

Chapter 168 - Testing Fate

The circular script on the Fulcrum glowed with a soft light, it had gathered Fate for more than a week. Kai wished he had observed the artifact before activating it the first time, so he would have a reference.

It could be quite a bit or a speck of dust.

The gathering speed depended on his Favor, which was his most impressive attribute. But whatever mad enchanter built the artifact, they probably didn't plan to lend it to the first guy on the streets.

There is one simple way to know for sure.

Kai descended the broken tower towards the submerged floors. He had debated where to activate it. The structure the twins had chosen to set up camp in was in the center of the cluster, aligned with the higher mana density area underneath.

Under the moons pulling, the tide was leaning against low. The half-flooded chamber was dry, with the layer of sand dark with humidity. Kai dove into the dark waters.

He barely felt the biting cold, the anticipation of the moment swelled inside him. Swimming, he pushed himself against the familiar tunnels to gain speed and emerged a minute later in an underground chamber.

One of the few not linked to a higher room, and only accessible from the flooded tunnels. Kai scrunched his nose. The air was damp and stale despite his best efforts to bring fresh oxygen through his spatial closet.

Kai retched a bit when his feet touched the slimy floor. A handful of sand had stopped him from slipping, but it didn't stop the mushy sensation. The ivory walls were almost unrecognizable beneath the coat of algae.

Why did I think this was the best place again...?

He had chosen to anchor the release of Fate to the place of activation instead of himself. It might increase the chances of discovering something about the ruin. The dilemma had been where to activate the artifact.

Underground, his senses and movements would be restricted by water and walls. While on the towers outside, he could easily survey the whole ruins from his vantage point and have more mobility.

Perhaps that would have been the wiser choice, but all the mysteries he was interested in were in the depths of the tunnels. That had sealed the deal. This chamber was in a central position that would allow him to reach the corners of the underground complex in the shortest amount of time.

I'm going to feel like a big fool if nothing happens.

Checking the nubs of the silver disk had been tuned correctly one last time, Kai swallowed his nervousness and gave a light press.

Click.

The silvery sound echoed like it was both from far away and right beside his ear. The glow accumulated in a week dissipated like embers blown away by the wind.

As the tiny sparks disappeared, Kai stretched his senses to investigate for any change. The underwater chamber was eerily silent, only disturbed by the occasional dripping of water.

C'mon, spirits, give me something. I'll settle for anything, no matter how small.

Seconds ticked by as Kai spread Mana Sense dozens of meters in every direction. The strain of the skill was mounting in the back of his head. He just needed a sign that something unusual was going on.

Was the charge not enough? Last time the *click* had barely faded when a storefront collapsed.

Five minutes later, nothing had happened. His shoulders slumped. Dozens of careful preparations to minimize the risks and days of patience to wait for the right moment, all for what?

Kai released his hold on Mana Sense with a sigh. Hallowed Intuition had formed a hushed murmur, a constant humming if he focused on it. The skill had also behaved erratically in High Harbor and had failed to warn him of the vase almost cracking his skull.

Its predicting abilities relied on Favor to work, and the Fulcrum interfered with Fate. He had no idea how, but the two things clearly interacted. Perhaps the artifact disrupted the flow of Fate and made the whispers of Hallowed Intuition even more cryptic.

At least I've confirmed something. Tests, yay!

Kai was about to dive back into the water to see if the fishes inhabiting the tunnels exhibited weird behaviors when the murmurs of the skill hit a crescendo. His skin tingled from his toes to the tips of his ears. A pulse of essence crossed his entire body and continued through the ruins.

The mana currents churned below him, wildly accelerating their motion, denser by the moment.

The fuc—

Kai jumped into the flooded tunnels and pushed mana into Blessed Swimmer to navigate them faster. He had no idea how long it would last, and this might be his only chance to understand what the fuck was going on.

The waters themselves were stirred by the wild streams of mana, rousing the sand and reducing visibility. Schools of fish and skittering crabs fled in a panic, the mollusks that couldn't move dug themselves in the ground.

Kai relied on Blessed Swimmer to not get swept away as he looked for the origin of the event through the chaos. The ambient mana had already more than doubled, and the density was still climbing higher. His skin had gone numb to the continuous tingle.

Spirits, the mana must be five times higher than normal now.

Kai stopped in a large hall with a single entry where his dad had recorded an etching. Sand and debris filled two-thirds of the space, whirling in the water. Blessed Swimmer couldn't protect him completely, a sliver of rock cut a thin line in his arm, bleeding a red thread.

Is this the place?

He shaped Water mana into a shield to observe the mayhem without distractions. Blue, dark and iridescent motes swirled. He narrowed down Mana Sense to see if he could get any conclusive answer.

It doesn't make an—

A strident cry split his thoughts, breaking through the confused humming of Hallowed Intuition. Hoarse and incomprehensible. The mana storm started abating, the sand filling the chamber stirred, heaved, as if something...

Wha— That's not possible!

Another raspy cry pierced the indistinct mass of whispers, echoing in his mind with a somewhat desperate note. Kai abandoned his curiosity and bolted for the door with all the Strength he could muster. He smashed into the corridor opposite the entrance and pushed on with hardly a grimace. Empower surged through his body granting him superior speed.

At the edge of his senses, an incandescent mass of mana uncoiled in the chamber. Kai didn't stop to get a better view and pushed harder against the water. Whatever that was, he didn't need Hallowed Intuition to know it was bad news.

Mana overflowed his veins, powering his limbs. Kai reduced the drag with Blessed Swimmer trying to outrun the impending sense of doom. Bruises and cuts accumulated on his body in the hurry to make it out. He charted the fastest path to the surface, he needed to get out of here *now*.

Shit, shit, shit—

A low rumble spread through the water from behind. Bones rattled and movements faltered in some kind of primordial fear. Another hoarse cry. Run. Flee. Hurry.

The presence in the heart of the ruins began to move.

Kai couldn't spare the Mind to extend Mana Sense, he knew with certainty that it was coming towards him. It reemerged in his range, cutting through the tunnels with terrifying speed.

A light shone above. His muscles screamed as he hurled himself out of the dark waters directly into the dry chamber. He had no idea which tower he was in, but Kai didn't hesitate to climb higher. His instincts screamed to run.

Kai only dared to stop when he reached the broken top of the building, warm sunlight bathing his body. He balanced on the jagged top of one of the lower towers to survey the terrain. Sword firmly in his grip, his chest heaved to catch his breath.

The tower where they camped stood fifty meters away. Overlooking the beach, the Vastaire site was entirely untouched by the storm below. The crystal sea glimmered in the sun, calm and peaceful beyond the ruins.

Whatever that *thing* was, it had given up its chase once beyond the water.

What the fuck was that? I checked all the underground chambers, they could only be accessed from outs—

Hallowed Intuition humming rose faintly, a shadow shot from the sands below. It crossed the distance in a blink. Kai surged Empower and raised his sword in a defensive stance.

Long needle-like fangs and a dark abyss crashed against the steel. Unable to fend off the attack, Kai was thrown back like a rag doll. His back painfully hit the opposite wall. The adrenaline helped him ignore the pain, nothing appeared to be broken.

His sight was slightly hazy from the impact, but he gritted his teeth and stood up to meet the threat. A glimpse of dark blue scales slithered off the tower and disappeared into the white sands.

Mana Sense had caught more than his eyes, a signature brighter than any beasts he had fought before faded into the cloud of essence below.

That's not possible.

There was no awakened beast for tens of miles in every direction. No time for hows or whys. Kai downed all four vials he had prepared for emergencies. The most potent recipes he could brew from Dora's book.

Heat radiated from his stomach through his body. His head cleared and the scrapes on his skin stopped bleeding. Then the enhancing potions kicked in, sharpening his mind and strengthening his body.

Future-Kai will deal with the consequences if I survive.

The foul smell of rotten fish filled the air. Kai pinpointed the source to a dark green patch of dense ichor painting the ivory stone. His hopes were quickly dashed, his sword was clean. The beast must have been injured before it attacked him.

Damned spirits, I said to send me a small sign, not a fucking kaiju.

Peeking over the edge of the tower, the beach looked sunny and peaceful. Mana Sense couldn't perceive anything off apart from the abnormal concentration of mana beneath.

Kai didn't trust it for a second.

The dense cloud of essence hung below the sands. He might be able to pierce it if he were closer, but that would mean moving closer to the threat. Why did he pick such a short tower in his mad escape, damn idiot. Jumping to a higher building now would leave him exposed to a strike.

Calm the fuck down. What are your options?

After its initial strike failed, the beast appeared content to ignore him, perhaps nursing its wound. There was a chance the monster would get bored and go away if he waited long enough. The mana was already dissipating, and the normal ambient essence couldn't sustain beasts of that power. That might take a couple hours, *if* he was lucky.

Shit!

He couldn't wait. Flynn and Lou would come back before then. Knowing them, any warning sign would draw them closer instead. Flynn had promised to keep the other teen busy for an hour. Kai had been sure it would be ample time to exhaust the effect of the artifact and hide any trace. He hadn't considered the consequences might be this dangerous and *alive*.

Guess that leaves only one option.

With a single viable path before him, Kai was somewhat relieved. There was nothing to be done besides giving it his best shot and hoping he didn't die.

That's a cheery thought!

Hallowed Intuition had stopped constantly humming, meaning the interference from the Fulcrum might be over. Plans huddled in his mind. He chipped away at them, till a single, awfully reckless idea remained.

He threw the empty vials onto the sand below. A sharp whisper proved his danger-sensing skill was working again. The tumbling glass didn't reach the beach before a scaled tail smashed them to dust.

Definitely still there.

From the bestiaries he had read at the estate, he could think of a few monsters that might fit the description. Unless this was some exotic species.

I hope I'm wrong.

Kai descended to the lower chamber, senses tense for any sign of danger. Hallowed Intuition warned him of the mortal danger below and advised him to go back at each step.

I've got no choice.

He needed to taunt the scaled monster while giving up as few advantages as possible. He hadn't gotten a good look at the beast, but if the spirits had any mercy, it was too large to squeeze through the windows.

That left only the passages in the floors. It'd be far easier to anticipate, though he wasn't looking forward to fighting a monster with that Strength in close quarters. The ivory tower was a shield but also a trap that limited his movements.

It's the only way.

Kai spared ten breaths on each floor to see if the scaled beast would make its move. His improved boosting potions should give him at least twenty more minutes before the side effects kick in. He had to close it before then.

He spied on the dark waters two rooms below, *close enough*. Kai summoned a stream of seawater towards him. He absorbed half of it in his ring and let the rest pool around him for good measure. His Magic was stronger when it could directly control a liquid without wasting power condensing it.

C'mon, fishy fishy.

Searching the room, Kai gathered a handful of pebbles. Right hand still wielding his blade, he used the left to throw them in the water one by one.

Pluf. Pluf. Pluf.

The power of pebbles transcended species and language. Hallowed Intuition granted him a brief warning before the beast emerged from the water. There was no strike this time. Two

long feelers broke the surface, lazily testing the air. They were linked to a sharp snout covered in dark blue scales with a metallic gleam.

Without haste, the spiked draconic head emerged fully, almost filling the entire door frame with its size. The massive body slowly coiled in the lower chamber without apparent end. Two icy, blue slitted eyes fixed on him. Kai stopped breathing.

The tail finally emerged from the sprinkling water with its finned ends, and the beast broke the stare. A few specks of white flooring remained visible beneath the massive body.

No arms or wings along the serpentine body, and two symmetrical wounds along its midsection leaking dark green ichor. The same foul smell of rotting fish filled the chamber. The cuts were oddly straight and deep, judging by the amount of ichor and careful movement of the beast. His suspicions were correct.

A freaking sea serpent. I demand a refund!

Perhaps early Yellow, he didn't have enough experience to tell for sure. The odds he could beat this monster in a fair fight were not in his favor. A forked tongue tasted the air. The snake let out a low disdainful whistle, revealing a row of glass-like teeth. Its jaw was more than large enough to swallow him in a single bite.

Kai tensed his muscles, sword before him and elemental spells ready. The entire reserves of Mana Spring were ready to be used.

Spirits bless me. What are you waiting for? Do you want me to throw a pebble on your stup—

The sea serpent struck, ravenous jaws open to tear into his flesh. The water on the floor surged, consuming half of his elemental reserves to form a revolving shield around him. Hallowed Intuition whispered in his ear, giving the final go-ahead.

Empower flooded his body to bursting. Kai abandoned his sword and dove for the jaws like an Olympic swimmer, following the exact timing suggested by his skill.

A sharp pain shot from his left shoulder and leg where the fangs cut into him. Then the world turned dark, and even more foul smelling. Kai didn't wait for the serpent to constrict his body or test its stomach acids. Streams of water gushed out of his ring, forming into a series of sharp blades hacking the beast from the inside.

A glass-cracking hiss shook the serpent's body. The sound made his vision go faint for a moment, it might have knocked him unconscious if it wasn't for the water shield around him.

The fleshy walls contracted to squish him, but the shield was much more effective against constriction and blunt damage than its piercing fangs. Realizing its efforts were in vain, the snake changed tactics and started to retch.

No, you don't.

Kai took two daggers from the spatial closet and plunged the dark flesh to prevent the serpent from spitting him out. His ears rang with the continuous cries. Empower and potions strengthened his muscles to help him hold on while rivers of dark green ichor flowed around him.

Just do me a favor and die already.

His Water Mana was the first to run out, forcing Kai to take a more active role. He braced and stabbed his daggers between each contraction. Ignoring his disgust in favor of survival, he began exploring the insides of the beast.

The cries of the beast grew louder and desperate, then weaker. Kai continued hacking even when it stopped moving. Finally, a notification blinked in the corner of his vision. The sea serpent was dead.

Who the fuck said being small is a weakness.