

Chapter 229 - Desperate Gamble

Dammit, work!

Bearing down with the full might of his enhanced Mind and Spirit, Kai imagined an impenetrable cloak of Shadow enveloping the Altar. Dark motes flowed out of him in droves and wrapped around the artifact. It worked—for exactly half a second—, then the veil swelled and burst into a torrent of colorful lights.

I can't run from a murder lizard while I'm carrying a magic beacon.

The streams of essence couldn't be contained or cut off from the mana flow of the ruins. Kai interrupted the cast before the spell could burn through the rest of his Shadow reserves.

The boosting potion and dense ambient mana increased his regeneration, but it was a losing battle. He had spent a huge chunk of Water and Earth to set up and execute his trap.

A loud *thump* sent a vibration through the tunnels as if another boulder had slammed on the floor. That would have been the plan if his attempt at snatching the Altar had failed. Lou would create a distraction every five minutes to give him a breather and confuse the basilisk.

They'd string the beast back and forth till an opportunity presented itself. It wasn't a spell-proof plan, but it was pretty decent given the grade difference at play.

My plan would have worked if this Altar wasn't defective.

The King barely flinched at the commotion in its relentless pursuit. It must have carried the artifact around for years, if not decades, becoming familiar with the underground flow.

Can't you take the loss with dignity and fuck off?

Kai wove through the chain of passages, his legs burned with pain and power far beyond his limits. He pushed against the mossy ground and jumped through a breach in the wall. They'd cut six intersecting loops around the summoning chamber. Each time he changed direction, he forced the basilisk to retrace its steps and lose ground, but his zigzagging run became less effective with distance. The best he could do was maintain his lead.

While his elemental reserves were slowly refilling, his unattuned mana was draining to support Empower. He had to keep track of the incandescent form of the lizard and make sure he didn't run into a dead end.

Not every awakened beast had more endurance than humans, but this was a B-rank basilisk a grade over him. He stood no chance of outlasting it, especially with a timer over his head.

I've got about twenty-four minutes before the potion runs out.

Once the side effects kicked in, his chances of escaping would be nihil. Even if the mixture of Kai's Restoring Light and Second Wind healed him to prime condition—which was unlikely—the basilisk would catch up to him without the boost.

Can't I have something go smoothly for once?

Kai leaped into another passage, never slowing his run, and he squeezed what he could spare of his brains for a solution.

The King wouldn't be stupid enough to get robbed twice if he threw away the Altar. The only people who could rid him of the threat were at the camp, but he had sowed too much chaos to go back without getting arrested. Not to mention the beast would catch him if he left the network of passages.

I could escape to the Hidden Sanctuary...

His left hand tightened around the shard. He would have preferred to ensure Lou was back to safety before he calmly figured out how it worked. Alas, the world had never cared for his desires. Zervathi had promised the path would be revealed once he reached the Altar.

How easy though?

The portal might take minutes to open or require a ritual. The basilisk could follow him inside, though he wouldn't need the artifact once the portal was open.

A rumbling *thump* shook the center of the site as Lou tried to attract the attention of the basilisk again. Five more minutes had passed, twenty left. The only change in the stalemate was moving closer to exhaustion.

Well, I'm not drowning in choice.

"Hey, Zervathi! Can you hear me?" Kai spoke to the crystal between his huffing breaths. "I found the Altar. How do I get to the Hidden Sanctuary?"

He infused his mana into the artifact, attempting to transmit his thoughts. Each mote was a precious resource, and they all disappeared as if he poured water into a bottomless abyss.

Does it need more? Or am I doing something wrong?

In the lack of light, his boot slipped on a patch of slimy mushrooms and sent him crashing into a wall. Kai clenched his teeth to ignore the pain on his shin and stood up. He couldn't rest, he had to keep moving.

The rattling hiss of the basilisk resounded closer than ever. He reversed into the previous passage to salvage his lead.

The god was silent. There was no mystical light or divine sign showing him the way.

Damned douchebag. Answer me!

Kai desperately tried not to think of the worst possibility: the Altar had been irreparably damaged and couldn't work. More likely, Zervathi had a different concept of a clear path.

There must be some condition to activate the Altar. Wait...

He touched the gem with a tendril of iridescent mana. If he needed to contact another dimension, there was no better element than Space. That was how they had spoken the last time and probably why he got chosen in the first place.

The Altar pulled on the thread, forcing Kai to feed more mana into it in a tug-of-war.

Well, it wasn't that complicated.

The shard glowed brighter and brighter from within. It cast the grim underground into a rainbow of morphing colors.

As if a magical beacon wasn't eye-catching enough. Why didn't you play trumpets too?

~I had high hopes for you. You're truly a superb specimen, elfoid monkey child.~ The thunderous laugh that rocked his mind cut off into a furious cry. ***~What have you done to the Altar of Covenant? Why is there only my unbreakable divine shard left?~***

Dazed by the shouts, Kai lost his footing again. He used the oblong gem to hook on a corner and redirect his momentum.

I found it like this. And it wasn't on the highest peak like you said.

~That's appalling. When I ruled, not even the vilest heathen would dare desecrate the divine artifact of a righteous god in such a way! Manners and decorum must have been lost to the turning of the ages.~

My condolences to you. It must be terrible.

~Horrendous, really. I've dedicated centuries of my existence to banishing Darkness. To think after all my contributions my name would be forgotten...~

Yeah, that must suck. Kai might have felt some sympathy at any other moment. *I'm a bit busy running for my life. So, if you could take me to the Hidden Sanctuary, I could free you from your shackles and we can both be happy.*

~Younglings are always so impatient.~ Kai got the distinct impression that Zervathi was shaking his head. ***~In light of your contributions, I shall forgive your coarse attitude. A barbarian can't be faulted for his lack of education.~***

You—

Another futile *thump* echoed in the distance. Exhaustion and urgency stopped Kai from articulating what he really thought. Once he fulfilled his end of the bargain, he wouldn't have to listen to Zervathi complaining ever again.

My deepest apologies, oh mighty god. I had a long day. If you could please speed along, your humble servant would be eternally grateful.

~I see you're eager to carry out your divine duty. Huh... could you stand still? Even with a solidified shard of my essence, transdimensional magic is a delicate art in my diminished state.~

Of course. How long do you need?

~A few minutes in any of the chambers you crossed shall suffice. Any movement messes with my calculations. What would be the point of bringing you to the Hidden Sanctuary if you missed a limb or your head? Mortals can be oddly fragile.~

If Kai had breath to spare, he would have screamed. He had been forced to listen to this pointless prattle for nothing. Was this what Makyn had felt with him? No, not even on his worst days could he match this.

Did you miss the part where I was 'running for my life'? Unless you can stop a yellow beast from chewing me, I can't slow down.

Zervathi sent him the impression of a sigh of resignation. ~Are you humans always so emotional? Let me see...~

The Altar's kaleidoscopic lights brightened till Kai had to close his eyes to not be blinded. Then a pulse of spatial energy rippled around him through the ruins, making him wonder if the spectacle was even necessary.

~Mhmm... I see the issue. I'm afraid I can't halt that pitiful Bar'Ghelith basilisk. What did you do to earn its fury?~

It was the one to find your Altar and it wants it back.

~Well, Bar'Ghelith basilisks weren't called Vindictive Death for nothing. Truly scum of the earth. I remember one of my champions attempted to exterminate them once. They're tenacious pests, known for their ability to hold a grudge for centuries. Extremely cunning and elusive with a preference for warmer climates.~

Fascinating. Is there nothing I can do?

~Of course, don't despair. You can hide the shard in a place outside its reach and slow it down with your body. So that another worthy champion may take up your mantle and continue the quest after your inevitable demise.~

I meant a plan that doesn't involve my death.

~Alas, no...~ The rumbling voice grew dimmer and sad. **~I have invested greatly in your success. I must cut the connection to preserve my power. Good fortune to you, child. Even if your attempt fell short, your sacrifice shall be remembered.~**

The thread of Space mana snapped, and the Altar dimmed into a transparent gem.

Did that asshole just hang up on me?

Kai came to a halt inside one of the longest passages they had cut. A two-meters corridors between two chambers. He panted for breath, chest heaving and heart drumming. His body was consumed by attributes he hadn't earned, he wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest.

Not yet.

He hadn't heard Lou's last attempt at a distraction, but the potions must have less than ten minutes remaining. He wouldn't give up till he was officially doomed.

The basilisk hesitated at an intersection before deciding to approach him from his right. Kai deactivated Mana Observer, knowing the beast would notice his touch. His mind rejoiced at having the burden lifted.

He focused on tracing an alcove in the smooth ivory. One last cut, slightly to his left.

It wasn't a terrible idea, besides the dying-for-nothing part.

Conscious that a psycho lizard was barreling towards him, he used a spell to remove the stone instead of letting it slide out. The alcove perfectly fit the shard. It was deep, but not too deep. He could have made it unreachable for the basilisk. But what would be the point? He wouldn't be able to recover it before the reinforcements from the Republic locked down the site.

Kai dashed to his left, hiding behind the corner in a veil of Shadow. His back hit the creeping vines covering the wall as the basilisk burst into the chamber on the other side of the passage. Its forked tongue whipped the air and the beast released a deep rattling hiss, full of triumph.

Okay, it's a shitty plan.

The King strode towards the artificial passage. Claws extended into the aperture, screeching against the ivory to reach its stolen treasure. The calls turned shorter and raspier when it failed to grab off the shard.

Snout and forelimbs extended into the narrow passage, but the spiky crown on its head rasped against the wall, unable to reach inside. Its body was made to sprint and dart, with powerful though short limbs relative to its size.

Kai had to admit he had gotten lucky with the improvised measurement. When it fully extended, the claws could just scratch the edge of the alcove he created. A palm from reaching the crystal shard, resting inside. The beast gave no sign of giving up, filling the underground with skin-crawling screeches, one failed attempt after the other.

C'mon, lizard brain. It's not the time to turn into an idiot. You can't reach the alcove from that side.

It could just be his mind playing tricks, but his limbs seemed heavier. He had no idea how much longer the potions would last. He might not even get the full duration since he had only consumed a drop.

When the hellish sounds stopped, Kai carefully extended Mana Observer. He leaned over to confirm that the basilisk was gone, likely racing towards his position.

I'm actually doing this.

Empower surged in his legs, he leaped over the passage and infused the creeping vines covering the wall with Nature mana. The plants coiled around his arms and legs to hold his weight. Confident they wouldn't snap, Kai took out his sea serpent sword and extended his veil of shadows to cover it.

He was surprised by the calm reigning over his mind. In a handful of seconds, he might die but he was strangely at peace. Maybe it was the physical and emotional exhaustion or a side-effect of the potions kicking in. Or just the awareness that he had done everything he could.

The reason didn't matter. His mind was clear of any thoughts. He hung in a heap of vines to lay his trap. Waiting. Without moving a muscle.

Meek whispers of danger heralded the arrival of the King in the pitch-black chamber. Kai stopped breathing. He felt exposed without Mana Observer monitoring his surroundings, but this was the only way his gamble might succeed.

Though blind, the basilisk would notice an enchanted light or the warmth of a torch. The plan he had strung up with hopes and prayers, all bet on the beast's arrogance to succeed.

Why should the predator worry about the prey? The little mouse who stole its treasure had run without ever fighting back. The chasm between them was so vast that his best spell tingled its scales.

The soft squelch of damp ground moved closer. How could a beast of that size make such little noise was probably magic. Hallowed Intuition grew more restless. It didn't suggest him to run, the skill knew that would be a death sentence.

Stay still and wait, pray not to be discovered.

There is no other way.

A rattling hiss pierced the silence, making him aware the basilisk was below him. So close, Kai could smell its rotten breath, rancid with the beasts and humans it had devoured. The King just had to raise its head, taste the air with its tongue and eat him like a crunchy snack.

The strident screech of its claws against the ivory wall brought a wave of momentary relief. He hadn't been discovered. Kai freed his arms from the vines, in precarious balance with the harness around his legs.

A spike of panic almost pierced his calm - he needed to act. He had a single shot. If he failed to inflict a mortal injury, or the basilisk noticed the deception, he was dead. Worse, if the basilisk decided to play with its food.

The shard clinked against the floor inside the passage, making the King hiss gleefully and sweep away his hesitation. Kai severed the vine wrapped around his thighs and let himself fall forward. The fall sent a breeze through his hair, both hands gripped the hilt of his sword.

Not a wisp of mana left him till he heard the basilisk's tongue whip the air. Right then, the world bloomed into color with Mana Observers locking onto his target. The basilisk head was extended inside the passage as far as it would go, claws over the shard.

Kai infused his sword with Earth to increase its weight and unattuned mana for sharpness, aiming for the largest vessel of incandescent mana. Recognizing the danger, the King raised its snout to retreat but its crown stuck in the narrow entrance.

Surprise motherfucker!

The blade penetrated the side of the neck where the spiky crown gave way to lesser scales. The sword got stuck halfway through when Kai grabbed one of the bony spikes to get the leverage to push it deeper. The wound would have killed any orange grade on the spot, but the basilisk refused its fate.

He twisted his blade and held on for his life as the beast thrashed madly beneath him. Something nicked his left leg, sending a wave of numbness through his body.

Before the venom could fully paralyze him, Kai cast a torrent of water and ice to push himself through the passage. His shoulder hit the corner of the wall, slowing his flight. He landed roughly with his legs halfway into the narrow corridor, mana flowing through his veins turned dense as honey and unresponsive.

You need to be a douche till the bitter end, don't you?

More accursed screeching filled the underground as the basilisk tried to claw for him.