

## Chapter 113 - The Chasm Between

“I think I found something.” Kai took a few tentative steps, trying to pinpoint the exact direction from Hallowed Intuition.

“Are you sure?” Moui looked confused, his eyes scanned through the wall of greenery. “I can’t sense— get behind me. Something is coming this way.”

The hunter readied the ax in his hand as Kea drew her bow.

The whispers became clearer, Kai remained in his position. Mana Sense was stretched in a wide net in front of him when something touched the fringes of his perception. “It’s only red tier, I can take it.”

“Kai,” there was a note of warning in Moui’s tone.

“It’s not the first time I’ve battled one. I’m in no danger,” he said with conviction, drawing his sword. “You can always intervene if you think it’s necessary.”

Kai had always fought solo, but common sense was enough to understand that arguing with a danger incoming was a big no-no. Indecision and miscommunication were fatal flaws when working in a group.

He stood his ground since the threat was negligible, there would be time to apologize later. This might be the only chance to show his abilities. If he wanted to stop being treated like a helpless child, he couldn’t keep hiding his skills.

The beast stopped about forty meters from them, its head snapped in their direction. More details were revealed as it stalked forward with measured steps. Its glowing mana veins positioned it at the peak of Red. Incomparably stronger than the first boa he fought years ago.

Moui tensed. "This beast is dangerous."

"Trust me, Uncle. I've fought drakes before." The sinuous motion of the quadrupedal lizard was impossible to mistake. The grade wasn't everything - a red mouse and a red elephant would have widely different attributes.

Drakes were among the top brass in this regard, one of the three deadliest species found in Veeryd. Their poisonous bite was enough to kill anything at their tier, and often one higher. Naturally, Kai had prepared an antidote, though he'd rather not get bitten.

The whispers of danger grew louder. The bushes swayed as the horned snout poked through. Its slitted emerald eyes observed them with intelligence. The beast wavered a moment when he noticed Kai was prepared for its arrival.

Moui had heeded his request and hid his presence behind a tree with his sister. His glowing form had switched the ax for a bow. It would take him an instant to intervene, but it wouldn't be necessary.

The drake moved with deadly grace, green and brown scales camouflaged in the jungle underbrush. The crest on its back only reached waist height, but the long body was over two meters long. Usually beasts this powerful were only found in the heart of Veeryd.

*Must be my lucky day.*

The tail flailed in the air with a cutting sound. With spells at his fingertips, Kai retreated a step back to invite the beast to strike. There was no need to go out swinging like a fool.

The overgrown lizard flickered its forked tongue revealing ivory teeth like jagged knives. Suddenly Hallowed Intuition whispered to dodge, half a second later Mana Sense confirmed the threat.

The powerful musculature of the beast exploded into motion in a blur, faster than him without Empower.

Kai released the first spell right as the drake prepared to lunge at him. Fueled by a chunk of Nature mana, thorny roots caught its claws. The beast was too committed to adjust. It barely managed to arrest its momentum to avoid crashing into the ground.

Yanking with savage abandon, the drake chomped through the trap ensnaring its limb. Even enhanced by magic, the roots couldn't compete with the toxic jaws, but they had done their work distracting the beast. The drake didn't react in time when the two blades of water flew straight for its eyes.

A deafening roar split the jungle. The blinded drake swung its claws and tail wildly. Kai danced at the edge of its reach. The jungle floor turned muddy with a final spell, restricting the movements of the beast. Without solid ground, it couldn't leverage its superior strength.

At his level, Water Magic was somewhat lacking on the offensive front. He stood no chance of penetrating the sturdy scales unless he expended large quantities of mana, and even then, a fatal wound was unlikely. Kai learned to make up for it with precision and flexibility.

The swinging tail offered no blind spots. He could wear it down with spells, ensnare it in vines and roots, trap it with Earth magic and aim more water blades at the weak spots. It would be time-consuming and stretch his elemental reserves, but it was the safest method.

But it wouldn't impress his sister much. Kea didn't understand magic. She understood strength and speed.

Using a few weak vines to jerk its limbs and taunt it, Kai created the perfect chance to strike. Empower surged through his muscles and he flashed forward without hesitation.

The drake had turned to snap a branch to free itself, leaving him exposed. It couldn't know that moment of distraction was more than enough for Kai. The sword drew a long arc through the side of the drake's neck, nicking the bone.

Bright red blood flowed gushed out of the wound. An acrid metallic smell filled the air. The beast's death throes were drowned in a gurgling sound as it silently died.

Drakes were feared for their intelligence, but that didn't matter if he didn't give them the chance to learn. The likelihood it had met another mage was close to nil.

"Is it truly dead?" Kea's bewildered voice broke the silence.

Kai checked with Mana Sense before approaching. "A few more seconds. Wait... yeah, now it's dead." Kea could have done it herself, if she didn't skimp on mana training.

*Not much of a challenge. If it had reached Orange, there was no way Moui would have let me fight it. Maybe I should have drawn out the fight...*

The battle hadn't given him many chances to show off. No desperate plays or great feats of magic, just a few measured strikes. That was the style Elijah taught him, precision and control over pointless flashy displays. End the battle as quickly as possible and save your resources.

"It's dead," Moui confirmed.

Kea cautiously approached the drake. She poked the green scales with the end of her bow before going closer to examine it. The hunter did the same with an inscrutable look.

*I hope it was impressive enough.*

"Who wants to skin it? I forgot my knife." Drake hides could fetch a decent price, but they were a pain to remove. The stronger the lizard the harder they clung to their scales. It would also show it was the real deal. "You can keep it."

Kea looked at him as if he had grown another head. "How did you do it?"

"How did I do what?"

"How did you move that fast and cut through its scales?" Moui asked.

"Oh, that. Years of training and a few orange skills. This wasn't anything special. I can handle pretty much anything at the red tier. With orange beasts it depends on the species."

*Is this too much?*

The implication in his words was obvious. Kea was too shocked to respond, but Moui offered him the assist he needed.

"You hunted an orange beast?"

"Only a couple. And I had to lead them into a trap, but I did get the achievement." Kai smiled proudly, that feat had not been easy. The chasm between grades with beasts was huge. If one caught him unaware, they would be upon him before he could react. Though the trickiest part was finding them in the first place.

Awakened beasts of that level stayed near the heart of Veeryd. The environment there was half the challenge. The risk of encountering an opportunistic predator coming to take advantage of the fight was high. And he was dozens of miles away from safety, half a day of trek through the thick jungle vegetation.

Without Elijah watching his back, he didn't know if he would have tried it. Maybe searched for weeks till an orange beast strayed farther out. It was also why he had to kill two before getting the achievement. The butler had intervened to stop a harpy eagle that strayed too close to his battle, and it was enough to invalidate the first kill.

“That’s not possible... right?” Kea looked at Moui completely lost. Kai had expected doubts, or to be pummeled with questions. The hunter stayed silent.

*Funny how much credibility a little showing off gives me.*

He had shattered their expectations and now everything was possible.

*Well, Moui already knew that I had high skills, he just never thought they were combat-related.*

Only time would tell if Kai had made the right decision. They knew and soon his mother would too. There was no taking back now. He wasn’t too worried about them gossiping. Kea was the only unknown variable.

She looked as if she had seen the ancestors appear before her. Keeping secrets and underplaying his achievement hadn’t been working. The new plan was to prove himself so much beyond her that any comparison was pointless.

Knowing Kea, she wouldn’t give up so easily. But if killing a peak red beast wasn’t enough, he had many more ideas in store for her.

Moui began to skin the drake. His sister helped, though her mind was elsewhere. Under the hunter’s expert movements, the hide easily parted in what looked like magic. They only harvested the best cuts of meat since the taste left a lot to be desired.

Kai was a half-decent butcher, but even his sister’s distracted technique was better than his. He stoically watched, nodding at their work. It wasn’t the time to crack his mysterious and almighty persona.

*This is kinda fun. Work my servants for the glory of your liege!*

After the carcass was taken care of, they went to check the last trap. It was trashed, probably the work of the drake. No one seemed in the mood to hunt. Moui tried to act casual, but Kai could feel he was being observed.

It was only early afternoon when they headed back. Kai would have liked to showcase more abilities and explore the jungle near Sylspring but didn't oppose the decision. The chances of meeting something stronger than were close to none.

Only then he realized he had forgotten about Hallowed Intuition. The skill had behaved very differently from his experiments in town. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to listen to its cryptic messages during the battle. If he misinterpreted something, the risk was far higher than bumping into someone.

He couldn't afford to bet his life on a new skill when he already knew how to achieve victory. Still, he had gained important information nonetheless.

Instead of a sudden impulse to act, he had heard indistinct whispers. And they hadn't appeared at the last moment. Before the drake caught their scent, Hallowed Intuition had already warned him of the possibility.

That was actual foresight. There was a myriad of situations where an *intuition* could prove invaluable. His only disappointment was that the skill hadn't gained any levels. With 700 XP each, they would push him noticeably closer to his goals.

*This is going to be a nightmare to train.*

The skill didn't react unless there was some form of danger. Kai could imagine how Elijah would darkly chuckle if he heard this, but the man wasn't here. Such a requirement was going to be problematic.

Only the spirits knew how many levels it would take before it reacted to something else. The only other solution could be to increase his Favor. Which was even harder.

"If you want, we can stop at the Hunter's Lodge to sell the hide." Moui proposed.

"Sure, I told you it was yours if you skinned it."

"I'm not going to take your money."

"Then give them to Kea."

"I don't need your charity!" Kea snapped, her fists clenched at her side. "You can keep your damned drake."

*It was too much to hope she would accept this quietly.*

The hunters' outpost looked as strange as he remembered. A stark and sudden demarcation separated the wild vegetation from the grassy meadow.

They had barely entered when a man walked up to them. Despite his practical attire, the friendly smile and pot belly made Kai doubt he had hunted anything recently.

"Are those drake scales I see?" The man brushed his goatee with an expert look. "An adult specimen even. This is a great catch."

"Hey Bebo, you never lose your nose for business," Moui greeted the man. "We were coming to sell. I assume you're interested."

Bebo laughed boisterously. "You know me." He bowed his head in a humble gesture. "Someone has to make sure the good folks don't get swindled by those sly merchants." He winked at the siblings.



“The hero of every hunter,” Moui said with a straight face, causing Bebo to have another burst of hilarity.

“Have you ever not been satisfied with my deals? Come on, let’s take a closer look at that hide.”

Kea said she would meet them later and disappeared. They stopped at the doorway of the largest cabin after the main building. He was quite sure he had heard loud bargaining coming from this exact place earlier today.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure, kiddo. Why wouldn’t you? I only eat children on Wednesdays.” Bebo laughed again, patting his belly.

“We met Tridel this morning,” Moui explained.

“Ah, don’t mind that guy. No one follows the rules that closely.” He waved dismissively. “I’ll talk to Ceila if there are any problems.”

Kai didn’t have to be told twice. Inside it looked like a shop, just much, much messier. Disorganized piles of pelts, bundles of arrows, bows, knives and axes laid on racks and counters.

“Everything you see is up for sale,” Bebo gave him a crafty look. “I’m sure your father will buy you anything you want.”

Kai didn’t bother to argue he wasn’t his dad. Words didn’t change the facts.

*I’m probably richer than Moui by now, but that does sound appealing.*

He browsed the merchandise. The quality of most items was excellent despite the lacking presentation. A chest immediately caught his vision, he would recognize the glow of mana herbs everywhere. He was about to ask if he could open it when the conversation caught his attention.

“What a clean kill, I’m glad you were thinking about me when you fought it.”

“Yeah, Uncle is the best hunter,” Kai exclaimed walking up to the counter where they had placed the hide. “He didn’t even give me the chance to attack it and it was already over.”

Moui had enough awareness not to spill his secrets, but his silence could tell enough. Better to avoid any trouble.

*This Bebo looks like a sharp fellow.*

“You are a bit young to fight such a beast, give it a few more years. I’m sure you’ll become a great hunter one day.”

“Really?” Kai continued to play the part.

“You can trust me, I have a certain eye for these things,” Bebo ruffled his hair. “I can already tell you’ll do great things.”

Kai avoided sharing any glance with Moui, wearing a proud look.

After some bargaining, they sold the hide for thirty mesars, more than he expected. The pristine conditions played a large part.

“Has anything caught your eye, kiddo?” Bebo asked him. “I’m sure Moui doesn’t mind buying you a prize for such good luck, right?”

“Sure,” Moui smiled. “You can spend all thirty coppers.”

Bebo clapped his hand enthusiastically. “Hear that kid, your father is feeling generous.”