

Chapter 185 - New Leads

"It's just a little scratch, stop being such a baby." Kai scowled under Flynn's weight, careful not to trip in the underbrush of Veeryd. "We'll have the whole jungle after us if you don't lower your voice."

"I got bit by a fucking drake! I want to see you shrug that off." Flynn leaned heavier against him, limping over a broken branch. "That stupid lizard almost chomped my leg off."

"Now you're being dramatic. It was just a little nibble, you were good at dodging at the last second. If you were slightly faster, it wouldn't have touched you at all."

"Now you're being an asshole."

"You told me you wanted to get stronger. Did you think it would be easy?"

"No, but why did I have to fight a goddamn drake?" he sulked. "I had never seen one that big, it was probably mid or late Orange. There were a hundred easier options."

"You know how the Guide works, the reward is proportional to the risk. I wanted to ensure you'd get a decent feat, and it worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah," Flynn snorted and gritted his teeth when a branch brushed his bandaged leg. "But what if I was slower? Would you have gotten there in time?"

"I was ready to intervene the moment things went wrong," Kai reassured the sullen boy. "I mean, I was *at least* seventy percent confident I'd make it in time."

Flynn made a curious choking sound, hands tightening on his shoulder. "What about the remaining *thirty* percent?"

"I was confident in *you*." Kai grinned brightly. "Now, hush. I think another beast is following us." He helped Flynn sit on a fallen trunk, while the teen silently stared daggers at him.

Hallowed Intuition tingled his mind, narrowing the direction of the threat. A burning presence entered his Mana Sense range, moving towards them in fluid strides.

Kai pointed to a thick shrubbery where the beast was coming from and raised a finger to his lips. If they spooked it, the animal might stalk them for miles before it struck. Flynn furrowed his brows and concentrated on finding the mana signature. His muscles tensed ready to dash, fingers tightening on two daggers.

Trees covered in moss and vines surrounded them like gnarly pillars, their canopies greedily caught the sunlight before it reached the ground. Kai withdrew the glass sword from his ring and channeled Shadow mana into the enchantment.

It was a low-orange beast, it likely had far higher base physical attributes than him unless he used Empower. He didn't. Kai casually stood in the path of the beasts, slanted posture, not looking directly at where the predator would emerge. He hummed softly, forcing himself to stay relaxed.

The presence got closer, the graceful body of a jaguar. Just their luck. It must have followed the smell of blood from the heart of Veeryd. The constant dripping of humidity and the rustling of leaves covered its steps.

C'mon, little kitty. There's absolutely nothing suspicious here.

A murmur in the back of his mind. The crunching of twigs. The feline pounced, a shadow out of the underbrush. Empower blazed through his body, magnifying his attributes. Enough to turn halfway, adjust his stance and brace for impact.

The jaguar's deadly jaws gaped to rip his throat out.

The fangs stopped short. His veiled sword impaled the feline straight through its heart. The impact sent him skidding on the wet ground, almost losing his balance.

He was close enough to smell the rank breath of the jaguar. There was confusion in its golden eyes as life slipped away. Crimson droplets flowed down the invisible surface toward his grasping palms.

Kai stopped channeling Shadow mana and freed the weapon from the dead beast. A glass-like blade appeared in his hands, blood dripping off its smooth surface. He wanted to try this trick out since he had designed the enchantment. Shadow concealed and diverted attention, in the half-light of the trees the sword was undetectable.

It actually worked! A pity I couldn't fit all my affinities.

Even with Edgar's help, a sea serpent fang had poor compatibility with certain elements. The runes needed to be reliable, the gnome wouldn't allow it any other way.

I'd need another target to test the others.

"That was stupid." Flynn cheered him, slumping on the trunk. "What if you missed the heart? It could have clawed your throat before it died."

"I didn't miss." He couldn't stop a little smugness from seeping through. "And the strike would have slowed it enough to dodge." Probably. It was a calculated risk. He would have gotten his head out of the way, not sure about his arms and torso, but he could survive a scratch there.

Kai quickly harvested the fangs and claws of the jaguar with Water Magic. They didn't have time to skin it properly or carry it with them. The spare space in his ring was already filled with the drake's remains.

They had immediately dismissed using the Fate Fulcrum to attract awakened beasts. Best to venture deeper into the forest and search patiently even if it took a couple days. One time had been enough to learn their lesson.

It was a shame to leave the jaguar behind with how rare they were, but the jungle would take care of it. Some lucky beasts would feast on the carcass and advance their grade, by morning there wouldn't be even the bones left.

"Let me see your leg." Kai crouched to check Flynn's injury. Away from the heart of Veeryd, they had a little time before other beasts caught the scent and mustered the courage to investigate.

The bandages were covered in dark red patches, mostly dry. Flynn cursed like an old sailor as he untied the gauze. "Would it cost you to be gentle? You've got a blacksmith's hand."

"It'd be easier if you stayed still and didn't nag me."

He uncovered a series of gashes on the tanned skin. Thank Yatei, the drake didn't get the chance to thrash, so the wounds were reasonably clean. The hemostatic balm had stopped the bleeding. They would need a few stitches, but Kai preferred to avoid testing his sewing skills unless it was an emergency, for both their sakes.

Okay, it's a little worse than the one I got.

"How bad does it look?" Flynn kept his gaze up to not look at the injury. "Will I need to wear pants when I go swimming?"

"Didn't you say scars were cool?"

He sighed. "It depends. Not all scars are made equal, and I would have chosen a better spot than my thigh."

Kai rolled his eyes. If Flynn could be this dumb, he was fine. "Alas, your leg still looks unremarkably boring. The healing potion is doing its job, and there are no signs of necrosis, so the antidote must have worked too."

"Like you said it would. I'm not going to die from the drake's venom, right Kai?"

"Well... I didn't have time to brew a fresh batch, but I'm reasonably certain."

"Kai!"

“Stop whining. I gave you the whole vial to be sure.” Kai cleaned the wound and redid the dressing. A stronger healing potion could knit the flesh together, but it would also sap his strength and they still have miles to trek. “Let’s go.”

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“Had a nice time exploring the jungle?” Alana put a plate of freshly baked cookies between them.

“It was fun to be back. There is nothing quite like it near Higharbor.” Kai crunched on one, mintberries and coconut. Worth burning his tongue.

His mom gave him an exasperated look and a glass of water. A crease formed between her brows when she looked at Flynn. “Are you sure you don’t want someone to take a look at your leg? I know a really good healer. If you’re worried about the cost, I’m sure Kai will be happy to help.”

“I—” He buckled under his mother’s gaze. “Of course I will.”

They hadn’t hidden hunting a drake, though they hadn’t specified its strength or grade. While they shared equal blame in the retelling of their encounter, Alana deemed him responsible for corrupting Flynn into reckless behavior.

I’d feel offended if she wasn’t right, he kept his mouth busy eating.

Flynn smiled pleasantly. “That’s very kind, but I’m fine. It was barely a *scratch*, and the healing potion already took care of it.” He blew on the cookie before munching, earning a look of approval. “Mhmm... these are great! You need to tell me how you made them!”

“It’s my secret recipe,” Alana beamed proudly and winked at him. “But I’ll write it down if you promise not to tell anyone.”

“On my heart,” Flynn shared a conspiratorial grin. Food had squashed his surly mood, mostly. He didn’t forget to glance at Kai when no one else was looking. The meaning was clear, ‘you owe me one’.

Damn flatterer.

Kea had fixed the stitches on his injuries, delighted they needed *her* help—though she’d rather die than admit it. With the potion Flynn took, it’d be like it never happened in a day or two, minus the pain he went through.

No plan is perfect.

It had been a successful expedition. Moui had once mentioned a yellow basilisk stalking the heart of Veeryd. But the central area extended for dozens of miles of dense jungle, and with Hallowed Intuition and his Favor, the chances of running into trouble were close to none.

Moui and Kea arrived as if summoned by his thoughts. His sister hummed cheerfully, while the hunter observed them closely. "I heard the hunt went well. It's a pity you couldn't bring back that drake," he said. "Maybe next time I should come with you."

"That's a wonderful idea," Kai surprised him by agreeing. He wasn't worried Kea would snitch on the gravity of the injury, but Moui knew the jungle and its beasts better than anyone else. He might poke holes in their story if he gave him the chance. Kai thought fast. "Oh, I almost forgot to ask. It's just a rumor, but did you see any trace of Vastaire ruins inside Veeryd?"

Was that too obvious?

"You mean the ones Dad studied?" Kea said, grabbing the last three cookies.

He silently thanked her for smoothening the change of topic. "Yeah, I've been going through his research journals. Apparently, an old hunter told him he saw broken towers deep in Veeryd, but Dad was never able to verify it. There is no name for the witness, and he's probably dead by now."

Rellan had reported many such rumors that were impossible to confirm. From folk tales with feeble links to the ancient civilization, to strange sightings near the Vastaire sites and stories of underwater ruins. Nothing helped shed light on the greater mystery of the sea serpent's appearance.

Moui scratched his beard, successfully diverted from further inquiries. "I don't know about towers, but I've seen ivory constructions."

"That's— Really?" Kai hadn't expected a straight-up confirmation. He had spent hours pouring his mind over the journals without success only to stumble onto a new lead. "What did they look like? Can you tell me how to find them?"

"Too deep for you to go." Moui regretted speaking up already. "I only went there once, and it almost cost my life."

So that means near the very center.

"It'd be useful to know their location for my research."

"If you aren't planning on going, why do you need to know?"

"To match the position with other sites." His confident answer didn't sway the hunter. "I might fund an expedition in the future."

“If you do, I’ll tell you then.” Moui said, unmovable.

We’re getting nowhere.

Kai went to fetch a notebook and tried a different approach. “Can you tell me what you remember?”

He quizzed Moui on any shred of information he recalled, hoping he would slip more details. No such luck. From what the hunter said, the ruins were greatly damaged and covered in vegetation. He hadn’t gotten the time to examine them closely.

Though he didn’t say it outright, Kai suspected it had been on the same hunting trip when the hunter first met the basilisk.

Wait, did that basilisk come from the ruins?

The story of the mysterious king of Veeryd had always left him puzzled. Few knew about it, and fewer from personal encounters. It was logical that a strong beast lived where mana was the densest, but how had it gotten there?

Everyone agreed there was only a single basilisk in the heart of the jungle. As far as Kai knew basilisks couldn’t reproduce asexually. Had all the others died off? Was it the last member of its species? Some beasts lived far longer than humans, but that sounded highly unlikely.

As much as it appeared from nowhere.

New theories and suspicions, but no answers. Maybe he’d actually need to fund an expedition or wait till he could defeat a yellow beast in a fair fight. Neither of them was a short-term goal.

I wish I could go ask it. Hey, Mr. Basilisk, do your anger issues come from when the hunters murdered your family while you were just a baby lizard? No, no, you can’t eat my leg. We need to talk about the time your father went to buy milk and never came back. Hmm... it might work.

The intrusive thoughts didn’t bring any sudden revelation. They were washing the dishes after dinner when Kai thought to ask his mother. “Did Dad ever mention strange spatial events around the ruins?”

“Mhmm... No, never.” Alana looked lost in the soapy water. “I guess it’s possible. You know your dad, he muttered to himself about his research, but he wasn’t the best at explaining what he was doing.”

“Yeah, thank you.” Seeing her melancholic mood, Kai didn’t press and retired early. Their excursion into the jungle hadn’t only benefited Flynn.

Mana Manipulation (lv75) →

As you reach the first milestone, you are presented with four choices to continue your journey.

- **Stay the course - You won’t gain new significant benefits, but you’ll greatly deepen the insight into your path.**
- **Elemental Novice - Become adept at controlling elemental mana.**
- **Fine Tuning - Become adept at controlling small quantities of mana.**
- **Diligent Student - Become adept at mana patterns and spells through repeated usage.**

He had shaped mana in a thousand exercises to get that last level. It turned out all he was missing was to use the skill in a fight. Without even trying he broke through the hurdle.

Let’s take the win. What did I get?

There were three decent options, none of them excessively restrictive for his future.

Going by exclusion, Kai eliminated Fine Tuning. It must be the result of solving Virya’s puzzle. Controlling tiny precise quantities of mana would be useful in Alchemy and Enchanting, not much in a fight. When a beast or pirate charged at him, his spells needed to be simple and powerful, there was no time for artistry.

On the opposite end, Elemental Novice would be extremely useful in a fight, and not at all for crafting. There were very few recipes that required controlling elemental particles at his level, and less for Runes. Even in the long term, unattuned mana was the foundation of crafting. The reason why people with poor affinities turned to it.

So that’s a no too.

Ding

You chose to become a Diligent Student. Mana Manipulation (lv75) can now reach lv100.

Dora and Elijah had drilled in him how training and preparation were the keys to success. If he had to improvise in a battle, things weren’t going well. The same with crafting, only constant exercise could lead to perfection.

With the decision made, Kai easily slipped into the world of dreams. The next morning, an errand boy brought him news from Reishi to meet him at his mansion.