

## Chapter 213 - Preparations

Fields of golden wheat, barley and rye extended for miles. Kai pressed his nose against the cold windowpane, he had heard Hawkfield was the breadbasket of the Republic, but it was different seeing it in person.

The ears of wheat swayed like waves touched by the wind, the fields crossed by a network of shimmering canals and little houses with tiled roofs. They would need an army of farmers to plant and harvest everything by hand.

*Hmm... What kind of skills do you get from a farming profession?*

Waking up at dawn to till, sow and tend the crops. The hours of mindless physical labor sounded enticing after courting death in the last few days. If he added skills and levels to the mix, it might even be fun. He had gotten quite good at nurturing cabbages and turnips with Nature Magic. Who knew, maybe he had the potential to become the best farmer in the Republic.

*I'd get bored after a while...*

If he squinted, he could glimpse large silos and buildings rising in the distance, where the promising youth of the archipelago came to be brainwashed. Flynn told him that Hawkfield was a Republic town built from the foundations up. Everyone there worked for the government one way or another.

It was an isolated enclave surrounded by farmland for miles and miles. The little news that got out were the stories of the kids in the program, though they weren't reliable sources.

*Ana must be down there too. She has four more months till she gets her profession.*

The zeppelin zipped over Hawkfield, gliding over buildings of white plaster and stone. They were set along a grid of perpendicular streets and interspaced by mowed fields of grass. Everywhere Kai looked, blue banners with the soaring hawk flapped, or hung draped from balconies and windows.

It was an idyllic place compared to the wild and muddy jungle of Kawei, yet it had something profoundly unsettling about it. Maybe the too clean lines of the architecture, or the military efficiency with which the tiny passersby below seemed to move. There were no markets, no children running around, not even a tiny aquamarine line of sea on the horizon.

Despite standing in the middle of Yanlun—the largest and central island of the Baquaire Archipelago—Hawkfield had nothing of the native charm. It was a piece of the Republic through and through.

The zeppelin was anchored to the berth tower by long metallic chains. No one came calling for him. Kai gathered his bags and headed for the holding door of the vessel. He queued behind Lou and Valela's group, hoping to go unnoticed. They had agreed to keep the distance of a professional relationship. Acquainted but not familiar.

Seryne was there too. Heavy lines marked her face, she was either ready to fall asleep or have a manic episode—Kai'd rather not be there to find out which one. She was the first to exit when the hatch opened, followed by a squad of soldiers and crates.

*Will she get fired or demoted?*

He descended the winding stairs of the berth tower, the air had the clean and dry smell of farmland ready to be harvested. He took a lungful of oxygen, there wasn't even a hint of salt. The impression he got from the air was only reinforced, everything looked so foreign.

*Where exactly do I go? Did I lose a memo, or did they actually forget about me?*

Men and women in many shades of uniform walked down the gravel roads. The minutes ticked by, no one so much as looked in his direction. Should he snoop around? Pretend to get lost and run away? The nearest settlement was dozens of miles away across the Republic farmland.

*Should I ask for directions?*

Lou strolled from a corner, his boots crunching on the gravel gave away his arrival. "Are you lost, kid?"

"I'm just suffering from the Republic's poor organization." Kai crossed his arms with a scowl. "Can you believe their rudeness?"

"Truly unforgivable." Lou shook his head, pointing to a large four-stories building in the distance. "C'mon, it has been a few hectic days. If you can bear the insult a little longer, I'll find you a place to stay."

"It better be nice, with a proper bed and a large bathroom." It had been too long since he took a warm shower. He'd also need to buy appropriate gear to explore a buried ruin since the Republic couldn't be trusted with that. "By the way, do you know who brought me here?"

"We put you on the barge to Eastwin, and the military on the zeppelin. They probably expected you to follow them. They'll realize you're missing in a couple of hours and send someone to look for you." Lou gave him a little smirk. "I had a hunch that this would happen and came to check."

*I'm an external contractor, not their employee! How is it my fault when no one tells me anything?*

“So, shouldn’t I wait for them?”

“That’s not necessary. The military doesn’t have enough sway in Hawkfield to push things. Like you said, it’s their fault for the poor organization. Your contract with them will end soon, and the council will want to hire such a capable expert too.”

*Hmm... I won't say no to a bidding war.*

“When are we moving out to search Veeryd for—?”

Lou’s hand bolted to hush him. “*Kai*, I’m pretty sure you also signed a contract of silence about our investigation.” He lowered his tone to a whisper and glanced at the passersby before letting him go.

“Aren’t we in a Republic stronghold?”

“It’s not that simple. The Republic doesn’t freely share classified intel among its members.”

*That does make a lot of sense...*

“Right...” Kai could feel his ears heating up. “Sorry, I was just used to being around the camp where everyone knew about *that*.”

“It’s fine, just be mindful of your surroundings. You’re lucky it’s me. The punishment for violating a clause won’t be a scolding if an officer overhears you. Wait till we get inside a private room if you want to discuss an ongoing investigation.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kai followed him into a large governmental building. The ground floor was filled by busy clerks, while the upper floors housed a half-empty dormitory.

*Nothing says civilization like the smell of paperwork.*

His room had a single bed. No more sharing spaces with strangers, though the bathroom was in common with three other lodgings. Kai plopped down on the clean sheets—not as fluffy as he’d like but passable. “When are we leaving? Did the mana researchers find anything else? What’s the plan now?”

Lou massaged his eyes and sat in a chair across from him. “I don’t know, a few days to a week. Can I count on you to be more discreet?”

“When am I not?”

“Like... twenty minutes ago?”

“That was the exception that confirms the rule.” Kai gave him a brilliant smile.

“I’ve no idea what that means.”

“Me neither. Now tell me what you know, I promise to be silent as a fish.”

“There isn’t much.” Lou scratched his stubble. “Both the military and political wings didn’t expect things to escalate this quickly, or *drastically*. Right now, the upper brass is scrambling to decide what to do next... Some people are calling to ask reinforcements from the mainland and let them handle it.”

*Just what I needed. It’s already crowded enough, I won’t ever get to the Hidden Sanctuary if more parties get involved.*

His value was dependent on the lack of resources in the archipelago. If a professional team arrived from the continent, they might not need his expertise—or give him far less leeway. He might have to escape and look for the entrance to the sub-dimension on his own.

Kai ignored his twisting guts to keep his voice even. “How likely is that to happen?”

“Uh... I’m barely an officer, I don’t have access to that kind of information. This is more what I overheard from Valela, I’ve already said more than I should.”

“Please, it’s important.” It wasn’t fair to ask, but he needed to know, the answer would determine his path forward. Kai could already see Lou filing the information for later.

Lou observed him pensive before finally continuing. “Among the ranks, most soldiers had wanted to call for help for a while. The new guards were more hesitant to invite strangers to take over, but opinions have been changing after the last events. However, neither the governor nor the commander wants to hand over their authority to the mainland.”

“So, we’re safe...?”

“That’s not the word I would use, but neither side will call for reinforcements, *for now*.” Lou was still peering strangely at him. “If there’re more casualties, voices will reach the mainland one way or another. Valela also thinks the governor will cut his losses before it gets to that, so the council can negotiate the terms.”

*Basically, one more fuck-up and I’m screwed too. Great.*

“Hmm... What about the ruins in Veeryd? I thought we were headed there.”

“We are, but it’s a long shot, many doubt those ruins even exist. All the other Vastaire sites were located near the sea. It’s also weird that there have been no signs of spatial anomalies.”

If a bunch of yellow beasts appeared in the jungle, we should have noticed something by now.”

*So either they don't exist, or those ruins are special...*

Lou stood up, heading for the door. “I hope you know I’m grateful for your help with spatial tears and beasts. We wouldn’t have all survived without you, but I’ll need to tell Valela about this conversation.”

Kai nodded distractedly. “That’s only fair. I’ll tell her I forced you to speak.”

“There is no need, it was my choice. Please don’t do anything stupid.”

“When do I ever?”

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Kai positioned the three boxes on the table before him, their polished surface reflected his smiling face. Three days of rest and two marching on the road. He had been worried he wouldn’t get his goods in time.

The temporary lodging he was assigned in Wildepoint—the forward settlement of the Republic near Veeryd—was half the size of the one he got in Hawkfield, and a third as comfortable.

*Still better than camping in the jungle. Spirits, I didn't even get a week of civilization.*

At dawn, they’d be trekking through Veeryd. No matter how the expedition went, he probably wouldn’t get the chance to spend his credits. He had signed another contract with the military till the beast attacks were stopped. The council hadn’t been able to match their offer, or maybe they just weren’t as desperate.

Seryne had managed to maintain command of the operation—likely through some underhand tactic. Each time she appeared, her confident demeanor looked a little less believable, the cracks stitched together with prayers and wishes.

*Why else would she offer me a gold a week? She must know I escaped the ruins with Valela.*

That was on top of the other benefits: 200 credits for *outstanding service*, and the ability to buy three restricted items on the complete Orange List. While not officially stated, both rewards were contingent on signing with the military, and too tempting to refuse.

Kai lifted the lid of the largest box. It held a white booklet with the title in elegant black letters: *A Hundred Shades of Power*. He leafed through the pages covered in runes. The manual detailed how to precisely measure an affinity.

The drawback of checking a single element at a time didn't affect him, and for 150 credits, it had been too convenient to pass up. He'd much rather be self-sufficient than pay a ritual specialist. After the boost from Zervathi's blessing, he wouldn't trust the ritualist in Higharbor to not leak his affinity for Space.

Drawing the runes wouldn't be a problem with a little practice, and the ingredients weren't hard to find either. He could provide the elemental notes to fuel the ritual himself.

*I'll have to wait till after the expedition is over.*

The next box contained a single vial filled with a dense red liquid: *Swift Absolution (Orange)*. A less exciting purchase, though it fit within his remaining budget for *only* a gold mesar. If the Republic didn't lie, the potion would protect him from the backlash of discarding an orange skill.

He still hadn't decided whether he would use it to learn Space Magic, but it was convenient to have the option open. Unfortunately, it didn't work with yellow skills, or he could have discarded Mana Engraving, losing only three levels.

Every orange skill in his status took years of work and served a clear purpose. Even if he didn't end up using *Swift Absolution*, Flynn would certainly find a use for it.

*I hope Mom didn't chew his head off when he told them I disappeared. The baby was due in days or might already be born...*

Kai directed his thoughts to the remaining oblong box before the tide of worries could wash over him. He could apologize and make it up to them after he survived this ordeal. He needed to stay focused. He'd eat his new boots if the expedition into the Veeryd went without a hitch.

*And the best for last.*

The last item cost him all his credits and most of his savings. A dark blue wand with a pale wooden handle sat on a bed of velvet, the glossy surface pulsed with a web of runes: *Tidal Wand (Peak-Orange)*.

The corner of his mouth pulled up in a toothy grin. Kai reverently picked up the wand, his fingers finding purchase on the handle. He waved it dramatically at his wardrobe.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The wardrobe was deader than dead, and he realized one of his lifelong dreams. When he saw the wand on the list of items, he knew he had to buy it. The Orange List only had a small selection of focuses for spellcasting, but it covered all the basic elements.

Kai let his Water mana flow through the runes and summoned a cube of ice. It was about a fifth larger than he expected. It was the largest boost to his offensive potential he could hope for.

*Not bad. It'll take some getting used to it, but this might just make the difference.*

The Tidal Wand only improved a single element, and cost five golds between credits and mesars. He'd rather not know how much Valela's was worth.

His stomach grumbled. Kai stored the booklet and potion in his ring and the wand in his right pocket, the opposite side of his sword. He walked down two flights of stairs, heading for the mess hall.

Wildepont was a military outpost. From the main street, he could see both the iron gates of the palisade enclosing the settlement. The outpost was swarming with soldiers in preparation for the expedition.

Kai entered the large building and got in line for his bowl of stew with half-cooked vegetables and suspicious pieces of stringy meat. The food wasn't likely to improve in the next few days. He had a spoonful halfway to his mouth when a young woman with auburn hair in a pixie cut approached his table.

"Do you mind if I sit with you? Looks like we're both new here, and I don't like eating alone." Her smile made a dimple appear on her cheek. "I'm Annyl by the way, nice to meet you."