

Chapter 171 – The Contract

“You said the beast was injured before it came on shore?” The inspector surveyed the sea serpent’s battered carcass in her dull uniform, her nose wrinkled at the pungent stench of rotten fish that choked the air.

Kai couldn’t blame her. He had run out of curses for his improved Perception hours ago. While a day wasn’t enough for the flesh of a yellow beast to decay, it let the internal liquids seep out, forming dark and foul puddles on the sand.

The majestic creature had been stripped bare of every shred of its dignity. A thin trickle of greenish ichor leaked from the dark flesh where the blue scales had been ripped free—surely the job of some savage predator.

Despite the distaste at having to surrender part of his spoils, Kai had limited their harvest to that single section. It allowed them to conceal the straight cuts that had wounded the serpent and preserve the hide. No one would suspect spatial magic had anything to do with the jagged mess.

The ruinous injury was *almost* negligible before the work of sea birds. Flocks of ravenous feathered friends pecked without mercy every ounce of flesh not protected by the metallic scales. Even the crown fins circling the draconic beast had been reduced to a series of stark bony spines.

“Yes, ma’am.” Kai dutifully bobbed his head. “We were very lucky the beast was weakened, or we would have stood no chance to put it down.” He had offered to do the talking to arouse less suspicion. Who would suspect such a naive and honest little kid?

“We tried to shoo away the birds, but they kept coming back.” He hung his head in shame.

The inspector watched him closely but failed to find any fault in his act. With a curt nod, she continued her examination towards the jaws, evading the pools of foul liquids around the sea serpent.

As she was about to crouch before the head, she jolted back with a frightened shriek. She somehow managed to keep her balance, but couldn't avoid walking into a pool and splattering her clothes.

An osprey covered in ichor stumbled out the jaws, a strip of dark flesh firmly in its curved beak. With a proud screech, the bird of prey flapped its wings and flew away to secure its price.

"They've been getting bolder since there is no more food on the outside." Kai nodded emphatically from a respectful distance. Mana Sense had warned him of the intrepid bird, but it would have been rude to butt in the work of a professional.

The inspector looked at her soiled clothes with a grimace of disgust, her fingers flexed on empty air with unexpressed frustration. Kai didn't doubt she'd wring the bird's neck if it were within reach. If they asked him, the dark spots were an improvement over her dull uniform, though she didn't seem to share his fashion sense.

With a harrumphed breath, the woman schooled her posture. She advanced towards the beast, checking there were no more surprises. A flick of her wrist and two men of her crew approached and lifted the mighty jaws.

Looks like it skimped on the dental insurance.

Kai had to bite his cheek to not laugh at their befuddled expressions. A total of thirteen lonely spikes remained in the mouth. Half of them were chipped, the others shorter than a dagger, minuscule compared to the ones that had been packed away.

It had been hard work to relieve the serpent of its fangs. The glass-like teeth were sharper than his knives, and tougher too. He had to spend long hours finely manipulating water into the thin seams of the jaws to extract them.

“You must have been lucky indeed to run into a toothless sea serpent,” she commented. “I’ve never seen anything like it, the fangs look almost surgically removed.”

Kai drew a circle on his heart, bowing reverently to the sky. “Bless the Seven Moons. The priest always says the gods work in mysterious ways.”

“Bless be their light.” The two workers chanted by instinct, staring dumbly at the serpent. The inspector echoed the invocation but her narrowed eyes stayed on him, lips pressed in a thin line.

What are you looking at? I’m the picture of innocence.

Kai played naive and unaware of her mood, enjoying her frustration. The contract had been signed in double copy and safely stored. With no evidence, there was nothing she could do, and she knew it.

Okay, this might have been a better idea than I gave it credit for.

“Everything alright, ma’am?” Lou took this time to step forward with a pacifying expression. His squared shoulders and stature made him look years older than his age. “The kids are tired and scared after this experience. I’d like to bring them back to Highharbor as soon as possible, I’m sure you understand.”

The woman broke into an understanding smile that didn’t touch her eyes. “There are a few simple matters to finalize, and we’ll take care of this.”

“Of course, we need to evaluate what can be harvested.” The teen gave him a pointed look. “Kai, why don’t you go prepare with the others?”

You’re no fun.

Kai left Cadet Lou Denule to deal with it. They just needed the inspector to sign on the specifics of the beast to ensure they didn't get cheated. There was little to argue with measuring tape and numbers.

He hadn't had time to go through all the clauses of the contract, but Lou had already proved himself a skilled negotiator. Their final earnings were closer to two-thirds of the serpent rather than half as he had promised. A cheap price to not come close to the putrid carcass again.

Guess he was being modest...

He waited to reach the inner circle of the ruins before whistling a happy tune. The healing potions had done their job, his right shoulder and leg were still tender, but he had no issue climbing the ivory tower to their camp.

The twins lay snoring in a corner, looking oddly innocent in their sleep. They had worked through the whole night to secure their unofficial stash, and then spent the morning masking their work to make the tears look believable.

Flynn had left earlier in the morning to keep their harvest away from the Republic's crew. While it was unlikely that someone would check their bags, it was better not to test a scorned official. Flynn would wait for them in a village on the path back to Higharbor.

"Is it done?" Ana asked, her tone ringing with disapproval.

"You know, we didn't do anything illegal." Perhaps it was poor form to reap the most valuable parts before signing a contract, but not *strictly* illegal.

Well, probably. I should check but it sounds reasonable.

Ana stopped packing her bag and turned to face him. "It's immoral."

“No more than charging ridiculous fees for a service because they’re the only one who can provide it.” Kai rummaged through their supply for a snack. “We were the ones who risked our lives to put that serpent down. Is it not fair that we decide what to do with it?”

Ana bit her lip, mumbling something under her breath. “I’ve kept you a bowl of stew. You just need to reheat it.”

“Thanks.” Kai accepted the peace offering. “Do we have a plan for our way back to Higharbor? I’d rather avoid stopping in Gray Quarry.” An inquiry on their travel arrangements was enough to rile her up and forget the argument.

Ana launched herself into a lengthy explanation of why the route she had charted was the superior option. Unsurprisingly, Uli and Oli were still not willing to relinquish command of the map.

Though Ana wasn’t keeping her tone low, the brothers continued to blissfully sleep. They occasionally turned or mumbled about sea beasts and cakes, he wasn’t sure a roaring monster would be enough to wake them up.

Kai watched the twins with envy. He wouldn’t mind getting a nap himself, but their time in the ruins was coming to an end, and he still had work to do. After Ana reached the ninth reason to follow her route back to the capital, he fled with the excuse of relieving himself.

Yeah, she would definitely make PowerPoint presentations if she knew they existed.

Descending the towers towards the flooded levels, he left his clothes behind and dove into the dark waters. His senses spread through the labyrinth of tunnels looking for any threat.

Nothing. Some ripped fronds of kelp and messy sand dunes, but the underwater world had returned to its peaceful state. Not the shadow of a red mollusk. The dense cloud of mana had dispersed, and even the minor essence anomaly had vanished.

Slowly, Kai made his way to the chamber where the sea serpent had appeared. He hesitated in the doorway, doing a double check on Hallowed Intuition to get the all-clear.

He swam inside, lighting the dark room with his enchanted crystal. A school of vibrant yellow fish fed on a patch of algae on the ceiling. The sands descended towards the center forming a shallow crater. This was the place where the beast had emerged, though the concentration of mana was now the same as on the surface.

He inspected every inch of the walls, floor and ceiling to see if he had missed something the first time. He had not. There was no rune, no scratch, the chamber was immaculate except for the etching his dad had recorded.

It was one of the shortest writings, three lines of glyphs. A prayer for a god whose name he couldn't pronounce, to display gratitude for their mysterious Blessing.

Are murderous sea serpents a gift from some forgotten god?

Kai ignored the sting of disappointment. If it were an easy mystery someone else would have already solved it. He released a bubble of air from his ring to breathe and continued his search.

There must be something.

Floating in the chamber, he closed his eyes and switched off his crystal to focus on Mana Sense. The lulling muted washing of water drove him into deep Attuned Meditation. Among thousands of particles swirling around him, the elemental motes shone brighter. The colors of his four highest affinities were all represented - flowing blue was the most abundant, vibrant green the least. That wasn't why he came here though.

Kai searched for his most frustrating element. An iridescent mote blinked in the corner of his view. And then more, some close enough to be converted by his will, others teleported away before he could reach them.

...twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty...

It could have been a useful place to gather Space mana, if it wasn't away from any decent city, and buried meters underwater. The problem with Space Magic was that, by the time he gathered enough mana to cast a cantrip, he hardly remembered his last test. And the complexity of even the most basic spells.

By the time he was forced to reemerge for air, he was sure Space particles were more common down there than anywhere else he had visited. While still not being a tenth as plentiful as Earth motes.

Beggars can't be choosers.

This wiped out any remaining doubt, his theory was correct, spatial magic was responsible for the sea serpent's appearance. If it was a clue for something, he just had to find out what that *something* was.

Kai scoured the underground system for any other sign. There was nothing else. Checking the same halls for a fourth time would just waste his time and make him lose more of his sanity. Perhaps there was some mention in his dad's journals, or in another Vastaire site. Neither of which he could check at the moment.

He found an isolated tower to read the deal Lou had made with the Republic. There was no place safer than his ring. On the third page, there was a clause that prohibited scavenging the carcass of the sea serpent, though the wording only included the person who had signed the contract, i.e. Lou.

Good enough.

Lou was indeed recognized as the sole owner of the beast's parts. It wasn't weird since he was the only one with a hunting license. No, Kai didn't worry. The teenager was hesitant to

accept a potion from him, there was no way he would steal materials worth close to a gold mesar...

No, he wouldn't...

Kai put away the contract to go look for Lou, just to check on how he was doing, maybe he needed help. No other reason. On the beach, there was no trace of the inspector, though the crew she brought was already at work.

In no more than a couple hours, they had managed to saw the scales on the underbelly of the serpent, and they would soon begin to skin it. He couldn't help but stare as they sliced open the impenetrable hide, their hands and tools glowing with mana.

How does that work...

His eyes intently observed them as he attempted to make an echo of their skills.

"Kai."

The voice interrupted his skill. Kai turned to see the hulking teenager marching towards him. "Lou, I was just looking for you." He smiled brightly.

The teen stopped within arm's length, throwing a glance at the workers behind. "The sea serpent is *yellow* grade."

Oh, that... guess the inspector knew her job after all.

"Really? That's great news, it must be worth more than I thought."

Damn, stupid mouth, don't give him strange ideas.

"You didn't know?" Lou suspiciously narrowed his eyes.

"The snake refused to tell me when I tried to pet him. Then I was focused on not getting eaten."

"That's not a *no*."

Damn, he caught on fast. It's not really a secret...

"Its *grievous* injuries must have weakened it a lot before it got here," Kai waved at the workers, getting an awkward nod in return. "Thankfully you were here to save the day, right? Have you thought about how much you want to keep and sell?"

Lou resisted only a moment before he let himself be led through the towers for some privacy. "We don't need to discuss about shares."

Kai struggled to keep his grin. "We don't?"

"No, it's your kill, you can have it all."

Oh... I didn't doubt you for a second.

"No, you were right. It would have been a mess if I tried to deal with it on my own. The twins already have their stash, you should get at least...a third?"

"Don't joke like that," Lou darkened. "Have you any idea how much that's worth?"

Probably better than you.

“You said it’s mine, so I can give it to whoever I want.”

“Okay, you can give me five percent for the help,” Lou said like the words caused him physical pain.

“No way, do you want people to think I’m a miser? You get twenty.”

“Ten.”

“Fifteen, last offer.” Kai raised a hand to stop his objections, “It’s decided.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

“Well, that’s how it *should* work. As they say, my money my rules.” Kai ignored his protests.

“C’mon, Ana wants to leave tomorrow at dawn, we need to pack.”

It had been an eventful journey, but he was glad to go back to civilization.