

Chapter 231 - The Imprisoned God

Kai faltered as the window into the Hidden Sanctuary stood before him. He had witnessed firsthand how dangerous spatial magic could be in his clumsy attempts at teleporting cups and shells. If Zervathi made a mistake, he would be turned into human mush before realizing it.

Is it safe to cross?

~Of course.~ Zervathi declared, seemingly offended. **~As safe as I can make it.~**

That's not the same thing.

Kai glared at the shard in his hand, unsure where to direct his irritation. While the god remained quiet, the complexity of the portal reassured him somewhat.

The filaments composing the frame were woven so tight, he would have assumed they were solid blocks if he hadn't seen them form. Delicate runes lined the edge, morphing every time he glanced at them. One moment they were vaguely familiar, almost understandable, the next entirely foreign.

Hmm... What language is this?

Overcome by curiosity, Kai focused Mana Observer at a squiggly spiral on his right. It was made of six concentric squares, a seven-pointed star and a wavy sea, a broken fractal—

A headache slammed into his brain, shattering his vision. When he could see again, his head rested on the mossy ground with his skill already deactivated. He stood up wincing and massaged his forehead to soothe the pain.

I thought it was safe to look at it.

~I said you could admire my art, not bash your head through it.~ Zervathi rumbled.
~Have you ever heard the concept: look and don't touch? I didn't think I needed to warn you that fire is hot. Mortal minds aren't made to understand the divine, you're fortunate your body has passable survival instincts.~

Thanks a lot.

~You're welcome, monkey elfoid child. Now, if you could hurry along...~

Bracing himself, Kai strode through the window into another world. The surface of the portal rippled and clung to his body with a tingle, but he was too committed to pull back. The silvery gate swallowed him into a frigid embrace, and he staggered into the Hidden Sanctuary.

Kai gasped, the cold air stung his lungs as he reoriented himself. He had crossed the incomprehensible distance between realms with a single step. The temperature drop was more than a side effect of the portal. Goosebumps ran up his arms and his breath condensed in a thin fog before his nose.

~Huh, it worked perfectly...~ Surprise turned into elation. ~Naturally those cursed shackles are no match for my brilliance!~

Kai ignored the cheering god in his head and wrapped his arms around himself. Even during a winter storm, the weather never dipped below freezing in the archipelago. This was likely the coldest place he had been to in this life.

Thank the spirits I was born on a tropical island. I forgot how much I hated the cold.

The glyphs and chains of inky splintered runes were the same ones he had seen through the window, only more ominous. While these didn't morph under his gaze, he avoided looking at them with Mana Observer to be safe.

He did a quick count of his fingers and toes, nothing was missing. His body wasn't pulled into a million motes, he hadn't fallen into the void, or even felt nauseated. Besides the chill in his bones and a slight itch, it had been no different than crossing a door.

That wasn't too bad. Is this how it usually works?

~Who do you think you're dealing with, child?~ Zervathi sounded very pleased with himself. ~Even in my diminished state, I'm a god. Dimensional crossings are within my primary domain. I don't make mistakes.~

Forgive my ignorance. Kai rolled his eyes. It's my first trans-dimensional travel.

~I've not studied you humans for long, but your facial expression doesn't seem to align with your words.~

You can see me?

His eyes searched the space. A notification blinked twice as he had coded for feats, but he dismissed it. Apart from the enchantments and glyphs, the chamber was made of ivory stone without a single window or entrance. The only hint of color was the portal showing the underground at his back.

~I've brought you beyond most of the shackles that bound my prison. I can see and hear everything close to my vessel.~

Just what I needed.

~What did you say?~

Hmm... wait... why's the mana so thin?

It was more than just the cold, ambient essence was sparser than he believed possible. If he were to count the stray motes swirling around him, he might not reach a thousand.

Coming from the Heart of Veeryd, the difference was stark. The air wasn't filling, and his skin felt parched from seconds of standing there. There was almost physical discomfort, a knot in his gut as his body struggled to hold on to his mana.

~Not pleasant, is it? Try spending a few millennia here. Those heinous bastards sealed the chamber in every material, magical and metaphysical way they could.~

Sounds like a paranoid bunch.

~Bah! They were barely competent, they were only lucky to catch me by surprise. Thank Order, they didn't think to suck out the air already in the chamber, or your lung would have exploded from the lack of pressure.~ Zervathi chuckled.

Hilarious.

~No, it would be absolutely terrible.~ He thundered, any trace of humor gone. ***~Do you have any idea of the efforts I went through to bring you here? To have all that wasted in some cheap and crude show. No...~***

Zervathi was as self-absorbed as only a god could be, though Kai sincerely hoped he hadn't gone mad. Eight millennia must not be easy even for immortals. He glanced back at the portal, just a step away.

"Can't you let in more mana and heat in here?" he spoke aloud. Since the god was spying on him, he'd rather keep him out of his thoughts whenever possible.

~While the shackles are falling, there are still wards in place that would recognize the breach and obliterate your soul. But you need not worry. You shall be safe as a dragon egg in its mother's clutches if you follow my instructions. Given your lack of common sense, I shall remind you not to tamper with the treacherous runes in here.~

"What do I need to do?" Kai slowed his breathing to conserve the finite amount of air. Reaching the Hidden Sanctuary was the first part of their bargain, now he just had to assist Zervathi in escaping his shackles.

~Come to the Altar where my vessel is imprisoned.~

Kai glanced at the shard in his hands with a furrow in his brow. "You mean..."

~The Altar of Communion is seventeen strides beyond the spatial gate.~

“Oh,” he walked around the portal, careful not to step on the dark enchantments.

There was indeed a circular dais hidden behind the window. Chains of splintered runes converged on the seventh layer, becoming so dense that the ivory stone appeared like onyx. A pitch-black sphere rested on top, not much larger than a human head. It was so dark and muted, not a ray of light reflected off its surface like a hole in the fabric of reality.

That's odd...

Every surface was visible though there wasn't a light source anywhere, and the world dimmed when he looked at the sphere. “Is that ball your vessel...?”

~Obviously not, the void crystal is the last layer of my prison. My physical vessel is trapped inside.~ Zervathi urged him forward. ***~What are you waiting for? I've disabled the pressure component; you can step on the enchantments on the Altar.~***

“What about the rest of the chamber?”

~I told you not to tamper with them for a reason. Even monkeys, children and peasants know not to step on defensive arrays.~

“Yeah...” Kai wished the god was free so he could strangle him with his own hands. Thankfully his paranoia had saved him once again. “That isn't common knowledge where I come from.”

~May Order watch over me, civilization must have sunk to the foul depths in the last millennia. What wicked fate must have befallen my archipelago to house such a primitive race?~

“My condolences,” Kai snorted. He stopped by the edge of the altar where the enchantments grew too dense to proceed. Up close, he could see many white slivers cut into the stone of the altar, severing inky clusters of runes. The grooves were no more than a few hairs wide, reminding him of the spatial tears he had seen on Kawei.

“Is there anything else I should know?” He'd rather not die because the god had forgotten to tell him something that was taken for granted.

~Mhmm... Don't activate your skills unless I tell you to and make sure your enchanted items don't touch the Altar if they haven't been shielded. Also, it goes without saying, that you must isolate yourself.~

“Remind me how that's done.”

Zervathi sighed deeply. ***~Now's not the time for jokes. Retract your mana from the outer layer of your skin and don't absorb or expel any notes.~***

“Of course.” Kai bobbed his head. “I just wanted to make sure we had the same definition.”

Keeping his flow contained wasn't easy when his mana desperately wanted to leave his body and fill the void around him. Kai methodically redirected his outer capillaries towards the main veins. It was awkward and uncomfortable to keep hold of so much essence, but he did what was needed.

His shirt had a weak cooling enchantment. Ideal in the jungle, not so much in the freezing chamber. Kai stored it in his spatial closet alongside the wristband that hid his grade. “Will the ring be a problem?”

~Your humor is still lacking.~ Zervathi scoffed. ***~I told you that shielded items aren't a problem. Just don't let my divine shard touch the enchantments, that could end badly.~***

Kai cautiously lifted his boot onto the first dais, his toes poking out where the basilisk had clawed through the leather. He waited to make sure there was no reaction before switching his weight to keep climbing.

With each step, his stomach twisted in anticipation of some death ray coming to reap his soul.

This was such a bad idea.

~There is no danger. I— WAIT!~

Kai froze as he was about to touch the fourth layer, afraid to even breathe or speak.

What?

~I scratched the confines of my cage by accident. You're free to continue.~

Are you fucking kidding me?

~No, my sense of humor is superior to yours.~

He pressed his lips shut, his arms trembled— though not from the cold. The bone-deep irritation helped him climb to the highest platform of the Altar. Up close, his eyes struggled to cope with the tridimensionality of the sphere absorbing the light.

“What now?”

~Shatter it.~

“What? You want me to punch it?”

~If you like. I told you it'd be easy, break that vile thing and the bargain shall be fulfilled.~

“Won’t it explode or curse me? Can I smash the prison of a god that easily?”

~Don’t flatter yourself, I’ve been working on weakening it for millennia. By now the void crystal is nothing more than a hideous paperweight, but these cursed wards prevent me from destroying it completely.~

Kai started at the ominous ball of evil. It was more than common rock, though at this point he didn’t have much choice.

While Zervathi was hardly forthright in his explanations, there was no doubt that the inky runes belonged to the invading force. And Kai liked to believe the Great Spirits would have said something if he was about to unleash a malicious demon on the archipelago.

“Can I use a weapon?”

~Nothing that is enchanted. You can use your hands, head or any other part you deem up to the task.~

There wasn’t any weapon in his ring without a rune. He was about to use a journal when he got a better idea. “Hmm... Can I use your shard?” The Altar was pointy and hard enough to work as a weapon.

~If you must subject me to this indignity, make it quick...~

Here goes nothing!

Standing as far as he could, Kai slashed the ball with the shard.

Crack!

His arm swung in a wide arc, not finding the resistance he expected. A wave of darkness burst forth, stealing away his senses and burning his skin.

In the time he blinked and shielded himself with his arms, the chamber was brightly lit. The pain was gone too. There wasn’t a trace of the black sphere, not even a glass shard or dust. Instead, a new set of cracks had marred the stone of the dais like a white starburst. A delicate white statue slumped in the center.

“As I’ve said.” A voice chirped. The statue stood up in a flutter of wings and dusted itself off. It adjusted the oversized crown over his pointy ears before deciding to throw it off the altar, clinking on each step. “Even a trained monkey could complete the quest.”

Kai stared at the palm-sized fairy, trying to reconnect the thundering voice to its acute chirping. “Is this your true form?”

“Don’t be an idiot, human. A vessel is just a means for gods to exert their power on the material realm, though it also makes them vulnerable. This one was a trap to mock and imprison me.” Zervathi glared at its tiny body and burst into manic laughter. “Those fools thought they could imprison me for eternity. They didn’t even predict that by sealing the Hidden Sanctuary, the mana density on my archipelago would fall, causing their enchantments to fail.”

“I see...” Kai slowly retreated. The portal still hung across the chamber, showing the underground on the other side. He was glad it all worked out, but he’d rather get away from the unhinged doll. “If you would give me my blessing I would get going.”

“Just summon your Guide.” The fairy scoffed.

Ding

New Feat: Intrepid Explorer - As the first sapient to find the entrance to the Hidden Sanctuary after eight millennia. You are awarded: +10 Favor!

Kai gawked at the number. That was the notification he had pushed aside earlier. If his accidental prize was this high, he couldn’t wait to see the main course.

Ding

Congratulations! You’ve fulfilled your end of the bargain with the god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi!

As reward for your efforts, Zervathi shall endeavor to not intentionally harm any human for one hundred years unless first threatened and grant you with strongest Blessing of your choosing he may bestow.

Finally.

“I would like another boost to my Space affinity, and what else did you say you could—”

Ding

The god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi, has bestowed a blessing upon you to repay your clumsy efforts!

You are awarded: +2 Favor!

“That’s not what I asked.”

“You’re not very sharp, are you?” The fairy studied his dainty hand as if he could wish it away by staring hard enough. “You see, I’m a little short on divine power after my imprisonment. That’s the best blessing I’m currently able to bestow as per our agreement.”

What! You little—

Zervathi waved him off. “You may go ahead and spread the glory of my coming. Just leave my divine shard behind before you walk out.”

He had risked death more times than he cared to remember and gotten entangled with the Republic all for two measly points. Receiving Intrepid Explorer was the only thing that kept his simmering rage in check.

“Aren’t you a god of Truth? You cheated me!” Kai clenched his fist.

“Lies aren’t part of my domain.” The fairy sneered, shaking his head. “If you’re so ignorant to have made false assumptions, you have only yourself to blame. You should be grateful to have received the honor of aiding me. The first blessing was already plenty. Now give me my shard before I lose my patience.”

Hallowed Intuition had stayed silent since he had crossed the portal. Faced with the slew of esoteric enchantments, the yellow skill must have reached its limit. Though it had shown no reaction even after Zervathi had destroyed most of the runes with his emergence.

Hmm...

The god probably wanted to exhaust his powers before blessing him. The same reason why he only asked for the divine shard now. Kai would bet the artifact could be salvaged for power, or some other godly shenanigan.

“No, I don’t think I will.” Kai marched towards the portal.

“I order you to stop right now! Wait!” The fairy buzzed in front of his face with an irate expression.

“Why?” Kai calmly smiled. “What are you going to do if I don’t? Smite me?”

“You dare anger a god?”

Kai strolled around the annoying bug. “You can’t do anything, right? You said you’re out of divine juice, and the bargain forbids you from harming humans anyway.”

“You, insolent monkey! That’s only valid for a century.” The fairy gave a slightly unhinged laugh. “What’s a hundred years after spending millennia imprisoned? I’m immortal, I can wait for as long as it shall be necessary.”

I should have asked for a longer grace period, though a hundred years should be enough to find a solution...

“Huh,” Kai scratched his brow with the shard, no doubt the nosy god was still reading his surface thoughts. “Guess we’ll see each other in a century then. Good luck recovering without your magic rock.”

“Wait!” Zervathi cried again, buzzing before him with his arms crossed. “What do you want in exchange for that shard?”

“For you to stop the beast attacks on the archipelago and a better blessing when you’ve recovered.”

“That’s a ridiculous price just to save me a short decade of toil.” The fairy sneered with a smirk. “And remember I *can’t* lie.”

Damn, bug.

“Then just stop the beasts from crossing.” The shackles that imprisoned Zervathi were the same that sealed the Sanctuary. No one could predict the consequences of freeing the god. If a single beast as powerful as the basilisk were released, it could turn into a massacre. There could be hundreds or more other beasts. No way he’d trust the Republic to handle it.

The fairy pouted. “That’s still too much.”

“Aren’t you the god of the Hidden Sanctuary? That should be easy for you.”

“At the peak of my power, you’d be correct. It would hardly require a thought. But as we both now know, I’m quite powerless in this state.” Zervathi gestured to his fluttering body with a scowl. “Doing what you ask would consume almost all the power contained in that shard, I’d be left no better off.”

Kai chewed his cheek. “So you can’t stop the beast attacks?”

“Mhmm... I didn’t say that. I would be able to do it if I could spare my energies somewhere else.” The fairy chuckled darkly, pointing at the portal. “Carrying a being unharmed across dimensions is taxing. I’ve kept enough for a single trip since leaving you here would break our bargain. However, if you agreed to remain, I could use that power to save the archipelago.”

“You want me to freeze to death in this chamber?” Kai was willing to forgo his rewards and risk his life to keep the islands and his family safe, but certain death...

“Don’t be silly, humman. I’m not that cruel.” Zervathi smiled, showing a row of pointy teeth. “I shall open a way out of here. The rest will be up to you. I can assure you there are other ways to leave the Hidden Sanctuary.”

“I— What chances would you give me to find them?” Disappearing would solve his troubles with the Republic. He would also bet his life again for the sake of the archipelago.

“Hmm... Have you such little faith in your abilities, child?”

I'm not a fucking child.

“That’s not an answer.” Kai stepped closer to the portal.

“I admit, you’ll probably die. But don’t you want the chance to prove me wrong?”

“Not particularly. For all I know, you could open an exit into the den of another basilisk.”

“Fine, I shall sweeten the deal.” Zervathi counted on his dainty fingers. “I’ll ensure your safety out of this temple, and you may seek my help three times after. As long as your wishes don’t require more than a third of the power I’ve regained, I shall grant them. Take it or leave it, this is the best deal you’re going to get, child. You have my word.”

You sneaky...

Once more *truth* turned against him. The open-ended nature of the bargain would grant him a lot of flexibility, though the trick was also obvious: the longer he waited the greater the reward. During the first months, he’d be on his own or be forced to waste his requests with little value.

“I can pick *any* reward if you’ve regained enough power?”

“I meant what I said.” The fairy enounced with condescending slowness. “Before you leave the Hidden Sanctuary, you may beseech me for anything within the established constraints.”

“Hmm... Can you help me contact my family first?”

“No. They don’t know my name and I’ve never met them. Keeping the portal open is already draining me. You have thirty seconds to decide before I’ll be too weak to send you back and the bargain is off.”

The damn bug knew how to push his limits. If he had to decide between his family’s safety and their peace of mind, he’d choose the first. He had always been good at surviving.

Glaring at the fairy, Kai offered him the shard. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”