

Chapter 218 - Looming Threat

Excited exclamations spread through the group. Kai stepped forward and squinted, the moons were covered by a blanket of clouds. Blinded by the enchanted crystals near him, he shielded his eyes to make out the dark form.

A gnarly tree had engulfed the side of a broken tower and morphed it into a grotesque shape. Vines wrapped around the jagged top, with sparse slivers of ivory shining through. Further beyond, similar misshapen giants emerged from the vegetation till the jungle blended into the undefined background.

They had reached the lost Vastaire site. The place his dad had never managed to find, it was real. The air was thick with mana over ten times the archipelago average. The answers they sought were buried here.

Thrilled by the hope of a safe shelter, the scout broke the ranks to move forward.

Kai tried to reach for the man before stilling. His smile froze as the whispers rose with crystalline precision. "Watch out!"

The scout halted, glancing back, the realization of the situation set on him. He was a short few meters ahead, too far for anyone to reach without compromising the formation.

The ranks had frayed at the sight of their destination and hastily reformed. Kai found himself half that distance away from safety, more than he remembered walking.

Shit.

A rattling hiss cut through the night air and straight through their souls.

He aimed his wand to cast a hail of projectiles at the greenery beside the tower. Thin ice shards rained down on the vegetation. He had no hopes of injuring the basilisk, but he might ruin its camouflage and persuade it to run.

Behind him, the soldiers readied their weapons. "Shoot!" Makyn bellowed with an authority he didn't possess. Arrows and javelins rained down following his trail into the darkness. They didn't have to wonder at the unknown for long.

A long wiry beast bolted out of the darkness. It evaded most of the blows, keeping low to let the rest skid off its emerald scales. The scout stood halfway on the side, but the King wasn't aiming at him. As the initial volley abated, a pair of slit golden eyes fixed on Kai with malicious intelligence.

Are you that cranky I ruined your stealth?

The warnings turned into frantic shouts. His brain blitzed with urgency, slowing his perception of time. If he turned to run, the beast would be upon him before he took three steps. Honed by years of training, his instinct didn't fail him.

Kai doubled down on his attack, commanding his mana to flow into his wand while he unsheathed his sword with his right hand. A stream of ice and water shot toward the crouching beast. The basilisk ignored the projectiles and sprung in an emerald blur towards him.

As life and death brushed together, the outside world stopped existing. His Mind and Spirit bore on his arsenal of mana skills to condense the stream. Kai remembered images from his previous life, with enough speed and pressure, water could cut through metal.

Intent is everything.

The basilisk bent its body and darted at sharp angles, it deflected magic and arrows off its hide turning them into glancing blows. The thin jet of water cut through shrubs and earth without effort.

The strongest spell he ever cast made no difference if he couldn't hit his target. It only delayed the inevitable. The monster had actually been holding back when it acted scared of a frontal assault.

Kai had already crossed his limits, he had nothing else to give. No one could save him if the basilisk was willing to pay the price. A few chipped scales and surface wounds to get rid of the bug who ruined its stealth.

He tightened his grip on the enchanted blade, Empower flooded his body to brace for impact. If the lizard thought it could get away with this, it was dead wrong.

I'm not going down alone.

Kai was ready to abandon his wand to wield the sword with both hands. Then the jungle turned into day. A second sun rose behind him, illuminating the verdant plants, the dilapidated ivory towers and the charging basilisk.

Taken aback by the flash, the King of Veeryd staggered to an abrupt halt. Its long muscular body coiled, wiry limbs dug into the ground to arrest its momentum. The beast came into full focus.

The basilisk measured over three meters across. Emerald scales refracted a rainbow of hues, the sudden light broke the cloaking to reveal a weave of burning channels. The draconic head sported a crown of horns and two symmetrical crests. It took shelter behind the front limbs while the long tail ending in a curved bone flexed for balance.

In the brief halt, the attacks caught up with the slippery beast. Pressurized water and enchanted metal carved lines into the beautiful hide. Black ichor spilled on the ground. The

basilisk let out a furious piercing hiss, and the gaping maw showed rows of curved fangs glinting with venom.

Not so smug anymore, eh?

A pulse of mana enveloped the King to reassert its cloaking and it bolted away into the broken tower and the underbrush beyond. The only signs of the fight were a terrified scout lying on the ground and a trail of dark green ichor, eating through the plants it touched. They weren't the only ones to bleed anymore.

Fucking coward.

"Halt! Don't follow it." Makyn commanded again.

"You're not in charge." The scout leader from the tent spoke up. "It's wounded. We can finish it." The cheering soldiers paused, shifting their attention between them.

"Back into ranks," Seryne appeared to address the troops. "We need to set up camp. The beast should leave us alone for now, but we're not going to take any chances. I want eyes in every direction..."

After delivering a series of orders in quick succession, Seryne lingered on Makyn. "I understand the urgency of the situation, but we have a chain of command for a reason. Don't overstep your boundaries, sergeant."

Makyn bowed his head. "It won't happen again."

Damn, my porter is going through his rebellious phase. I'm so proud.

Seryne looked at him with a studious look. "Good job, Kai. You can rest for tonight. Tomorrow your ability will be required to help the exploration of the site."

I can even sleep. How generous!

"Yes, ma'am. I'll do my best to help." Apart from the near-death experience, everything was going according to plan, he'd get a front-row seat to look for clues.

I just need to stay alive. Why couldn't that psychotic lizard just die?

In the middle of the marching convoy, Kai looked up at his porter. "You good?"

Makyn grunted in assent. "I wasn't the one who almost died. Stepping outside to bring back someone else was foolish. I should have stopped you too, you're not going to step out of my shadow from now on."

"Yes, boss."

One time was enough. That lizard is such a meanie.

Makyn watched him with a weird expression. "Are you alright?"

If it were on anyone else, Kai would have said it resembled warmth, but that wasn't something his faithful porter did. He grinned brightly. "I'm great. Why?"

"Your hand is shaking."

"I—" Kai looked down at the hand still gripping the wand. Fumbling to sheathe his weapons, he hid his hands in his pockets. "I'm just tired. The jungle gets cold at night."

Makyn gave him a slow nod.

"By the way, you were correct," Kai spoke before the man would. "The basilisk dropped its cloaking when it was blinded by that light. It's higher than mid-yellow, though not quite at the high stage."

His scan confirmed the King must be a B-rank creature. He didn't know whether to be relieved to finally have an answer, or terrified it still had room to grow.

"You're fast at assessing grades."

"I was the closest one. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to thank my savior." Kai strolled inside the convoy towards a group of blue uniforms. Cheerfully waving at Ferla and Lou, he looked beyond them. "I'm assuming that light was your doing."

Valela let him through, her shoulder slumped. "It was. I wish I could have done more and stopped it for good." Two guards from her group counted towards the people they had lost to the beast today.

"Don't be ridiculous. That was plenty. Your spell was timed perfectly to save my life." Kai wiggled its eyebrows. "What else could you wish for?"

"Thank you." She gave him a weak smile. "Though the timing was more luck than skill. I could have acted sooner to scare it away, but I was afraid to blind the soldiers if I didn't aim right."

Spirits, she cannot take a win.

"You did great. If you acted earlier, you wouldn't have caught the basilisk at its most vulnerable moment within range of our attacks." Kai patted her shoulder while Ferla stared daggers at him. "It's a pity the same trick won't work twice with that sneaky lizard."

* * *

Kai jolted awake, striking the hand on his shoulder. “What—” His eyes focused, Makyn stood over him to wake him up. He was sleeping on a cot, inside the camp, safe. The dusty vault of an ivory chamber closed around him. “Sorry, you took me by surprise.”

The soldier dismissed the scratch on his arm. “It’s almost time to go. I thought you’d like to eat your breakfast in peace.”

How long did I sleep?

It felt no more than a few minutes since he closed his eyes, and it was hard to tell time underground.

It had taken hours to properly set up camp inside a cluster of chambers. He usually had no trouble falling asleep, but the basilisk’s rattling hiss kept echoing in the night until the Earth shapers had walled the entrances.

Boorish lizard with its stupid whining. Such a sore loser.

Kai stretched his limbs with a groan. He couldn’t properly relax as long as the King stalked outside their camp. No doubt, it was licking its wounds, ready to strike when they lowered their guard. With his grade, he’d survive one night of shitty sleep.

“Your backpack is over there.” Makyn pointed behind him.

“Thanks.” He grabbed a random piece of salted jerky. When his stomach failed to respond, he brought out a bag of mango cookies to the same result. He forced himself to swallow some food, drinking from a canteen.

“I can tell them you need to take the day off if you’re not feeling well.”

Kai looked up to Makyn, surprised. His porter was taking the bodyguard job very seriously. “And Seryne won’t mind?”

“No one can force you to use your skill.”

Fair point.

“I’m good. It’s not the first time I’ve come into Veeryd or hunted beasts.”

“I imagine the other times you were accompanied by your mentor, and you could go back to safety after it was over.” Makyn stiffly sat on the cot beside him, gazing straight ahead. “Being stalked by an overwhelming foe isn’t the same thing. It can be...”

“Overwhelming...?” Kai helpfully provided.

“Yes, especially if it’s your first time. Even on the mainland, you rarely meet such nasty beasts outside high-danger areas. It’s normal to be scared.”

Hmm... you’re kinda bad at this, but I appreciate the effort.

It was nice knowing that someone saw him as more than a useful pawn, though taking a day to rest or not, he still had to do it. And the sooner he could return to civilization the better.

“Do you want a cookie?”

Makyn definitely had a sweet tooth, he ended up eating two with a little coaxing. The camp had been set up across six chambers at the edge of the underground complex.

The largest part of the Veeryd site was buried and crossed by large tunnels. Another proof that the basilisk likely originated from the ruins and wanted them out of its house. The Earth mages had moved and compacted the ground to free up space, though the place still smelled of stale mold.

If it was the price of being surrounded by solid walls, Kai was happy to pay it. Long slabs of rock covered the entrances, enough to offer a warning in case the basilisk decided to break through.

Kai followed his porter to a side chamber where a group had already gathered. Eight soldiers and four mana professionals, everyone was fully at Yellow. They were supposed to map the ruin and locate any point of interest for the main group.

“You’re late.” The head of the scouts greeted them with a snort. “We’re already ready to head out. You know your role, kid?”

I think someone’s called Vert, or was it Bert?

“I’ll warn you if I feel anything.” Kai smiled as numerous pairs of eyes examined him. The people in the team ranged from curious to skeptical, but most remained indifferent.

Bert set the formation of the party with Kai and the mages in the center. There was a minor scuffle when he wanted Makyn to act as the frontline. His porter glared icicles till he was assigned a better position to be his bodyguard.

Good boy, I’ll give you another cookie tonight.

“Let’s go.” Bert scowled. “The reports say this site is on par with the one on Kawei if not larger. We’ll move underground along the edge in a spiral till we reach the center.”

Inside the narrow chambers and corridors, it would be easier to counter the basilisk's agility, if the beast showed up. The earth mages rolled the boulder blocking the entrance to reveal a tunnel covered in bluish moss and layers of dirt.

They entered two by two, swords and shields and then spears. Makyn equipped his longbow, staying before the mages. Kai keened his senses for anything out of place. The damp air hummed with mana on par with the estate.

It's even higher than outside. Zervathi did say the Altar of Covenant was on top of the highest tower, so we're not going to find it even if it's here.

It was probably better that way, he needed time to plan and learn the terrain. Space mana had double the standard concentration, slightly lower than inside the summoning chambers.

It was harder to tell minute differences with such high density. The motes whirled in chaotic streams according to their nature. He stood no chance to make sense of them unless they moved deeper.

They methodically moved through outer corridors and chambers. Some showed recent claw marks and moved earth, most were untouched groves. No beast or rattling hiss disturbed their march. The King had gone silent.

Hallowed Intuition thrummed like static in the background, as calm as it would go inside the Heart of Veeryd. Walking about a mile of winding passages, they stopped before a buried corridor. The basilisk must have gotten lazy halfway through its work.

Bert scowled at the dirt like it was a personal affront to him. "Can you open a way?"

A mage with raven hair in an elaborate chignon walked forward. She placed her hand on the wall and closed her eyes with a concentrated look. A pulse of Earth mana delved into the tunnel.

You could have done the same without moving a step. Kai rolled his eyes at the theater.

The mage shook her head. "It goes on too deep. We'll burn through our reserves to reach the end."

"Then we'll head deeper in to see how far the blockade goes," Bert snorted. "There might be easier places to cross."

The number of obstructed ways kept increasing, the area where they entered was probably an exception that had given them an optimistic view. They followed a winding path of tunnels, often backtracking when hitting a dead end.

With the whispers quieting, Kai dedicated his time to unraveling the messy streams of mana. To find logic in the chaos. Though the streams folded on themselves, he was certain they must have an origin somewhere inside the ruins.

The solution was to isolate the elemental currents that flowed more consistently. If only he could freely move—

Ding

Mana Sense has reached lv100! Requisites for skill evolution met, congratulations!