

## Chapter 216 - Towards the Heart

Veeryd rustled with life and chirps. Deep into the inner reaches of the jungle, parrots and canaries didn't fail to let their presence be known. There was no whiff of unwashed bodies, the air smelled of wet verdant plants not yet choked by the humidity of the day.

Lost in his surroundings, his boot scraped on a moss-covered root. Kai grabbed a vine and stepped on the spongy ground to balance himself.

*Damn, I'm rusty.*

Once upon a time, he could silently glide through the forest, hopping among the trees without a footprint or broken branch in his trail. Unlike proper skills that never lost their edge, a learned expertise was different. And he hadn't kept up the practice after he left the estate and moved to Higharbor.

*Elijah always insisted I learned to skulk through a forest. It was a pretty weird fixation, though if I can cross thick greenery, any other place will seem easier.*

Veeryd was the only place in the archipelago where he might need to avoid roaming beasts. If books and merchants didn't lie, they would have been much more common on the continent.

Slowly, the old lessons trickled back. How to step on the soggy ground without squelching, which branch would bend without breaking, the roots and rocks that he could solidly tread, the amber berries to hide his scent—

"Stop daydreaming before you get yourself killed." Makyn's tone fell on his thoughts like a cold shower. The soldier stood on a fallen log, untouched by the vegetation, as if he were strolling in his back garden. The bag of sweets still in his hand, he threw a green and white striped candy into his mouth.

*Okay, you're passable too. It's not that impressive when your Dexterity is five times mine, if not more.*

"I'm being careful and keeping up with the convoy." Kai leaped over a low stream. "Not like anything could happen while you're with me, killer boy."

His icy eyes glowered at him, the effect was somewhat weakened when he munched on another sweet. "I agreed to bring you scouting, but you either take this seriously or go back."

*Do I also get my candies back? I would have bargained better if I had known you'd accept.*

"I'm extremely serious," Kai performed a strict military salute. "I noticed the red arboreal snake camouflaging in the vines over there, the couple of buried lizards we passed, the macaw in that hollow tree, and the harpy eagle circling over us."

Makyn remained expressionless till the last mention. His head snapped up, quickly pinpointing the bird of prey stalking them. It was the only orange beast they had come across, in the middle stage. It hid among the higher canopies skirting the limit of his Mana Sense, though it couldn't escape Hallowed Intuition.

"Don't worry, harpy eagles are pretty smart. It's observing us to see if we're worth the risk. It won't attack now that we've spotted it." Kai could have baited it to swoop if he kept acting unaware, but the birdie wasn't strong enough to be an issue. "I told you I make a pretty good scout—"

Makyn disappeared in a blur of movement. The mana presence dashed among the trees like he was racing on plain ground, too fast for the eyes to follow. A rustle of leaves and broken branches cracked over him, and a piercing screech was cut short before it could peak.

With a thud, the soldier landed a few meters away. He held a bag of sweets in one hand, and a large dead bird with a crown of feathers and a curved beak in the other.

*What a showoff.*

"That was unnecessary."

"Flying beasts are an insidious threat to guard against, it's better to get rid of them when you get the chance. If it followed the convoy and ambushed the non-combatant, it might have become a problem."

*That's a lot of ifs. Guess we'll eat overgrown chicken tonight.*

"We're not at the Heart of Veeryd yet. You can leave it with the convoy, I'll be fine on my own."

Makyn shifted his gaze between the cumbersome bird and him. "I'm on scouting duty."

*Spirits, he's such a stiff sticker for the rules. Worry not, boy! The candies were the first step, you'll fall to the fun side soon enough.*

"It'd be a waste to leave it here. Do you want to walk around with it? C'mon, the cook will be delighted to have something to add to the stew." Harpy eagles were relatively light, but with its wings and plumage, the carcass was taller than him—which was a lot. "It'll take you seconds. I can keep an eye out for beasts on my own."

"Don't wander."

"Oh... I was just planning to run away. Would you mind telling me which direction you'd search for last?"

Makyn watched him with no amusement.

“I’ll be still as a gutted fish,” Kai swore with a hand over his heart.

Left alone, he observed the sea of unawakened critters in the jungle underbrush. A smattering of rays pierced the dense canopies, making an emerald fern sparkle with morning dew. He almost expected a powerful beast to pounce from a bush, but the deadliest animal was a blue-striped spider. Its bite would burn, but it couldn’t chip his orange-tier Constitution.

*How disappointing. My jinxing powers have failed me.*

“You didn’t move.” Makyn reappeared behind him in a rustle of leaves.

“I would never disobey your orders.”

*Now, that’s definitely a skeptical look. You’re being hurtful.*

“So, where to now? We can’t risk the convoy getting ambushed by a red mouse. It might nibble at the boots of the soldiers.”

Makyn gave up on his ineffective freezing glares and led the way. “You shouldn’t lower your guard in mana zones, no matter how weak they are. Beasts sometimes roam outside their hunting grounds. The easiest way to die is to be negligent when you don’t expect a threat.”

*You’d have gotten along great with the butler, but he has already etched the lesson on my soul.*

Despite the teasing comments to his porter, Kai had never stopped scanning his surroundings. “Hmm... if these ruins aren’t summoning beasts, there should be a single yellow creature to worry about.”

The Republic must already know about it, the stories were no secrets. Annyl had told him the scouts who located the ruins had been attacked by a dangerous monster—possibly the infamous basilisk. A single monster would be easily cut down by the dozens of yellow soldiers.

Makyn let out an exasperated breath. “Who told you about that?”

“A woman I met in Wildepont mentioned it.” Kai stretched his senses for any sign of guilt. “She said her name was Annyl.”

“Did she give a surname or rank?” Not a ripple in his mana flow or voice.

*Better this way... it’s odd he doesn’t know who she is at all. Was Annyl a fake name?*

“Only that she worked in logistics.” He glossed over the topic with nonchalance. “I already knew about the *King of Veeryd*. Most people think it’s a tale to keep overconfident fools from getting killed, but I doubt we’re that lucky. My stepdad is a hunter and believes it’s real.”

“What else do you know?” The soldier opened a way through the vegetation with methodical slashes. “The scout who made it back was unclear in her report.”

*To think the Republic snoopers haven’t learned everything. Or is this still their internal squabbling?*

“It’s a basilisk.”

Makyn turned to loom over him, hand tightening on his sword. He searched his face for signs of a joke. “Do you know what species?”

“I’ve never seen any kind of basilisk in person. Are they more like a snake, a lizard or a drake?”

Bestiaries were one of his favorite books to read at the estate. Strange monsters with mystical powers living in exotic environments, it was like reading a D&D manual, only it was real. But in a mana-poor archipelago, it wasn’t useful knowledge with everything else he had to learn.

“Their aspect changes with their species and grade. You’re sure there is only one?”

“Hmm... They say the King kills any other beast that advances to Yellow. I don’t know if it’s true or a rumor added to spice up the stories.” Kai scratched his head. “Can basilisks really turn people to stone?”

“No, not usually. Transmutation magic is extremely hard to use offensively. Some species can, but not at Yellow. Though basilisks have venoms that will leave your body with the mobility of a rock if they don’t kill you first.”

*How charming.*

“Don’t worry,” Kai waved him on. “We’ll kill it if it’s stupid enough to attack.”

Makyn shook his head. “It’s not that simple. All species of basilisks are C-rank and above.” He bisected a blue ferret pouncing from a bush.

“What do you mean C-rank?” Kai said skirting the poor red critter.

“Uh, the archipelago is truly a peculiar territory.” The soldier let the impression of a smile slip through. “Like sapient races, our attributes and abilities aren’t equal simply because we’re at the same grade. With beasts, the difference is more extreme. A squirrel and a hydra at

Green will have wildly different powers. The Republic ranks them from F to A to define their threat.”

“And is C bad? It doesn't sound that high.”

“It is. At that rank, beasts possess innate magic, like the blackstone terragon, or other nasty abilities that can dominate foes at their stage. While B and A-rank creatures can cross the divide between grades.”

*Hmm... we can't be that unlucky.*

Kai bowed to move under a thorny branch. “How do humans fare in the ranking?”

“Assessing the power of sapients is never straightforward. Intelligence and equipment add an entirely new dimension to the equation. If I were to generalize, most people with a fighting profession will fall in D, with some in E, and rare exceptions in C.”

“And you are...” Kai innocently probed.

“Not that strong. Humans are complicated, it depends on the match-up and battlefield. In real life, you rarely get a fair fight one way or another.” Makyn managed to look even more somber.

*Well, he's great at ambushing beasts. Either he's being modest, or the personnel they stationed on the archipelago is worse than I thought.*

“And basilisks are C-rank and *above*,” the soldier reiterated. “Depending on the species, it'll be difficult to defeat it without casualties.”

*Yeah, I don't think any soldier in the convoy reached the peak of Yellow. Though quantity is a quality of its own.*

This was the most Makyn had ever talked. The man left to brief the scouts about the Kind of Veeryd, coming back just as quickly. They delved through the wet jungle, each with their own thoughts.

Ferns, vines and shrubs pulsed with the highest mana in the archipelago. The greenery was broken by small clearings with claw marks and trampled trees. Makyn frequently stopped to take care of aggressive beasts attracted by the scents and sounds of the convoy.

Around most of the archipelago, the vegetation was somewhat Earthlike, here, it was like entering a different planet. Trees rose like pillars of gnarly wood with leaves and flowers larger than his head.

Kai had trekked this far once before with the butler, but the sight still amazed him. He picked four orange herbs, growing like silver from the ground. As if he had stepped into the garden of a giant, he craned his neck up to the far jungle tops.

*Why do bugs have to grow larger too?*

A fly the size of a ping pong ball buzzed like a drone near his head. Kai swiped it away, cringing when his hand met the squishy body. He cleaned the back of his palm on a leaf and flared his mana to dissuade more critters from approaching.

“Manifesting your aura is an invitation to get ambushed if you’re not the strongest predator.” Makyn indifferently cut a way through a net of vines.

The Heart should still be a couple miles away, but the border wasn’t defined enough. Kai retracted his mana to a feeble pulse. “Is this better?”

The soldier gave him a once-over before nodding. “Your signature will get lost in the ambient essence. Beasts won’t notice you unless you step on them. We won’t go farther than this today.”

They wandered the jungle for a place to set up camp. Sharing their intel with five other scouts, they settled for a rocky clearing by a creek.

Kai strode back into the convoy with a smile, even the smell of sweating humans couldn’t chip his mood. He chatted with Sonya about the lush jungle, ate a tasty stew and slipped into the world of dreams.

At the crack of dawn, he left the snoring tent to devour his breakfast before the rest of the camp joined him. His hopes for another excursion were quickly dashed when Makyn was nowhere to be found. The soldiers held their weapons with a restless air, whispering to themselves and tightening their patrols.

*It’s reasonable to be a little nervous. We’re almost there.*

The Heart covered a large swath of land in the center of the jungle, but they only had to traverse half of it to reach the Vastaire site. After the dense vegetation of the inner reaches, the oversized flora was easier to cross. Plants fought for nourishment, greedily covered the sun and smothered their rivals, leaving a sparse underbrush.

*Hmm... it can’t be a coincidence that the ruins are in the middle of it. Either they’re leaking mana, or they were built there to take advantage of the density.*

Back on march among the ranks of men, Kai also started to feel jittery. Tension and anticipation mounted without an outlet. Inside the Heart, every beast that attacked the convoy was at Orange, usually not in the early stage. Though they were quickly dispatched, they kept the expedition on their toes.

*It would have been problematic if I had come alone. The military can handle the beasts, it's what they get paid for.*

If the Altar of Covenant was here, he might soon complete his quest and gain another blessing. It was also possible the summoning chamber here had been destroyed long ago, and that was why no yellow beasts had been sighted. Perhaps he was in the wrong place and the shackles around the Hidden Sanctuary would fail, dooming him.

*Don't be stupid. If the spatial anomalies are anything to go for, the entire archipelago will notice when the gates fully open.*

"Halt!" The shout echoed throughout the convoy.

The soldiers at the front compacted. Kai frowned at the image in his mana vision. There was no threat, just bright pools and pieces strewn around a large shapeless blob, leaking dense streams of mana.

An acrid metallic smell wafted to him, linking the pieces of the mystery. By the time he pushed his way through the ranks, Kai wasn't surprised by the sight of gore that awaited him.

Fresh crimson blood and shreds of meat covered the jungle floor like a macabre art installation. In the center lay the dead carcass of a... *something*, Kai couldn't tell what the poor sod had been, just that it once had silver fur. From the mana still flowing into the environment, the creature must have been well into yellow tier.

*Guess we know where the summoned beasts ended up.*

Kai was about to move closer to inspect the scene when screams of alarm resounded from the tail of the convoy.