

Chapter 239 - Survival

While the ivory stone was familiar, everything else wasn't. Instead of narrow tunnels and buried chambers, the vast halls of the temple were spotless, almost sterile. Flowing scripts circled the walls and floor in golden tapestries splintered by inky runes.

Kai strode across the eerie chambers, careful not to brush the enchantments, his boots echoing through the colossal architecture. Aside from the lack of people, the place hardly looked abandoned—definitely not for eight thousand years.

The dense mana saturating the air made his body tingle. Each breath was reminiscent of the suffocating humidity of Greenside, and just as unpleasant. It took a conscious effort to not heave, drawing in more air would only worsen the symptoms.

The last time he had experienced anything similar was during his arrival at Virya's estate. Even then, the mana gradient hadn't been quite as extreme. Once he adapted to the new conditions, he would replenish his reserves much faster.

~The promised exit is on the second left. Don't touch anything or wander around. Those treacherous cretins have made the wards unstable with their tampering.~ The fairy shriled with condescension in his head.

"I know." Kai scowled at the god, keeping to the indicated path. He couldn't fathom how the enchantments still functioned after all this time, but he wasn't eager to test them. The currents of mana flowing through the runes were enough to obliterate him several times over.

The temple must be a dangerous site, he was eager to reach a safe place and gather his thoughts. As long as he paid attention to Hallowed Intuition's warnings, he shouldn't have any problems avoiding danger outside. Then it was only a matter of time till he found a way to escape. If the worst case happened, he could use one of his three wishes.

Hmm, why is it so damn cold?

Contrary to the abundant mana, the temperature lingered around freezing point when Zervathi opened a breach in his prison. Tales spoke of hidden realms presenting all kinds of crazy environments, some in defiance of logic and natural laws. Hopefully, he hadn't gotten stranded in a frozen wasteland, that would make for a very unpleasant stay.

~Turn right into the Hall of Abnegation, remain on the left and continue for sixty-six strides to the Supplicants' Steps. You'll be safely delivered to your destination as promised.~ The godly navigator informed him. ***~Now I shall take my leave. You may call upon my name when you're ready to beg for my aid. My realm has been left in serious disrepair since my imprisonment. To think I have to waste my time on you when there is so much work to be done.~***

“Uh... Then why are you still talking?”

Kai noticed the connection snap shut. *Praise the spirits. I thought he would never leave.*

Having regained the privacy of his mind, he strolled through the last stretch. Glyphs and runes etched with gold covered both sides of the Hall of Abnegation, but his desire for safety beat any lingering curiosity. He descended a set of ivory steps two at a time, and only realized he had crossed the boundary when the enchantment closed behind him.

Chilly gusts and blinding light welcomed him out of the hazardous temple. Boots crunched on fresh snow. One hand rose to shield his eyes while the other wrapped around his torso for warmth.

Please, anything but a frozen wasteland.

Kai squinted, transfixed at the foreign scenery. A pale sun drifted on the horizon, its edges melted onto the dark sky as if a painter had splashed water onto a fresh picture.

Or a god has abandoned his realm for a few millennia...

For the first time, he actually considered whether he *might* have bitten off more than he could chew. The dying light didn't offer any warmth. Zervathi's temple was halfway up a mountain. It was hard to judge its size when he was standing on top of it and clouds shrouded the peak.

I'm not on a glacier. So there is that...

Kai rubbed his hands together, his breath fogged over his fingers. The sooner he found a warmer place, the better. Looking down the white slopes, panic wrenched his guts.

Wait... Is that...? That explains how they built the sites.

Snow continued for a few hundred meters of steep incline until the slope uncovered ivory rocks and a forest further below.

It must be where the Vastaire had mined the stone for their buildings. There was no trace of a quarry throughout the Baquaire Archipelago. His dad thought they had used some kind of arcane magic to create it, or transported it across the ocean. The answer was less magical—or more, depending on the perspective.

I still need to get down.

The entrance to the temple was carved into the mountain face, but the cliff prevented him from circling the structure. Unless he wanted to climb down, a snow-covered field was the only viable option to descend. The spooky temple wasn't so bad after all, it could offer him shelter till he figured out what to do.

Reminded of his vow of caution, Kai threw a handful of snow on the ivory steps. The ball sizzled into a thin fog. He couldn't go back, the temple gate was impenetrable from outside.

It must be how the temple managed to look so pristine. Guess that's a no—

Hallowed Intuition tore through his thoughts. Kai threw himself onto the ground as a roar shook the mountainside, bearing down with an overwhelming presence. He caught a swirl of wings stirring the clouds before an icy flash illuminated the bodies of two massive monsters.

The fight ended just as quickly as it started: golden ichor rained from the clouds with a scaled wing of the same color. After another thundering roar, the aura retracted, letting Kai breathe again. That was far beyond the basilisk or any other beast he had encountered.

A chorus of growls and screeches rose from beyond the cliffside. Kai stole a glimpse of majestic eagles and wyrmlings diving on the remains when furious whispers of danger drowned his thoughts again. The snowy peak shook and collapsed into an avalanche. He could only cast a shield and let the snow swallow him.

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I need to get out.

Kai crouched in the hollow of a rotting tree, unsure how long he had stayed there. Hungry, cold and tired. Sleep wasn't an option, a yellow predator could stumble on his shelter at any moment. He needed to be awake to parse mortal danger from the jumble of whispers.

How could I have been so stupid?

He couldn't tell if it was the fear of being eaten alive or his willpower that kept him together, albeit barely. Since his supplies had run out, he had been surviving on the wild plants he managed to scavenge. The murmurs and Herbology stirred him away from deadly weeds, but they were less accurate with those that merely made him cramp or bleed from his eyes.

Kai had headed into the forest because of the lower mana density, expecting it would be easier to hunt for food, but battles attracted attention, and fresh blood doubly so. He was forced to abandon half the prey he killed or flee with the parts he managed to hack off and stash in his ring.

Even when successful, he had no way to cook them. The last time he had been foolish enough to light a fire, he was forced to use Dora's elixirs to escape. Flames meant attention and attention meant death—another hard lesson learned.

He had to work with the elements he had. Frozen meat was easier to break and swallow without tasting it. He needed to gather more food before he grew too weak, but his legs

refused to move. The wound from the last hunt pulsed painfully on his side. An instant too late, and a drake would have munched on him.

I'm already weak... I'll be too slow...

If he lay here, there would be no more pain. He could eat a nightmare berry and be done with it. Though at that point, he might as well use one of Zervathi's requests for a decent meal and a few days in a safe shelter. He might find the will to give this another try if he rested.

Stop being an idiot and get up. You're not going to die in a stinking hole.

A stubborn spark of pride tugged at him, Kai was sure he had strangled the remaining vestiges a month ago. One wish had gone towards finding a way out of there, and another was reserved to make that plan succeed. That left a single request of wiggle room. If he wasted that now, he might as well doom himself.

"How else am I supposed to survive?" Kai whispered into the darkness of his rotting shelter. He needed to rest, to sleep for longer than an hour. "Is that too much to ask?"

Yes, stop whining and get up. Any wish will just delay our escape.

"Why must you be such a jerk...?"

Zervathi would need seven years to regain the necessary power to send him back on his own—basically a death sentence. The current plan lowered the timetable down to two or three years, given that he managed to fulfill all the requirements. He had no idea how he was supposed to cross the island when he struggled to survive in one place.

You can worry about that later. You need to get food. Get. Up. Now.

"Fine." Kai crawled out of the trunk to face the verdant jungle. If he had to die, he might as well do it while standing.

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Slicing the meat into finer morsels, Kai pushed the bowl along the stone floor of his cave. "Is that good enough for Your Majesty?"

"Mew." The picky kitten appraised the dish with a critical eye. Then his stomach got the better of him, and Hobbes threw himself on the meal with a voracious appetite.

At this rate, I'll have to roast your meat next.

He had cut his food once on a whim, and now the pest refused to eat it otherwise. It was a mystery how a cat could eat so much while staying so small. After regaining a healthy size, the kitten had barely changed.

Hobbes pushed the empty bowl back with his little paw. His violet eyes nailed him with a pleading look. "Meow."

"You spoiled little brat." Kai got down to more slicing. Feeding another mouth forced him to go out more often, though it was a small price for his sanity. Last night the kitten had even slipped into his bed to snuggle with him. "Hmm... What species are you?"

While he had only explored the area between the slopes of the Spike and the western forest, the kitten was the first beast with a Space affinity he had encountered. It was also the first that didn't try to run away or eat him. "Where are your parents? How could they abandon such a cute face? Did you get lost?"

Hobbes tilted his head, confused why the meal was getting delayed. He was already so slippery that Kai couldn't understand how an adult cat could have died.

"Well, just enjoy this while it lasts. I need to leave soon, but you can follow."

"Mrow?"

"I have to. I've already stayed too long. I also have a family I want to go back to."

Technically, he could stay put for seven years. Though the longer he remained in the Sanctuary, the higher the chances of something going wrong. Despite having gotten better at surviving, he needed to run into the wrong yellow beast only once to be done in.

"Do you have any idea where I can find an Astral Harmonizer, a stable Gateway and a manual on ancient elven runes that I can read?"

"Meeew," Hobbes squeaked impatiently.

"Hmmm... I thought so." Kai gave him the refilled bowl and took out the map. "I mean, they're at one of these sites. The question is which one should I pick?"

Zervathi provided an outline of the island as part of his first wish. The problem was that there were too many potential locations marked, three for the astral trinket, six for the gate, and two dozen where he might glean the Vastaire style of enchanting.

Some of these places were probably inside death zones, infested with beasts, or had wards that could crush his body and shred his soul.

I should have asked for more information.

He could exclude the sites on the Spike. It was already a miracle—or his Favor—that he hadn't gotten killed on the first day. Climbing the mountain would leave him exposed to aerial attacks, not to mention the monsters that nested on top.

“Uh, that still leaves too many options. I can learn about the runes in every place where I can find the other components. So, I can exclude those too, which leaves seven possibilities...” Kai squinted at the map, hoping to glean some information he was missing.

Apart from the areas he had filled out around the forest, there were few landmarks noted. “Do you think this is some kind of pit?” He pointed to three ominous lines on the other side of the island.

Hobbes was too busy licking his bowl to share his genius.

“It must be a pretty large hole to have been marked... or maybe a lake?” The area contained all the pieces he needed, but the journey alone would be risky and long. “Better if I check closer places first...”

There remained a single place with an astral trinket, an isle close to the shore beyond the forest. “Guess I'm going there...”

Diving into the sea wasn't ideal, but then again there were no good options, just the least bad ones. Perhaps there was some kind of low tide he could use. The swim didn't look too long anyway and Water was his strongest affinity.