

## Chapter 221 - Three Ways to Take Down an Evil Lizard

Kai pressed his lips in a thin line. It had been dark when they arrived at the site two nights before, letting him hope his hunch was wrong. The cruel light of day slayed those illusions.

Verdant trees and lush underbrush couldn't hide the chunks of ivory stone. Beneath the greenery lay a scene of devastation. Whoever attacked the Vastaire millennia ago had done a thorough job. Every rising spire had been cut down with no exception. Towers only grew shorter and more jagged towards the center where a broken stump of rock covered the basilisk's den.

*What are the chances that's not the highest peak? Damn, Zervathi and his stupid instructions.*

There was always the possibility of a mistranslation with ancient texts, the tiny, insignificant chance he was in the wrong place. Kai didn't delude himself. Together with the other scholars, they had poured their minds over the glyphs he recovered.

The writings were one of a kind, they narrated how the Vastaire struck a pact with Zervathi and gained access to the Hidden Sanctuary. The exact sequence of events was muddled.

He'd bet his blessings that the Altar of *Covenant* was in these ruins. The highest peak must have been shattered when the Vastaire fell, but the Altar survived—or at least a piece of it. It might be the cause of the anomalous mana density in Veeryd. The King had probably perceived the streams of essence and decided to carry it around.

That was his best theory. He had long debated whether to confide in Sonya for a second opinion. He could never be sure who was listening in the overcrowded camp, and the stakes were too high to take the risk.

Even without his knowledge, the scholars slowly limped closer to the truth. Kai limited his contributions to ideas of no value, he couldn't bring himself to lead them astray. In part, he didn't want to lie to Sonya, and he wasn't certain he could pull off the misdirection. This wasn't his expertise, and they were professionals with numerous skills dedicated to their job.

"Did you find what you were looking for? We need to go back." Makyn observed the vegetation, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "We're exposed out here."

Kai glanced at the dozens of mages and soldiers working around them. Unless the basilisk decided to jump from a tower, he couldn't see how he'd be in danger.

"Hmm... I've recorded everything I can see from this position. The disposition of the buildings is very interesting." Kai put away his sketches of the ruins with a wise look. After carefully studying the architecture, he had come to the conclusion the site was large. Probably larger than the one on Kawei or Velu.

He jumped down from the ivory boulder to appease his porter. The soldier had his gratitude for recovering the notebook and accompanying him outside. If Seryne had her way, she would have stashed him in a box until she required his skill.

*As long as she doesn't pay attention to what else I can do.*

His boots squelched on the muddy ground, the earth shapers had created a clearing. They pushed back the vegetation and sealed the towers with slabs of ivory. The half-mages weren't good enough to mold stone after cutting it, so they opted to secure the slabs with tons of rock and debris.

It wasn't a *terrible* plan. The King's greatest advantages were stealth and agility, the idea was to mold the battlefield so they controlled only the entrance and could trap the basilisk.

No beast would come out without Earth magic, or one of its subsets. It was a massive project given the size of the site. The undertaking was further slowed by overgrown plants and the threat of attacks.

Fifty meters of leveled ground weren't a great buffer against the King's speed. It stalked the edges of their formation, haunting them with its rattling hiss. Despite Seryne's assurance of safety, everyone knew the beast could barrel through the soldiers and kill any of them.

It had been unwilling to risk another confrontation thus far, grown cautious after their last encounter. Apparently, basilisks couldn't regrow their eyes at Yellow. Such a pity. Though the King must possess a keen sense of mana to have identified the Altar.

Kai didn't like his chances if the basilisk were completely blind and missed a limb. His strongest spells barely made a dent in the emerald scales. The chasm wasn't something he could bridge with planning and tactics.

His sea serpent sword might pierce the hide if he overworked the enchantments. The problem was landing a hit before he got gored or poisoned. His Mind could barely follow its speed, and he was entirely outmatched in physical stats.

Unless the King decided to stand still to be killed, he stood no chance.

*Yatei's mercy, why me? Playing hide and seek with a sadistic lizard wasn't enough? Now I need to go pet it to recover the Altar?*

He didn't want to end up like the soldier the basilisk dragged away in its jaws. Everyone thought the man had died till his screams echoed in the tunnels that night. Whether it was a tactic to lure them or plain cruelty, the sounds of a human being getting devoured were enough to terrify him.

Kai suppressed a shiver as they descended into the safety of the underground. A frontal assault was out of question. He needed to find a better way to recover the artifact.

“Thanks for letting me see the sun.” He waved goodbye to his porter. “I’ll go lie in my box, call me if anyone needs my help.”

Makyn removed his hand from his sword and stopped him. “You know it’s for your safety.”

*Among many other reasons.*

“Of course.” Kai dutifully bobbed his head. “That’s why the captain sent me to lead the vanguard and map the basilisk’s den. Her concern brings tears to my soul.”

The soldier looked about to say something but tersely shook his head. “Let me know if you need to go out again, or any help with your research.”

“Thank you.” Kai patted his arm and leaned in to whisper, “And you let me know if you want something to eat tastier than dust.”

At least his plan to corrupt Makyn one cookie at a time was proceeding smoothly. While the soldier wouldn’t break any rule, he could make space within them given the right excuse.

Kai strolled off to find a quiet place to think. He’d need all his brainpower and then some to figure out how to get the Altar.

The camp had expanded to include nine chambers in a closed loop with a single point of access outside, and two to the underground tunnels. Every other entrance had received the same treatment as the towers, sealed with a slab of ivory and tons of rock.

No one would define the place as comfortable, *livable* perhaps. He had been moved away from the other scholars into the officials’ chamber. Either Seryne valued his ability to sense the basilisk that highly, or she wanted to keep an eye on him. The woman acted like she owed him since he had signed the contract.

If it helped lower her guard, Kai was willing to play the obedient errand boy. The more they underestimated him, the greater his chances of success when he acted.

*We’ll see who laughs last.*

The captain might have caught on to his mingling with Valela. Outside the commonly shared duties of defense and upkeep of the camp, the blue contingent had been confined to three chambers.

Kai had been warned that entering any area without authorization could compromise the safety of the camp, and it would be met with harsh punishment. He’d rather not test them for now. Away from any form of civilization, the laws of the Republic held even less sway.

*Huh? Not this jerk again.*

He was almost thrown off his feet as a man ran into him. Kai only avoided the fall because his back crashed into a wall.

*Damn, I'll need to waste another healing potion.*

"Watch where you're going, boy," Bert sneered. "Didn't your skills warn you?"

Kai gritted his teeth not to wince. "It did. I wasn't fast enough to react." A whisper was no help when a yellow professional went out of his way to bump into him. He could have used Empower to dodge, but odds were Bert would have just hit him harder.

After chasing the basilisk through the tunnels had inevitably failed, the man had blamed him for not warning them sooner. It hadn't gotten better when the soldier's agonizing screams had filled the tunnels.

Kai had replayed the scene many times in his head. The basilisk had struck too fast, Hallowed Intuition didn't work as well when he wasn't targeted directly. Perhaps if Bert hadn't grown complacent and allowed the formation to grow slack, his comrade might still be alive.

*Guilt must be eating at you...*

It wasn't a problem he could win with reason.

Kai walked away without looking back. Inside this chamber, the air was almost free from the smell of bodies, and the floors had been scrubbed clean of dirt to reveal the polished ivory underneath.

It was as good as it got down there, though the treatment didn't extend to his lodging. Seryne had made the Earth mages erect a series of walls to divide the space for the officers. The mages must not have planned correctly, leaving a long and narrow space against the ivory wall.

More like a short corridor than a room with a sheet serving as the door. Kai climbed over a crate to reach his cot and the table beyond with his backpack. While he considered himself a connoisseur of cramped places, this was definitely the most awkward to move in.

*If the basilisk broke into the camp, it would get stuck between the walls before reaching me. That's at least half a star of value.*

Kai took out pen and paper, writing in English in case anyone spied on what he was doing. Later, he'd burn it or store it in his ring.

*How do I steal the treasure from an evil lizard and survive?*

The easiest way was to wait for the soldiers to kill the beast and then steal the Altar. That presented its own set of problems. How long would it take to set up the battlefield and hunt the beast? The basilisk had shown it wasn't above running away when it was outmatched. If it decided to flee, he'd be screwed.

*Let's focus on what I can affect first.*

Counting on the Republic to kill it, what were his chances to loot a priceless artifact, run away, and open a way to the Hidden Sanctuary? That was taking for granted that the gate would still work with a fragment.

*Fuck my life.*

Kai took a deep breath. If he hadn't taken Mana Observer, he would never have found the artifact. It was possible no one would notice it until they examined the body of the basilisk. Flynn had shown him how to pickpocket someone a couple times, could he swipe the Altar from the carcass under everyone's eyes?

Improvisation and his spatial ring might give him a chance, though it would also expose his secret if he failed. The issues would only multiply after the Republic identified the Altar.

*That's my best chance to do it. I can't miss it.*

He needed to ensure he would be present when the soldiers fought the basilisk. He tapped the pen on his chin before adding another line.

If he set aside matters of personal satisfaction, killing the beast wasn't a necessary part of the plan. He just needed its treasure, though the idea of getting close enough to steal from the King sounded even crazier. Even if he used a spell to do it, there was no way to safely approach that monster.

*I need to be ready if the chance arises, but I can't plan for it.*

There was only one more possibility to reach his goal.

Makyn's arrow had shown that for how terrifyingly strong it was, the King wasn't immortal. His chances to loot the carcass would drastically increase if they killed the basilisk without the whole expedition watching.

*Which is also something that can't be planned...*

He could think of a few ways to engineer a battle. Come up with a random translation of the glyphs that required them to explore the underground. Contact and convince Valela they needed to hunt the basilisk before the Republic. Have Makyn accompany him outside and taunt the beast till it attacked them.

Neither of these plans had a high likelihood of success, though any was more than zero. They would also all lead to more deaths. It was like murder with extra steps. He couldn't lead a group of people into a deadly fight on the slim chance he recovered the Altar.

*Well, it's not like I expected this to be easy...*

*Goal: How do I steal the treasure of an evil lizard and survive?*

1. *Let the Republic do the work.*
2. *Pickpocket the evil lizard.*
3. *Find another way to kill the evil lizard.*

All three *solutions* had issues that could arise outside of his control. From not being able to approach the carcass, to getting found out, or dying. There was no way to ensure success, though he could increase his chances.

Kai played every scenario in his head, trying to come up with a countermeasure. He needed to figure out the details of the Republic's hunting plan to improve his odds. Outside of that, the more fights with the basilisk he was in, the higher his chances to get the Altar.

While he wouldn't instigate a suicide mission, he could jump in if someone else had the brilliant idea. Which meant he had to convince Seryne to send him along on any expedition.

*Great. I need to play the dutiful little soldier.*

With a groan, Kai destroyed his notes and left his room to make himself available for any task. Captain Seryne spent most of her days inside her new office, the woman was obsessed with finding herself four walls to sit in.

Between empty discussions with the other scholars and tedious errands around the camp, Kai had to wait two more days before he got his chance. The mana of the site started to churn and rise beyond its normal density in preparation for a spatial anomaly.