

Chapter 44 - Brave or Reckless?

Hearing Muoi's proposal, Kai didn't have to think twice. He had long wished for the chance to observe an awakened best. The hunter said it was only red-tier and young, so it was probably even weaker than him.

"Remember to stay by my side and do what I tell you. Also, mind where you step. You are making too much noise." Muoi reminded him.

Nodding eagerly and promising he would do as he was told, Kai followed the hunter trying to be as silent as possible. It was easier said than done, the ground was wet and spongy, covered in fallen leaves and moss that made a squelching noise under his feet. He did his best to step on rocks and roots where he thought he would make the least noise.

In front of him, Muoi was somehow able to move like a ghost through the trees without making any sound or leaving a trace.

I get he is a professional hunter, but he is like four times my size. There must be a skill at play here. Wait a second...

Kai wanted to smack his head for being so dumb, he had a skill too - Sneak, his latest addition. He only used it to be more discreet when moving through town, but it seemed perfect for the occasion.

They walk longer than Kai expected. He had no idea how Muoi spotted the beast from this far away, Mana Sense still didn't perceive anything. Most of his focus was on where he put his feet, so he could not reach his maximum range.

They stopped behind a large tree covered in moss, its trunk easily large enough to hide Muoi's figure. The hunter gave him a look to remind him to be quiet before pointing to a tree little more than a dozen meters from them.

Kai looked but couldn't see anything apart from a few ferns and vines. Something caught his eye, a slight movement. Activating Inspect, he spotted the culprit. A green and brown snake perfectly camouflaged among the vegetation.

He couldn't be sure but it must have been at least a couple meters long. If that was a young one, he didn't want to think how big a grown specimen would be.

Concentrating on Mana Sense to get some answers, Kai was surprised by the results. He had never seen anything like it. Its mana veins were unlike anything he had seen before, thicker and denser. There were some similarities with humans, but also many differences. The mana network was more complex than he expected from a red-tier creature.

From this distance, his skill was struggling to pick up the fine details. As he was about to get closer Muoi put a hand on his shoulders to stop him. The hunter took out his bow, he was a hunter after all.

“How dangerous is it? Kai whispered.

“Not much, it’s a boa constrictor. Venomous ones are more dangerous, but it’s still going to be very annoying to flush him out if we spook him and it hides in some hole.” Somehow Muoi spoke even quieter than him.

“Aren’t beasts very aggressive?”

“Usually yes, but they are not suicidal. If it perceives my presence it will run.”

A very stupid idea sprung up in Kai’s head. Maybe if he had more time to think he would have known better. With only a few seconds to make up his mind, he didn’t want to lose his chance.

“Do you think I can take it?”

Muoi stopped drawing his arrow to look at him. Kai had expected an immediate no, but when the hunter didn’t speak immediately he didn’t waste the opportunity to plead his case.

“If it sees me, it will probably try to attack rather than run. You said it’s just a young red-tier and not venomous. I’m orange and I’ve trained with a staff. If it’s too strong I’ll just keep my distance and act as bait.”

He mostly trained spear moves, having a pointed end made little difference when training stances. If he had to use it to fight the story was different, but he remembered most of the quarterstaff moves.

Not knowing exactly why, Kai felt he had to do this. He always acted cautious, for once he wished to take a risk and prove to himself he was not a coward. That he wasn’t powerless anymore.

Muoi had a look that was hard to interpret on his face, but he still hadn’t said no.

“If something goes wrong I’m sure you’ll have time to intervene. I need to do this.” Kai said.

After a long silence, Muoi finally spoke. “Fine, you can try.”

“Wai—“ Kai stopped the counterargument he was about to say on his lips. He had not expected the hunter to agree. “Great. Thank you, uncle. I’m sure I can do this.”

Muoi gave him a stern look. “Be careful and do not hesitate to ask for help. I can’t miss from this distance.”

Kai was putting his life in Muoi’s hands, but he didn’t feel worried about it. The hunter had always proved trustworthy and even a better person than himself.

Looking towards his target, Kai left his bag behind. If he had known this was going to happen he would have brought something more than a stick.

No excuses. No hesitation.

His life wasn't going to change if he didn't start being more decisive. Hiding behind carefully crafted arguments and convenient reasoning. Maybe this wasn't a good time to start acting more impulsive, but life didn't give you a warning before it hit you, maybe it was better this way.

Holding his staff firmly, he gave one last glance to Muoi, but his uncle didn't offer any suggestions.

Just because I want to do this, it doesn't mean I have to be stupid in how I approach this.

He needed to formulate a plan. Trying to analyze the situation, he could immediately see two pitfalls. First, he had to be careful of where he stepped, slipping on the wet jungle floor would be the easiest way to screw this up. Second, he had to keep sight of his target. He could not get distracted. Pretty basic, but pretty important.

Thinking back on what he knew about snakes, he remembered they were not known for their stamina. In the worst-case scenario, he could probably tire it out.

Cold-blooded reptiles preferred to strike fast and end the fight quickly.

Kai wasn't sure how accurate his knowledge was or if it applied to a mana-enchanted snake on Elydes. Better to assume the worst.

Just go there, bonk the stupid snake on the head and get this over. How hard could it be?

Kai used Sneak to move closer, keeping Inspect on the snake. The skill wasn't made for this type of situation, but he had to use what he had.

After a little internal debate, he also activated Mana Sense. He only gave the skill minimal focus, he wasn't trying to examine the beast, just to keep track of it. Its camouflage became completely ineffective against his senses, the red-tier beast shone like a beacon amidst the vegetation.

Kai had barely crossed half the distance when he noticed a disturbance in the boa's mana.

Wha—

Before his mind could formulate another thought, the snake who had remained still like a statue till now launched itself at him. Sharp fangs wide open and ready to bite him.

It was only thanks to the mana warning that Kai had enough time to throw himself to the side. That was much faster than he expected, but there was no time for second thoughts.

Rolling on the ground in a crouch, he made sure to keep his Mana Sense on the snake.

He had to leave his staff behind when he dodged, leaving without a weapon. His gaze met the serpentine-slitted eyes of his target. Somehow he had thought a non-venomous constrictor would not try to bite him.

The snake's scales gleamed in the few rays penetrating the green canopy above as it gracefully coiled a few meters from him, readying for another attempt on his life. His staff was on his left about the same distance that separated him from the snake.

Kai had never been particularly afraid of snakes, but he had never faced one intent on eating him before.

He could call for help right now and this would all be over.

No more hesitating. If it bites me it bites me, I'll probably survive.

A slight change in the snake mana flow was all the warning he got before it struck at him again. Kai had the presence of mind to dodge toward his staff. His opponent seemed to have predicted the move, its tail hitting him on his shin like a metal flail. Pain exploded in his leg. He worried something broke, but when he put weight on it the leg still did its job.

He snatched his staff from the ground without moving his gaze from the snake. His heart beating furiously as the staring contest with the red-tier beast continued.

Fear started gripping his insides, the temptation to put an end to the stupidest idea he ever had growing ever stronger. He pushed that all down.

I'm done backing down.

Mana Sense gave him a big advantage, but dodging would not bring him anywhere. He had to be proactive and do something. A glancing blow almost took him out. If he mistimed his dodge or landed on the wrong foot it was over. He couldn't play the long game.

The snake hissed a challenge, annoyed that its prey kept eluding him. Kai was not an expert on reptile body language, but he knew how to read the mana flow on a living being and the beast's essence was stirring stronger than before, accumulating for a decisive strike.

Kai grasped the staff with both hands. He tried to make a couple of feints to his left, but the boa just released another hiss, staring at him with its unblinking gaze.

Damn. Either this beast is too smart or I suck at making feints.

Right now he truly regretted not taking more fighting skills. He had too little experience fighting. With the time ticking, he had to act before the snake made another move. He didn't want to lose the initiative again.

Another idea crossed his mind.

The snake was looking straight into his eyes. Kai blinked as if something got into his eyes. As expected, the boa launched itself at him as soon as it noticed his apparent distraction.

Kai didn't need his eyes when he could easily read its mana signature shining brightly in his mind. Aiming for the head, he struck his wooden staff with all his strength. With a crack he hit the neck of the snake instead, the open fangs on the beast grazing his ear.

For a moment he thought he had it, but it hadn't been the reptile's bones to break but his staff. Kai couldn't believe his eyes. That short moment of distraction was enough for the snake to start wrapping around his body.

Fuck!

The boa's muscles contracted as it coiled around his body and limbs. Holding half a stick. Kai couldn't do anything about that as he was focused on avoiding the bites from the head.

His blow had some effect as the snake's movements were slower and awkward. Kai somehow managed to push his broken staff between the snake's fangs. Without hesitation, he let go of his weapon and grabbed the boa's neck with both hands.

He had neutralized the most dangerous part, but the body of the serpent was tightening around him with far greater strength than his.

Dammit, I won't give up like this!

The snake tried to wiggle its head out of his grip, but he wasn't going to let it go. Gripping the spot where he hit the boa it let out a pained hiss. With no better idea, Kai threw himself to the ground toward the closest rock he could see.

The fall made the snake give just enough to free his right arm. It was getting hard to breathe as the boa squeezed his chest.

His left hand kept the head in place with the strength of desperation. The snake had stopped trying to free his head, focusing all his efforts on suffocating him. So, Kai gave up trying to breathe, like many times before when he went underwater.

He reached for the rock with his right arm. His position was awkward and his limbs got weaker and weaker as too little blood reached them. In a panic, Kai pushed all his mana into his arm to give it more power and struck the boa's head with all the strength he could muster.

Again and again, he smashed the rock against the snake.

It became a contest of endurance between the two. His ribs and bones cracking under the pressure. His lungs burning for oxygen.

I. Will. Not. Give. Up.

Finally, the snake muscles loosened a little. He managed to squeeze out a short breath. He could taste victory, but instead of celebrating he hit the snake harder. Blood spurted out of its mouth and eyes. Kai kept hitting.

The graceful head and scales were reduced to mush, giving a squelching sound as he gave a final hit. Breathing heavily, he suddenly became aware of the overbearing metallic smell of blood covering him.

"I'm pretty sure it's dead." Muoi was beside him. The hunter had stayed silent for the whole fight, Kai had forgotten entirely of his presence somewhere during the fight.

As the rush of adrenaline left his body, Kai started to feel the pain again. He let the bloody rock fall from his hand.

"Why didn't you help me?" Kai asked. He didn't feel angry, he didn't feel anything right now. Probably he was disassociating.

He had expected Muoi to intervene long before the fight reached such a desperate point.

The hunter looked a bit apologetic. "I was about to intervene many times, but you seemed to find a way every time. Why don't you check your notifications?"

Curious about what Muoi was getting at, Kai summoned the blinking messages.

Ding

New skill learned! Empower (lv1) – Use your mana to temporarily empower a part of your body.

Ding

New Feat: Feat of Strength - You won against a Red awakened beast before gaining a profession without any external help. You are awarded: +1 Favor!

Kai was sure Muoi had no idea about the new skill, but he must have known about the achievement.

"It's rare to get the opportunity to gain the favor of the spirits. If I warned you or helped you would not have gotten anything. The Guide can't be deceived. As you grow older the chances to increase your Favor become less and less."

"Did you also fight a red-tier beast before getting a profession?" Kai asked. Muoi smiled reminiscing. "I did. I was eleven at the time, but I had not reached orange yet."

Indeed Kai had not been able to obtain any more favor since he advanced his race. Counting he also obtained another orange skill, his gains had been considerable.

Whether this fight had been more stupid or brave was yet to be determined. Right now he wasn't in the proper mental state to be the judge of that. He still felt like he was watching his own body from the outside.

Of one thing he was sure, he was definitely learning Empower. Maybe also rethinking a few other skills.

Author's notes: Let me know what you thought of the fight. I usually prefer going more fast-paced when writing action. This time I opted to go analytical since it was as much about the fight itself as about what happened in Kai's head.