

Chapter 230 - The Hidden Sanctuary

Oh, well... The plan worked better than I could hope for.

On the other side of the passage, the basilisk refused to die despite the blade stuck through its neck. The beast gurgled hisses with manic fury, its claws screeching on the ivory stone at his feet.

You know this could have been resolved peacefully if you left me the shard. I would have even given it back once I was done.

Kai stared at the darkness overhead, unable to blink, robbed of any physical sensation beyond sight and hearing. His skills and mana were slow to respond. Mana Observer required his full focus to just expand over the beast. He couldn't pierce its cloaking, but he could see bright ichor gushing from its wound.

The basilisk painted a ghastly outline by thrashing in the enlarging pool of its own blood. It slammed his head through the narrow passage to reach him, determined to tear him apart in one last act of spite, though its claws were too far to threaten him.

Can't you be quiet? I'm trying to focus.

Since the King didn't run to his chamber, it was either too mad to reason, or too injured to cross the distance. Both bode well for him. Kai was pretty sure he had severed a major artery when he twisted his sword.

With a *crack*, the beast broke one of the bony spikes on its head and reached deeper into the passage. A claw scratched the sole of his boot, failing to find purchase.

Damned lizard.

The enhancing potions could wear off at any moment and doom him. Kai reached for the vibrant green motes plodding along inside his veins. He was back to his first lesson with Dora, slowly gathering each mote as if picking colorful pebbles from the beach.

The claw poked his foot again, this time dragging him a hair closer before it cut through the leather of his boot and lost purchase.

It has to be enough.

Kai released the spell, praying Yatei it would be successful. A green marble of essence flew into a pale shrub, a branch creaked to wrap around his wrist and drag him to safety.

C'mon, little plant, pull!

The shrub had just started to move him when a claw hooked his toe and stopped the progress. For an instant, the two forces were evenly matched—the insignificant plant and the deadly claw. Then the branch snapped right as the basilisk lost its grip.

You absolute jerk!

The beast managed one gurgling growl, too weak for a proper celebration, but strong enough to drag him toward its waiting jaws. There wasn't time to cast another spell. He had moved less than a palm towards the basilisk. An insignificant distance, and yet far too close.

Spirits, help me! Don't you want to look after your investment? We can strike a bargain if you lend me a little help now.

Unable or unwilling, no one answered him.

Kai demanded his body to move, his magic and skills to activate, but willpower alone couldn't defeat the basilisk's venom. He was trapped inside his body. The claws screeched on the ivory floor, cutting into his foot.

Please, anyone? I don't care who!

His body moved away from the beast. Without his sense of touch, he took a second to realize it wasn't a miracle. A hand had grabbed him, pulling him to safety. Kai recognized the rough Mana Sense scanning his body.

He wasn't about to get eaten by a vindictive beast. It was over.

The barricade he had erected in his mind crumbled, a flood of emotions threatened to overwhelm him. Nothing showed up on his paralyzed face. Or perhaps he was crying, he couldn't tell.

"Are you okay?" Lou lowered his stealth skill and took out a crystal light. Panting for breath, he checked his body for injuries. "When the basilisk didn't come looking for me, I didn't know what to do. What happened?"

Well, what didn't happen? There was a defective artifact, a self-centered god and a very stupid plan that ended up succeeding.

A few seconds earlier would have saved him years of therapy, though Kai couldn't fault him for that. Lou had no skills to locate the basilisk, each time he moved he risked running to his death. He was only safe when the beast made enough noise to reveal its location.

The King's anguished cries resounded in the maze. Lou observed the dying beast with hard eyes. "Is that your sword? How did you even manage that? Your plan didn't include fighting the basilisk head-on. You had promised not to do anything reckless."

I swear I can explain. There were a few hiccups along the way.

The teen walked out of his field of view with a cold expression. "Don't move."

Very funny. Wait! It's dangerous.

Kai struggled to observe Lou's glowing figure. How could the boy lecture him and then do that? The basilisk had already shown how eager it was to die in company. Even in their death throes, beasts couldn't be underestimated.

Come back right now!

Lou ignored him and approached the passage, a longsword aflame with mana in his hands. He slashed at the clawed forelimb as if he were chopping wood, out of range of any retaliatory strike.

The King couldn't advance and had gone too deep into the passage to easily retreat. Each step it crawled back, Lou followed. Even its hardy scales gave way under the flurry of strikes. Pained growls filled the chambers, Lou pummeled the beast with the efficiency of a butcher.

One limb after the other, the lizard was carved to shreds and fell silent. Only then, the bulky teen lunged towards the head to pierce the skull through the scarred eyes.

Kai observed the macabre spectacle, unsure of how to respond. He would have felt pity if it were any other beast, but the basilisk had gone far beyond hunting to survive.

"Sorry," Lou said, wiping the droplets of dark-green ichor from his face. "I wanted to ensure it was dead for good. And I couldn't tell if the wound you inflicted was lethal."

No problem... Hopefully, you got... all your anger... out.

The side effects of the concoction were kicking in, reversing the boost to his attributes. His mind and senses dulled, each thought required unbearable effort. His body would likely be in pain if he could feel any part of it.

"Kai?"

The world darkened, and Lou's voice slipped away to a muffled background noise. He was about to embrace unconsciousness when a cold fire flowed down his throat.

A pleasant chill spread through his body, making his skin tingle. His mind cleared enough to see Lou standing over him with the healing vial he had prepared, and drinking one of his own.

"Is it working?" The teen raked a hand through his hair. "Cursed gods, I should have gotten better at reading mana flow. Please don't die on me."

I advise my intensive program. Just forty hours a week for a couple months. After I'm done with you, Mana Sense will become second nature.

Still unable to move, Kai reached into his elemental reserves with excruciating slowness and conjured a single drop of water. A soft *drip* in the damp underground. Thankfully, Lou had always been a smart boy.

His frown quickly smoothed into a smile and his posture relaxed. “Can you hear me? One for yes, and two for no?”

Drip.

“Will you be fine?”

Drip.

“Why did you have to fight the basilisk...” Lou grumbled with a disapproving scowl. “I should bring you back to camp.”

Drip. Drip.

“The basilisk’s venom took a day to wear off for the yellow soldiers. That was with the help of the healers. I can’t leave you here.”

Drip. Drip.

“Kai, I’m not— Hmm... Do you have something for the venom?”

Drip.

“Your pockets are empty, is it in your...”

Kai created a sliver of mana to connect to his ring. The simple act took as much effort as his strongest spell.

Dora’s casket clattered beside his hand, and Lou wasted no time browsing through the vials inside. “Is it Kai’s Restoring Light? I know they’re code names, but why did you make them sound so pretentious?”

Oh, shut up.

Drip. Drip.

“Kai’s wisdom? No, that name can’t be right.” Lou didn’t bother to hide his chuckles as he read through every label and picked Kai’s Nullifier for last.

Why does it always end like this?

It took a third of the vial before the numbness started receding. It was already incredible how Dora had created an antidote that could purge most poisons below Green. Coming back to all his senses, Kai was assaulted by a wave of pain as if someone had beaten every inch of him. That was after he had already taken the healing potion.

“Thanks— for the help.” Kai coughed, trying to stand up. “I’m glad you came along.”

Lou’s smile froze on his lips. “I didn’t do much.”

“You mean apart from saving me from the basilisk and getting eaten by some critter while the venom wore off?”

“I should have come sooner. Why did you fight the basilisk anyway?” Lou tried to keep his tone light, though it was clear he was upset. “It’s a miracle you survived.”

I’d say it’s a mixture of genius and unrivaled skill, but yeah, it was pretty close.

“I—” Kai looked around for the Altar.

“Are you looking for this? It was in the passage.” Lou passed him the crystal shard. “Is this the artifact you needed to recover? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That makes two of us. It’s somehow connected to the mana of the ruins.” Kai accepted the shard and explained how he had been *forced* to face the King. “You should go back to camp and rest. The military must not suspect anything in the morning.”

“I can deal with that.” The brooding boy dismissed the notion, stretching his arm. “I think the side effects are milder for me since I didn’t push myself like a madman.”

“It’s not that bad.” Kai jumped to his feet, only slightly stumbling. It would take a few days to completely recover, but he could move with no issue. “Without the King, I can easily deal with any threat below yellow. Hmm, what should we do with the carcass?”

“We’ll leave it here.” Lou cut his dreams with no hesitation. “Any material we recovered will be a dead giveaway of what happened. The other beasts will take care of dispatching the evidence.”

“You’re right...” This whole affair was too messy and dangerous to risk it on a bit of coin, though it burned him to leave it behind.

Greed and arrogance already killed the lizard. I don’t need to follow in its footsteps.

They chatted about getting their stories straight, and where to meet in Highharbor. No one could guess what would’ve happened when the military reinforcements arrived, or who would take charge of the hidden realm. They’d need to lay low till the situation settled.

“Are you sure you’ll be fine?” Lou glanced at the Altar with his pensive gaze, though he didn’t ask about its purpose.

I did imply I couldn’t talk about the bargain. There have been enough revelations for one night.

“I’ve got it handled from here.” Kai smiled with all the confidence he could muster. “I’ll see you in a week or two.”

“Keep away from trouble.”

“I will.” He waited till the presence left his range to turn his attention to the Altar.

Time to close this bargain.

Kai wove a thread of Space mana. The shard initially repelled it, but after some prodding it accepted the connection.

~Why are you calling upon me again, mortal child? I have to conserve my divine power.~ Zervathi thundered. ***~Hmm... You’ve stopped running like a Vervakir maniac. Did you solve your issue?~***

Yes, I killed the basilisk, thank you for asking. Kai placed the Altar in the center of the chamber. *Is this good enough to open a portal?*

~For one such as I, it shall suffice. Stand back and observe carefully, humman. You’re fortunate to bear witness to magic of such complexity and beauty.~

The shard shone with a swirl of multicolored lights. Kai closed his eyes before the spectacle could give him a headache and focused on his perception skill. Spatial essence wove around the artifact in a tapestry of runes and mind-bending shapes.

For once, Zervathi hadn’t exaggerated. The magic was so far beyond his level that he could only admire the display like an art installation. Other worries were poking his thoughts.

How long will it take to break your shackles?

He’d rather hear a straight answer before he arrived on the site. The god had implied it would be an easy task, though finding the Altar should have been too.

~Once you reach the place where my vessel has been imprisoned, it shall be a simple matter. The cage has already been greatly weakened, I just require a mortal to deliver the finishing blow from outside.~

So there is no danger or hidden requirement?

~No.~ Zervathi huffed in annoyance. ***~The troublesome part was breaching the shackles to open a portal here. Even a trained monkey could assist me. You'll have no problem. Now, hush. I need to concentrate.~***

The kaleidoscopic lights had dimmed to a soft glow, while an iridescent portal hovered over the Altar. It looked as if it were made from liquid metal, pulsing with rhythmic waves. It expanded till an adult man could comfortably fit inside and turned transparent.

The outlines of an ivory chamber appeared crisp as if he were looking through a clear window. The walls were engraved with rows of familiar glyphs, denser than any writing he had recorded. Though it was the black, sharp runes that caught his attention. Enhancements like the ones he had seen in the summoning chamber in Kawei covered the pale stone.

~It's done.~ Zervathi spoke noticeably quieter. ***~Bask in my power.~***

The ruins opened larger portals in seconds. Kai couldn't stop his thoughts.

~I'd like to see how you fare after eight millennia of imprisonment, ignorant human. And how can you even compare unstable connections along traveled pathways to my masterpiece? It's so preposterous that your language lacks the terms to describe it!~

My apologies. He made a dramatic bow to the gate.

~I've stopped expecting any form of manners from you. Now, grab my divine shard and come. I see we're both eager to complete this bargain.~

Kai sent a vine to grab the crystal, took a deep breath and crossed the threshold.