

## Chapter 235 - Night

A viridian river swirled overhead, a fault line in the confines of his prison. Its eerie light bathed the jungle on the western side of the Spike, granting a moment of sight.

Colossal trees surrounded him, indifferent beholders to the carnage below. Rat-sized insects skittered for cover in the underbrush as slit yellow eyes searched for prey. The spatial disturbance dispersed from the starless sky, plunging the world into darkness.

Kai heaved for breath. Nights lasted longer in this realm. He had lost track of where he was or how long he had been awake. As if boulders had been chained to each of his limbs, he pushed himself forward, ignoring his body's plea for rest.

He didn't know how much longer until the false dawn brought him relief. Daylight carried its own danger, still better than the ravenous predators that stalked the moonless hours.

Somewhere on his right, an elder drake shook the ground with a raspy roar. A chorus of howling snarls rose behind him in response. Weak species didn't survive in the Sanctuary. Blood Crawlers hunted in packs, making up for their lack of sheer Strength with cunning and savagery.

A sharp branch tore into his arm. Kai stumbled, clamping his wound shut to staunch the bleeding. How long had he been running? Pushed beyond exhaustion and covered in an array of cuts and bruises, Hallowed Intuition urged him onwards with a requiem of whispers.

*I can't stop.*

That single truth held him together. Peril lurked from every patch of grass and silent tree. Slowing meant certain death. Kai rushed where the murmurs seemed most feeble, he couldn't die without letting his family know what happened.

His grazed bare feet scrambled over a chitinous carapace. Under the might of Empower, the insect crunched loudly, spraying his foot with a slimy gore that stung his skin. Another somber tune joined the chorus of warnings in his head. Venom wasn't a priority.

*I need to keep running.*

Kai leapt over a ditch. In the dark, he landed at the wrong angle and twisted his ankle. His face slammed into the ground, the force of the jump rattling his brain. Unconsciousness was ready to embrace him and end the suffering. What was the point of struggling anyway?

The howls of his pursuers sang with the thrill of a meal.

*I can't stop.*

Kai dragged himself up and stumbled on. He gritted his teeth to ignore the pain in his leg and sent the last wisps of mana to fuel Empower. As the thumping claws beat the ground behind him, Hallowed Intuition continued its mourning song, a hundred ways to die woven in one.

He couldn't outrun the pack.

*I need to find shelter.*

Conscious it would give his position away, he scanned his surroundings with Mana Observer.

*There.*

The hungry howls were almost upon him. Kai stepped towards a dark pond. He rubbed his blood-slick fingers on a stick and threw it forward. Deactivating his skill, he bolted in the opposite direction.

He threw himself under a fallen trunk and scraped his mana veins far below the safety threshold to wrap Shadow around him. The blood crawlers would rip him to shreds far quicker than overstrain.

The log smelled of death and decay. He pressed a hand over his mouth, ignoring his need for oxygen to muffle his breathing. Tiny legs skittered over his back. Kai paid them no mind. Pained snarls and angry howls resounded in the jungle as the forward hunters clashed with whatever horror lurked in the pond. Water and acrid blood splashed around him.

Kai allowed himself a half breath of reprieve. His end had been pushed a few hours further. He flicked off the centipede trying to burrow under his clothes and began to restore his reserves from the dense essence, careful to avoid drawing the attention of the pack.

Another hour, another chance to survive.

*I must—*

The rotten log burst apart, sharp jaws closed around his shin. Kai screamed, trying to kick off the blood crawler, but another beast seized his foot and dragged him outside. A cyan disturbance snaked through the sky, revealing the obsidian maws and segmented limbs of the predators before darkness swallowed them again.

Empower and Water Magic surged amidst the agony to free himself. Ice blades cut into the thick hide, he swung his sword towards the slit yellow eyes. For a moment, he thought he would succeed, then more crawlers chomped onto his arms to force him still.

Jaws ripped into his flesh and crunched bone in no hurry to kill him. No matter how much he struggled and overdrew his mana, more beasts kept coming to tear him to pieces. His screams drowned by the blood gurgling in his thro—

His eyes shot open. Kai jolted back in a crouch and took stock of his surroundings. White plaster walls, a torn blanket, wooden splinters and a toppled leather couch. A crystal half illuminated the shadow looming over him. A young man approached with open palms, speaking "...okay?".

*Flynn...?*

"Are you okay?" Flynn repeated and offered him a hand. "You were screaming in your sleep, so I tried to wake you."

*I'm safe. I've escaped.*

"I—" Kai released the hold over Empower and elemental mana, glad he hadn't cast any spells. He accepted the offer to stand up, realizing too late his palms were clammy. "I'm good. Just had a bad dream."

"It must have been quite the nightmare." His friend forced a smile, standing awkwardly.

"Yeah..." Kai dried his cold sweat on the torn blanket and straightened the makeshift bed, though he couldn't do anything for the broken armrest. "I'm sorry about the blanket." His eyes shifted down, "And the couch."

He had finally escaped the island, yet his mind insisted on dragging him back.

Flynn dismissed his worries with a casual wave. "I was thinking of buying a new one anyway." A bruise was swelling beneath his eye, though he angled himself away from the light.

*Did I? Fuck.*

"I'm sorry about your face too. I didn't mean to hit you. It— it's never happened before." Kai rummaged through the clutter of mana materials in his spatial closet. He had already consumed the potions he brought into the Sanctuary, and brewing more had been a challenge until he crafted a passable cauldron. "Here." He took out a balm.

Flynn eyed the weird dwarf coconut carved into a jar. "I'm fine, you just grazed me. It'll be gone in the morning." The lie crumbled under another grimace, blood already darkening the bruise.

*Not even one night and I've already fucked it up. Thank the spirits I didn't summon my sword and started swinging.*

"You don't need to lie to make me feel better. This is the least I can do. I know how hard I hit."

“It’s—” Flynn sat on the broken couch with a sigh. “It was like getting hit by an iron bat. Shouldn’t mages be all brains with scrawny bodies and stick arms?”

Kai welcomed the attempt to lighten the mood with a laugh, perhaps a bit too loud. “I must have missed the memo. And I’ve also reached Yellow.”

“Of course you did.” Flynn winced when the balm brushed his cheek. “Don’t take it personally, but next time I need to wake you up, I’ll use a stick.”

“That’s only fair. I can sleep in a tavern till I find a place to stay.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not letting you out of my sight until I’m certain you won’t disappear into some fairy kingdom, *again*.”

“But—”

“If you say something that stupid *again*, I’ll be the one to punch you.” From the challenging stare Flynn threw at him, he wasn’t kidding.

Kai considered getting hit to ease his guilt. “Okay.”

“Uh... good.” Flynn tentatively touched his cheekbone, raising his brows in surprise. “What’s in this balm anyway? It smells of lemons and the pain is already fading.”

“Just a couple of yellow herbs I found on the island. I also added a few orange ones to improve the consistency and give it a citrus scent.” Since the space in his ring was limited, there was no point in saving weaker herbs.

Flynn grabbed Kai’s hand to stop him from applying more. “Tell me you’re *not* being serious. Do you have any idea how much yellow ingredients sell for?”

“About half a gold?” Few arrived in the archipelago, so he had never worked with those materials before the Sanctuary.

“We’re not talking about beast parts. Healing plants range from three golds to more than twenty, depending on their stage and rarity. What were they?”

Kai scratched his nose. “I think the root was mid-yellow. Same for the water stalk, though it also had an elemental affini— Ouch!” He massaged his arm where Flynn punched him.

“I told you I’d hit you if you said something stupid.” He cracked his knuckles. “I could have bought three new couches with this.” He pointed to the balm on his cheekbone as if he wanted to scrape it off.

“Isn’t your face worth more?”

“Well— I— You might have a point,” he conceded, a reluctant grin cutting through his exasperation. “*Still*, you could have warned me your home remedy was liquid gold. Why are you keeping it in a nut?”

“I was out of glass jars.” Kai shrugged. With the enchantments, it should have no problem storing the balm. “The coconut was yellow too, if that helps.”

Flynn exhaled a slow breath, raising his hands towards him. “Please, let me strangle you. Just a tiny bit.”

“*Meow.*” Hobbes blinked on the couch, staring at Kai with the deep-rooted disappointment of a life of broken expectations.

*Hey! Don't you try to take the moral high ground with me. I've seen you rip a patch of yellow flowers just because their scent made you sneeze. Oh, yes. I remember every detail perfectly.*

Unused to the cat's shenanigans, Flynn was taken aback and leaned to pick him up. More surprisingly, his silver majesty didn't claw his eyes out, instead, he contently slumped into his arms.

“See, Hobbes understands me.” Flynn grinned at Kai. “You're impossible.” He scratched the demon overlord behind the neck, eliciting a pleased purr. “Now, try to get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

“We do?”

“I told you I'd help contact your family. We sail for Sylspring at noon, and we have many errands to run before that.”

They had only a couple hours to chat, hardly enough to catch up. This was all news to him. “I thought you meant the communication cube.”

“It's on cooldown. I spent the extra charges to organize Kien's second birthday, which is in three days by the way.”

*What?*

“I haven't bought a seat on any ship.” Kai stammered. He wasn't ready to face his mom or his little brother. Did Kien even know about him? Had the elixirs worked to raise his grade?

“Don't worry, I always buy two tickets just in case.” Flynn waved to him on the stairs. “I'll poke you awake at dawn.”

Hobbes rested his head on Flynn's shoulder, enjoying the pats with a triumphant look enhanced through their bond.

*You ungrateful kitten. I should have made a pillow with your fur. We'll see who you'll whine to next time you're hungry.*

Kai laid his head on the remaining armrest of the couch. Eyes closed, despite knowing he wouldn't be getting a wink of sleep tonight. Advancing to Yellow had reduced his need for rest. Not enough to live on a couple of fitful hours, but he had survived with less for far longer in the Sanctuary.

His thoughts were a chaotic whirlwind about his family. What was he going to say to them?

*'Hi, I'm not dead. Sorry for disappearing without an explanation for the past two years. It was kinda my fault, though I also helped save the archipelago. So, please don't be too angry.'*

*I'm so screwed...*

The ideas he had didn't even work in his head. Hours passed as he imagined an endless sequence of speeches and scenes. The stream of thoughts ended abruptly when an ice cube hit his collarbone and bounced into his shirt.

Kai sat upright and melted the ice with a thought. "I'm awake!"

"I know." Flynn waved at him from across the living room with a mischievous grin.

"Didn't you say you'd use a stick?"

"I couldn't find a cane long enough to safely poke you. And the ice looked like fun."

*I'm going to— Hmm... he welcomed me into his house while I punched his face and broke his furniture. I guess I owe him a couple years of free torment.*

"What time is it?" Sparse rays of light filtered through the curtains. It was close to dawn, though that told him little. His internal clock was set on the weird day-night cycle of the Sanctuary.

"We have about six hours till our ship leaves." Flynn elucidated, probably reading his confusion. "But we have a ton of things to do. Better get to the market before the streets are packed with people."

"We?" Kai scratched the lines of scars on his shin. "I don't need anything."

"Yes, we." He gave him a judging look. "We need to buy supplies. You also need to get a gift for Kien's birthday, and you *can't* walk around in that state."

"What's wrong with these?" He looked down at his saffron shirt and deep purple pants. The merchant in Eastwin said he looked great, the price tag definitely helped, but *still*. Apart from

a few wrinkles from sleeping in them and a small tear, they were more intact than anything he had worn in the last two years.

"Spirits." Flynn scanned him from head to toe with a judging gaze. "Your clothes are completely mismatched. And what about your hair? It looks like the barber gave up halfway through. Do you want your family to see you for the first time like this?"

"I cut it myself," Kai grumbled on the defensive. He didn't *think* to pack any decent mirrors before getting stuck in the Sanctuary.

"Well, I'm glad to know you're not talented at everything." A blade appeared in his hand. "C'mon, let me fix you up. I can at least make your haircut symmetrical and lend you some clothes. I won't be able to live in this city if someone sees me walking around with you," he waved a circle around Kai. "Like that."