

Chapter 217 - The King of Veeyrd

Kai was shoved aside by soldiers running towards the commotion. The King of Veeyrd was here, no other beasts could threaten the convoy. Support auxiliaries and mages fled in the opposite direction, thwarting his attempts to move closer.

“Form a line!” An authoritative shout rose above screams. “Everyone below Yellow retreat—”

Trees cracked followed by a wetter sound. A rattling hiss pierced the chaos of voices: half a dozen different people shouted orders. Kai recognized Seryne and Valela somewhere ahead. Bodies pressed against him, his instincts urged him to act, to run and swing his sword.

Don't be an idiot.

He stopped elbowing his way through the crowd. Even if he reached the front line, he couldn't face a basilisk in a head-on fight. He could barely contend with low-yellow beasts by burning through his elemental reserves and Empower. If half of what Makyn told him was true, the King was on par with the blackstone terragon, or stronger. His physical attributes couldn't keep up, it was uncertain if even his spells would be effective.

I'll just get in the way.

It was a sour truth to swallow. A deep-rooted part of him rebelled at leaving his fate in the hands of the soldiers, but rationality won. Jumping into the fray for pride was foolish.

Kai followed Hallowed Intuition's plea to get away and focused on his highest orange skill: Mana Sense; something he was better at than most of the mana professionals. He needed to gather information to find a way of helping.

At the edge of his range, dozens of bright presences shifted in a semblance of order. Some were leaking light on the ground, lifeless or dying.

Where is the King?

Since they didn't have a profession, beasts possessed a single set of mana veins, channels so bright they looked incandescent. Even red creatures stood out, the basilisk should be akin to a lighthouse, yet he failed to spot it.

Kai closed his eyes to focus on the whispers of danger and Inspect. He located a wispy presence, the shape moved like a fluttering breeze, almost invisible among the mana density of the Heart. Another rattling hiss and the soldiers' reactions confirmed it was indeed the basilisk.

Great, the murder machine can camouflage.

It explained how it had sneaked up on them while they were distracted by the other beast's carcass. Kai struggled not to lose track of the basilisk. The long serpentine figure bolted faster than Makyn. It skirted the edge of the convoy, rising and ebbing with the soldiers like in a mortal dance.

The military adapted to the attacks, making use of their numbers to cover their backs. Then, the fluttering glimmer retreated outside his range. Kai strained his skills till his brain throbbed behind his eyes. The soldiers' slow and cautious steps mirrored his confusion.

"Where is it?" Versions of that question echoed from a dozen different mouths. The convoy held its breath as seconds flowed into minutes of confused murmurs.

Kai followed the orders of an officer. The expedition rearranged to respond to threats from every angle, anxiously waiting for action.

Did it just run away?

"Can anyone spot that thing?" Seryne's peeved voice cut the stalemate. "Where are the scouts?"

A shuffling of bodies and voices rose in response, dozens of people started discussing the attack among themselves. With dangerous beasts in every direction, Hallowed Intuition never completely quietened. Unless the basilisk moved closer or specifically targeted him, it was hard to parse the clutter of warnings.

I should be grateful I have a way to track it. That level of camouflage during combat was ridiculous, I can't even tell at which stage of Yellow it stands.

Kai slipped through the ranks to see the site of the battle, remaining at a safe distance to not provoke the troops. Clawed prints marked the soft jungle ground, amidst uprooted trees and minced vegetation. The tracks were double the size of any drake he met in Veeryd, though it was hard to make estimates between different species.

One look at the soldiers got rid of any idea to ask questions. Grim men kept guard on the dense greenery, one sobbed over a fallen comrade who lay in a pool of blood.

Three.

Kai counted the bodies. Three lives had been snuffed out in the brief battle, and many more suffered injuries and bruises. Those seriously wounded had already been hurried away to the medics in the center of the convoy.

"Are you hurt?" Makyn strode from behind him. A fresh bandage on his upper arm was darkened with blood, and his usually spotless uniform was stained in mud.

They were minor inconveniences, but the sight disquieted him. That had never happened before, his porter never got hurt or had a wrinkle out of place. "I was on the opposite end of the convoy when it attacked."

"Good. Keep to the safe areas with the other non-combatants." His mouth bent in a grim line. "You were right, it's a basilisk."

Why couldn't the stories be exaggerated? Like it was a little cute lizard barely touching Yellow, or a misunderstood guy accidentally poisoning its friends.

"Do you know what rank it is?" Kai voiced the obvious question. If it had feasted on every other beast that came through the gates, it was no slouch.

Makyn shook his head. "We can't say for certain, its cloaking blocked the scouts' skills. It could be a peak yellow C-rank, or mid-stage B-rank. This ambush was a probing attack for infringing on its territory. It's possible it was holding back its abilities, the basilisk wasn't a species anyone recognized."

This just keeps getting better. It must have come from the Hidden Sanctuary decades ago.

It was all wrong. Humans ambushed and hid their powers, beasts just barreled through all defenses. "What kind of creature does retreat like that?"

"The dangerous kind. Come with me, the captain wants to see you."

Better and better.

"Did she say why?"

"No."

If Kai was stuck before, he definitely couldn't run when they were stalked by a bloodthirsty lizard. A provisory camp had already been set up, while Earth shapers and soldiers methodically felled the vegetation around them to provide vision and avoid another ambush. They passed beside the medic's tent. Six people in different states of injury lay on cots, their bodies were still like statues, not even their pupils were moving. Kai would doubt they were alive if he couldn't see their mana still flowing at an unbearably slow pace.

Makyn opened the flap of an enchanted tent, waving him in. Familiar voices were arguing inside.

Yay!

The air was chiller and dryer inside. Four people bent over a table showing maps of Veeryd and battle reports. Captain Seryne and a man dressed in the mottled scout uniform stood

opposite Valela, while a wrinkly old mage in cream robes sat in the middle, looking half asleep.

“We need to go back.” The princess threw them a frosty look. “We’ve already suffered losses before even reaching the Vastaire site. We have to go back and regroup.”

Seryne stood straighter to highlight their height difference. “Let me remind you, you’re here just as an observer,” she said with a fake smile, using the patient tone of a teacher with their dim pupil. “I’m in charge of this expedition. And we’re not going to return empty-handed while the archipelago and its inhabitants are under threat!”

“We’ve recovered critical information on the danger we’re facing, with the right preparations we can be back in a couple of weeks.” Valela pursed her lips. Waves of irritation rolled off her, though her voice remained even. “Continuing now will just be a waste of lives, the convoy isn’t equipped to face such a high-level beast. How are we supposed to look for the source of the anomalies with that monster stalking us?”

Seryne covered a chuckle with a hand and dipped her head in apology. “Pardon me, sometimes I forget the natives of this little archipelago aren’t used to... facing adversities. Trust me, dear, we’re perfectly capable of taking care of a measly basilisk.”

Valela gripped the edge of the table, leaning forward to hold her gaze. “With how many losses?”

“Hmm,” the captain turned towards them, ignoring the question. “Kai, come join us. Maybe you can help solve a point of contention.”

Wisps of mana darted around Valela in response to the condescending dismissal. She seemed ready to jump over the table and punch Seryne in the nose. With a visible effort, she released her grip on the wood and threw him a dirty look.

Hey, I didn't do anything.

The attention of the tent shifted on him—besides the napping fellow. Kai turned his expression into a blank canvas and approached the only free side table. “How may I help, ma’am?”

Seryne gave him a syrupy smile. “I’ve heard you have a peculiar danger-sensing skill that works with Fate. Did it work when the basilisk attacked?”

The princess’ flames got doused in water. She glared again at the captain before looking down in shame.

Well, there was no way it wouldn't get out.

Kai wasn't surprised by the Republic's interest after the meeting with Annyl, though the request was still odd. "Aren't there other people with similar skills?" Hallowed Intuition couldn't be the only yellow skill of that type in the expedition.

"Not any that works against this beast." The unnamed scout snorted, intently studying him. "The concealment of the basilisk goes beyond camouflage and mana cloaking. And while skills based on the seventh attribute are unreliable, they're harder to counter if the target doesn't have higher Fate than you."

Hmm, thanks for the heads-up. So I just need to get more Favor than everyone else?

"I can't be sure." Kai wanted to underplay his skill, though they seemed to know more than him, and Seryne wouldn't get fooled by his answers. "I got a warning when the basilisk attacked. The skill works better if it comes close and I'm directly targeted."

Those were universal facts of any danger skill. When it was uncertain whether someone could detect lies, it was better to mix half-truths. Now that he knew what to look for, Kai was confident to notice sooner, though not enough to outrun the beast.

"I see—"

"You can't involve a civilian in this." Valela's fire rekindled. "He isn't employed as a fighter. And he's not even an adult!"

"His contract is to provide whatever help necessary to stop the anomalies. And he signed with the military," Seryne calmly stated, showing a flash of satisfaction at Valela. "But I won't force him to do it if he's too frightened. Kai, you'll be protected at all times. You just need to join the patrols and warn us when your skill reacts. Are you up to the task?"

At least try something better than some dumb reverse psychology. That's insulting.

"Will I—"

"Naturally this will count towards your contributions."

Pride and money, really?

He gulped for dramatic effect. Moving around the soldiers would give him access to more information and freedom. He might even get a few levels in his skill. "Can I have Officer Makyn to protect me?"

* * *

“The bush on the left!” Kai commanded.

A volley of javelins and arrows shot to decimate a lush patch of shrubbery with star-shaped leaves. An emerald shadow dashed deeper into the greenery with a rattling hiss. More projectiles flew in after the King, missing by a wide margin.

None of the soldiers attempted the chase. The basilisk was more agile and faster than any of them combined inside Veeryd. Unless it revealed itself to attack, Mana Sense couldn't even perceive its wispy presence, and its green hide meshed into the vegetation.

Kai remembered when Moui once sold a couple of its scales to Reishi. The hunter had been unbelievably lucky to find them and live to tell the tale. His fear suddenly made so much sense.

Thank Yatei, he's not here.

Out of courage or stupidity, Kai had never been particularly afraid of any beast—not the sea serpent, or the chunky toad that almost melted him. The basilisk was different. It wasn't its ridiculous attributes that made him scary, but its sly nature.

The King stalked them each step towards the Heart, waiting for a soldier to lower their guard to strike without committing to an assault. Two men had been dragged into the jungle before anyone could react. One more had died chasing.

Beasts became smarter as they advanced, but Kai never expected them to observe and execute plans like a human. Knowing it would lose in a fair fight, the basilisk used guerrilla tactics to weaken them. Makyn had told him it wasn't a common behavior for a yellow beast, which meant rare but not unheard of, which was disturbing.

“It's B-Rank.” The porter lowered an enchanted bow taller than him.

Kai raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Are you sure?”

“I'm not the best archer, but my last shot bounced off its scales, and the medics are having trouble fully neutralizing the venom. It's probably mid-yellow, perhaps high if it's still holding back.”

“Yeah, why not peak stage?”

“Because it would have already killed us all,” Makyn said with complete seriousness.

Yay!

Initially, Kai had little luck spotting the basilisk with Hallowed Intuition. Whatever cloaking the beast employed it partially muted the skill; that was before he located where it was going to

strike on a lucky gamble. The wily lizard must have seen him pointing and switched targets to him.

Ironically, being targeted made his skill much more effective. Kai could feel the danger lurking in the jungle, rapidly moving around the convoy. It faded and grew, but it never disappeared.

At least I got a level. Gotta appreciate the small things. And we haven't spotted any other beasts since I got a new stalker.

The oversized jungle surrounded them on every side, the mana levels still climbing. There was less than an hour of daylight left, and the sun had already disappeared beneath the trees. No one wanted to try to spot the basilisk in the dark, and sooner or later Kai also had to sleep.

A hissing echoed from the shadows, outside the range of the archers. After losing half their number, the scouts rejoined the ranks to act as spotters.

The damned lizard is taunting us.

The convoy marched with an uneasy pace, using crystals to light their way. They were spurred by the need to find shelter and slowed by the awareness that a wrong step might mean death.

"Behind us!" The shout had not left his lips when screams rose from the tail, the basilisk must have figured out there was no point targeting him. Kai didn't know if he should be happy or more terrified.

Fuck. Valela was right, we should have gone back.

"Tightened the ranks and continued to the march!" Seryne ordered. "We can't stop now."

I wonder whose idea that was?

The dark forest loomed alien around them, rattling with sounds of death. Held by skittish soldiers, arrows were loosened at every bush. The whisper tickled, too obscure to offer direction.

"Look!" A scout pointed to a large shadow ahead of them. "A tower!"