

Chapter 128 - Escape

With the effects of the drug burned out of his body, a veil had been lifted off his mind. Free from the shackles, his thoughts dashed among two dozen worries and considerations.

Where am I? Why did my skills fail me? Am I still in time to warn the town? Is my family safe? What should I do now?

Kai hadn't realized how sluggish his mind had been. Slower than a baby at the bottom of Red. It was a miracle he had thought of asking Flynn for the ring. And without Improvisation to help him, it was another miracle he managed to convince the boy to give it to him.

I can't lose someone else.

One side of his brain screamed at him to flare up Empower and rush home as fast as his feet would carry him. The urgency and impending doom pressed him to act. To run and not think.

And yet, fear made him falter.

What if I make the wrong decision?

The importance of formulating a plan had been ingrained into him. But he lacked information, and he didn't have the time to calmly ponder what happened and piece together the events. With each passing second, danger was closing in on his family.

Mana Sense scanned his surroundings. He didn't recognize this part of Sylspring. Made of roughly shaped wooden boards covered in moss, the buildings were unfamiliar. A group of orange guards with professions of the same grade were patrolling outside, in and out of his range.

After Maela had identified his skill, Kai was cautious to push his perception to its limit or observe anyone too closely. Yatei knew where that crazy woman was.

He was about to sprint out of there, and damned be the consequences, when a familiar presence approached the storage they had stashed him in.

Spirits, I'll strangle that idiot till he turns blue.

Flynn quickly made his way inside, cautiously opening the door with a bundle of food in his arms. Kai didn't give him a chance to react before pointing his sword at his neck.

His eyes went wide. "How di—"

"Put that down and don't say a word." The blade tickled his skin. With Improvisation, there would be no room to doubt his words. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

"Kai, I—"

"I told you to shut up, didn't I?" Sword and magic remained ready at his fingertips. His eyes didn't blink until Flynn sat on the floor with his fingers crossed over his head.

"Is this really necessary? I'm not going to—"

"How much time do we have before the raid?"

Even if it was unlikely he would raise the alarm, Kai wasn't willing to take the chance. He wasn't sure how to deal with the fool, but he might as well get some information about what was going on.

“I don’t know. They don’t tell me everything.”

“Flynn,” Kai made the note of warning in his tone obvious. He didn’t have time for this.

“Maybe an hour or a little more. They probably want to attack with the favor of darkness, but you can’t stop it.”

Relief flooded him. He had time, though not much. “How many guards are outside?”

“Too many for you. They’ll attack to kill if they see you try to escape.”

“Let me worry about that. How many?”

“The guy who brought you here, Tridel, is still there. Even if you’ve enhanced your grade—congratulations by the way—I won’t help you get yourself killed.”

Kai moved the edge of his sword closer to his heart, but Flynn stared back with a determined expression.

Does he think I won’t hurt him?

Kai didn’t know himself, but he didn’t have time to wring the truth out of him.

“Dammit, Flynn!” He lowered his blade. “I’ll go out there anyway. If you want to improve my chances, tell me what you know.”

They crossed gazes, they both knew he wasn't lying. The green pair was the first to break contact in defeat.

"Ten guards, they're not very good, but it would be better if we avoided them..." Flynn quickly explained the layout of the outpost as if he had been planning to escape himself.

Maybe he was.

There were fewer people than he expected, no one higher than Orange ★★ except Tridel, but they had the advantage of age and professions. He hadn't fought many humans apart from Elijah. He was confident he could take them one-on-one. The problem was if they came all at him together.

"We're in the Veeryd jungle then?"

"Easiest place to avoid the Republic's eyes. With the coming and going of hunters and gatherers it's easy to hide."

"Are we at the Hunters' Lodge?"

That's where I heard that name.

Tridel had been the hunter who made problems for him.

"The Lodge is a couple miles north-east, more than half the people there work for The Voice of the Ancestors," Flynn explained. "A few members claim this area as their personal hunting ground to make sure everyone else stays away."

Right under their nose, sneaky fuckers.

The Republic couldn't stop people from going into the jungle or monitor them this deep. Even if they suspected the rebels hid here, there was no easy way to flush them out, unless they chose to employ more resources and personnel.

The governor must be a cheapskate. Shit, how far out are we?

The urgency seized him once again. He had thought they were still in some shady corner of Sylspring given the buildings he scanned.

"We might have a chance to evade Tridel if we are careful and take the long route," Flynn continued. Before he could react, Kai pinned him to the ground, overwhelming him with Empower.

A minute later, Kai closed the door behind him, silencing the muffled grunts. He couldn't lie, leaving Flynn tied up in his place was like poetic justice.

Even if he truly meant him no harm, Kai didn't want to test what would happen if they were forced to fight some rebels. An unreliable ally was worse than none.

I'll move faster alone.

Minding his steps to make as little noise as possible, he scouted ahead with Mana Sense before moving out. The clearing was smaller than the Hunters' Lodge, but housed more buildings covered in vines and ivy.

A few trees grew in between the cabins, offering plenty of cover. About fifty meters out a thick leafy treeline delimited the outpost. Kai would bet it wasn't natural, though he'd have to study it closer to be certain.

Hallowed Intuition woke up as he crossed the doorway, incomprehensible mutters, like whispers in the wind. Kai ignored them, unwilling to wrestle with their cryptic messages.

The sun had already disappeared beyond the canopies. Judging from the waning light, dusk couldn't be far.

I would have lost more time if I didn't know where to go. And more yet if I alerted the guards.

Flynn had roughly told him where the rebels would be posted. Even without a skill for stealth, Kai had plenty of practice sneaking around the estate to avoid the butler. Elijah had taught how to move silently to stalk prey, applying it to humans wasn't too different.

The voice of a couple guards discussing the raid drifted to him. Kai ignored them, slinking from building to building. The slight rustling of the grass was entirely covered by their words. He almost wanted to scream when the rebels stopped right in his path.

“—the Republic will do?”

“Don't be a fool, they'll be too busy chasing pirates to care about us. They'll be running like—”

Kai's blood boiled, they talked about the raid as if it was already done, and not a thought was spent for those who'd get caught in their crazy plan. After an interminable minute, they moved past him.

The last ten meters to the treeline were kept bare of any construction. Flynn had warned him this stretch had the biggest danger of being spotted.

Kai took a moment to prepare the cast. With the long shadows of the tree looming over the outpost, they would hardly notice a darker shade slipping by.

Shadow magic wasn't his strongest suit. It was slippery, and trickier than Water to use offensively. With his multiple affinities, Elijah settled for making him master the *very basics* of the element.

Kai slipped into the wall of greenery. The rustle of leaves was lost amidst the gust of winds that moved the canopies. The weave of shadows fell away. He only kept a small store of Shadow mana, and he bet he'd need it again before the day was over.

The impenetrable jungle extended before him, no different than any other spot. The mana density told him he wasn't far from the inner circle. Hoping Flynn hadn't lied about their location, Kai moved east and a few degrees north, straight for Sylspring.

He kept his steps quiet till he was sure the guards at the outpost wouldn't hear him even if he screamed. Activating Empower, Kai increased his speed. Mana Sense scanned his surroundings, the light buzz of Hallowed Intuition ever present in the back of his mind.

The fucker who knocked him unconscious was out here somewhere, but he didn't have time to sneak his way to Sylspring. And he didn't have time for a detour either. How big of a diversion would he have to take to be sure to avoid him? Spirits only knew, he might as well take the most straightforward path.

Even a hunter can't keep an eye on everything. Unless he has a skill for it...

Kai pushed Empower as far as it could go without burning him out. The thrilling energy rushed through his veins till his strides covered twice the distance. *Kai's Second Wind* and the urgency of the situation made him as swift as ever.

What did it matter if Tridel heard him if he outpaced that smug bastard?

By the time he finds my tracks, I'll already be too far. I can lose him on the trails once I reach the area frequented by the gatherers.

Frantic whispers yelled at him to move. Kai threw himself to the ground as an arrow whizzed past his head. The bolt embedded itself into a tree so deeply that only the fletching remained visible.

Cold sweat covered his back, but Elijah had taught him too well to freeze when in danger. Mana Sense flooded the direction of the shot like a tidal wave: nothing.

“You must be one lucky brat,” Tridel sneered. “That sniveling fool let you go, didn’t he? I’ll deal with him after I’m done with you.”

Kai jerked his skill in that direction, his senses spread wide, muscles ready to dodge at a moment’s notice. No matter how hard he looked, he detected no presence. Either he was out of his range or...

It must not be a coincidence he took me by surprise in Sylspring, damn fucker has a stealth skill.

“I knew we should have gutted you immediately,” the voice taunted from a different direction. “But don’t worry, I’ll fix this oversight soon enough.”

When Hallowed Intuition burst into a frenzy, Kai was already moving. Empower filled him with a flash of speed. Two arrows hissed past him.

With a violent creaking, trunks shattered into splinters, leaving fist-sized holes in the wood. His heart thumped in his chest, a thin line of blood had been drawn on his cheek. Kai hardly noticed it, Mana Sense darted to look for Tridel in vain.

The jungle was silent, Kai warily checked his surroundings. He couldn’t run, if the first shot had that same speed, he wouldn’t have dodged in time.

He’s probably faster than me even with Empower.

They had the same grade, but Tridel also had a profession and a grown body on his side.

My skills are probably higher, but spells won't help me if I can't hit him.

"I knew, all the Republic's dogs are conniving liars," the sneer was marred with anger. "The child act almost fooled me. I don't know how you've hidden your grade and profession, but it won't make any difference."

"Your aim just sucks. Can't even hit a powerless kid," Kai shot back, his eyes furiously searching the vegetation. There was no chance to talk his way out of this, but if he made him mad enough, he might commit a mistake.

Another shot at his back forced him to jump into the shrubbery. He had no room to breathe as it was followed by two more that he narrowly avoided. Luckily, they didn't carry the same strength as the last arrows.

It must be a skill he can only use a limited number of times or needs recharging, maybe it uses mana.

Kai caught a glimmer of his presence, but it was gone before he could pinpoint his location.

"How many more can you dodge, little piggy?"

"As many as you've got." Improvisation masked any fear or doubt. Kai knew he was a sitting duck, waiting to get skewered. Just one step in the wrong place and he was done for. "I can do this all day."

Come closer you fucker. I know you want to, I'm just an unarmed little kid.

Slow trickles of blood began flowing from four grazes when he reacted an instant too late. Flaring Empower consecutively was tearing his muscles. His movements were growing slower bit by bit.

I can't afford to back down.

“Spirits, I didn’t know you were so pathetic,” Kai made the smirk clear in his tone. “Then you fools wonder why the Republic took you over. If you are the best you uncivilized natives could muster, that had been a mercy.”

Tridel had stopped answering, but that only made Kai surer that he must be furious.

Mana Sense tracked the glow with increased accuracy. Just a shapeless cloud of slightly different mana. Maybe a Nature spell might catch him, but he had one shot, he couldn’t miss it. His body protested the treatment, more tired than he expected. Soon it wouldn’t be a matter of gritting his teeth. One muscle would fail him and he would get hit.

Why does he need to be so him,eful? He can't have many more arrows in his quiver.

“Your ancestors must be rolling in their graves. I almost feel bad for you, can’t get a single proper hit.”

Come on, stupid snake, take the bait. What the fuck are you afraid of, can't you see I'm harmless?

Kai was about to consider bombarding the jungle with water blades in the hope of getting lucky when that pesky glimmer got the courage to step closer—behind his back, naturally.

A tiny bit closer and we'll see who the piggy is.

Too soon and he might miss his chance, too late and he'd not get the first strike. His mind strained to keep hold of his mana.

As the Nature spell was released from his right hand, roots and vines rose at his command to entangle the area where the glow stood. Three water blades were released from his left.

With an Empowered leap, Kai took his sword out of his ring in a downward slash.

The skill that kept the hunter hidden was torn by the roots and vines wrapping around him. Shock was written in the bastard's eyes as he slashed with two long knives.

Got you!

Tridel intercepted two water blades with his steel, while the third cut into his leg. Kai was already upon him with his final slash, about to connect with his head. A perfect ambush. Only one knife was in position, not enough to stop the full momentum of his sword.

In a blur of movement, Tridel ripped free of the Nature spell. Both knives parried his blade which left a long gash on his arm instead of a fatal strike.

Kai immediately followed up with a second slash, his body burning with Empower. Another slash on his leg, then the hunter was out of reach. Kai gave chase, dashing after him.

He's bleeding out, he can't get far.

Tridel didn't reactivate his stealth skill, maybe he couldn't. Kai was gaining ground, it was only a matter of time until—

Kai fell flat-faced onto the soggy jungle floor, his body refused to respond.

Get up, I've not reached my limit yet.

He flared Empower to no avail.

Two boots stepped before him, droplets of blood pattering on the ground.

“Do you think all those arrows were for nothing?” His voice was full of glee. “I’ve no idea how you resisted so long, but that poison is enough to paralyze a fully grown orange beast.”

The hunter kicked him over. Tridel stood triumphantly over him with a bloody smile, knife firmly in his hand. “I’d tell you I’ll make it quick, but I’d be lying.”

Hallowed Intuition screamed at him to move, his body burned with Empower. It didn’t matter, Kai couldn’t.

Changing strategy, roots rose from the ground trying to impale Tridel, but he dodged before they could take hold. A flurry of water blades left more bloody lines, none fatal.

“I don’t know what kind of monster you are,” his grin was gone. “But the spirits will celebrate with your blood.”

Tridel dashed toward him. A water shield slowed him down, but it was only delaying the inevitable. He hadn’t had time to fully stock up on Water mana, and his elemental reserves were dwindling.

Yatej, Kahali help me! No matter the cost, I accept. I can’t die here.

As the shield was reduced to droplets, the spirits stayed silent. The glimmer of Tridel's knife loomed over him, ready to end his life.

The hunter stopped. Blood began flowing from his chest, the tip of a blade poked out of his heart.

"You've always been an asshole." Flynn stepped from behind the hunter, letting the lifeless body collapse to the ground.