

Chapter 209 – Hidden Beneath

Kai tapped his foot on the mossy floor waiting for the hourglass to empty. He had yet to decide whether he liked these spy subterfuges. Like any other kid on Earth, he had once fantasized about being a secret agent, but dreams rarely survived the encounter with reality.

He was tired of sneaking under the nose of the Republic. And while racing to solve the spatial anomalies first was more exciting than keeping a low profile, it was still stifling.

Like the muffling devices to have private conversations, there was a sea of unknown skills and professions. He could never know if his ploys to deceive the Republic were effective. He was playing a game where he didn't know all the pieces and rules.

Perhaps a team of soldiers was monitoring him at this moment through an unknown scrying method. Kai waved at the air. No one responded except for the dripping moisture from the ceiling.

How rude. Unless it's Morse code...

Getting *recruited* by the Republic had shed some light on the giant looming over his life. The garrison in the archipelago wasn't the most *savvy* except for a few individuals, at the same time, their roots extended deeper than he could understand. No matter how cautious or clever he was, he couldn't work around the obstacles he didn't know existed.

The lack of information was frustrating. Spirits willing, Valela knew what she was doing. Even if she genuinely cared about the archipelago, she was playing into the hands of the Republic and the governor.

If you can't beat them, join them I guess...

The last grain of sand trickled down the neck of the hourglass—it should be long enough. Kai stored it in his ring and headed into the damp tunnels.

He took a circuitous route before rejoining the main group at the summoning chamber. The non-essential personnel for the excavation waited on the upper level, looking down at the crack in the ceiling where the terragon had clawed its way out.

The aperture in the ivory stone had been enlarged and smoothed to let the soldiers intervene in case of danger. No one seemed to notice his return from his wanderings. Valela stood on the other side of the hall with a dignified pose.

Captain Seryne was also present, arguing with the mana professionals in the chamber below. It was rare to see her on the field, she usually stayed holed up in her office at camp. From the cold smile plastered on her face, she wasn't pleased with the delay.

"Where have you been?"

Kai jolted. “Did you *really* have to do that?” The hands that were raised to face the threat fell back down. “I went to stretch my legs. It looked like the mages would take a while to set up and they still haven’t.”

Makyn watched him unapologetic. “It’s not safe to wander alone in these tunnels, you should know that.”

“The mana went crazy before the beasts appeared, there was no danger apart from that.” Kai waved at the hall below. The best defense was attack. “The destruction of the sites started the accidents, and this will make it worse.”

“We don’t know that for certain.”

Kai gave him a look. “It seems pretty damn likely to me. I’ll bet you my contribution credits on it.” He offered to shake his hand to seal the deal.

“It’s against protocol to use credits for betting.” Stuffy-boy ignored him. “Ask a guard to accompany you if you need to wander around again.” He left to talk with a squad of soldiers.

Kai sat on the cleaned ivory floor to wait. A few iridescent particles blinked in his vision; the higher density was strangely confined by the walls of the summoning chamber. They gathered in small fluttering clumps, but if there was a hidden meaning, he couldn’t tell what it was.

Please, tell me I won’t have to study spatial theory. That sounds as much fun as astrophysics, it’s better enjoyed from a safe distance.

The boost to his affinity was obvious, probably around 10 points. He’d need a suitable ritual to know the exact value, Space was a hard element to test even in Higharbor.

Without being able to gather the motes, Kai soon regretted not having brought a book to kill time. It took another hour before the Earth mages were ready to begin.

Valela outdid herself to make them squabble.

The experts had decided to use magic for the excavation, enchanted tools would also risk damaging their findings and they didn’t have skilled manpower. Knowing the earth shapers made up most of the mana professions might have also played a role.

A portly man with a purple hat gathered his silk robes, hands extended dramatically on a square section at the edge of the chamber. The expedition tensed with bated breath, every eye zeroed in, soldiers gripped their weapons, mages pushed their Mana Sense—Kai included.

The flamboyant mage separated a thin sheet of ivory stone and lifted it to reveal more plain ivory. No runes, no fluctuations in the ambient mana or in the Space motes. A collective sigh filled the hall.

The tension rose and ebbed like the tides for the first dozen cuts. People fell soon into the rhythm of the monotonous work, the hushed tones rising to casual chatting and jokes.

Five stone shapers joined the excavation to speed up the process, while the panes of stone were examined and prodded by the mana researchers. The superficial layer of the floor and walls was removed without revealing any runes or causing any arcane reaction.

Well, they're being careful at least.

He sacrificed his copied reading skill to create an echo of their stone-cutting skill. Earth and Stone were close enough that he could crack a rock with his own spells, but it had an outrageous cost.

Kai relaxed his Mana Sense and Inspect when the copy started to hit a plateau. He couldn't risk skill strain before anything interesting happened.

"It might be wise to increase the thickness of the cuts," the portly mage said to his colleagues, patting his forehead with a lavender handkerchief. "We'll run out of elemental reserves if we have to remove a meter and a half of stone at this pace."

Yatei's mercy, not even my thoughts are safe from jinxing.

Kai was ready to jump down to slap his lazy face when a familiar redhead beat him to it. "That's not the plan we agreed on." Chev stood up. "We get a single shot at this. It's better to take all the time required."

"Easy for you to talk when you're not the one putting in the effort."

"That's because your group insisted on handling it alone. I'm perfectly willing to take your place."

"With what skills?" The earth shaper chuckled, turning to his colleagues for support. "Everyone knows that mana researchers tend to be... *lacking* in affinities."

Chev clenched his fist at his sides, his face taking an enraged tint. "Say that again!"

Seryne loudly cleared her throat. "Esteemed magi, may I remind everyone you've been employed by the Republic. While your expertise and brilliant minds are appreciated, this is a military operation."

Makyn leaned in to whisper. The captain nodded. "We'll continue to tread with caution as programmed. If your reserves run too low, we'll resume the work tomorrow. Is that acceptable?" Her gaze bore down on the mages till they lowered their heads in acquiescence.

Chev threw a smug smile to his rival, who harrumphed back to work in a fluttering of robes. Thin sheets of stone piled up while the summoning chamber grew larger.

Hmm... there might be nothing to find. For all I know the origin of the teleportations was entirely placed in the Hidden Sanctuary.

The sliver of sky in the ceiling above dimmed with the rays of late afternoon when an excited squeal rippled through the hall. A woman in sky-blue robes gripped a sheet of ivory stone, hand pointing to the center of the chamber.

Soldiers and mana experts snapped to attention. "What is it?" Seryne hopped down a wooden ladder. "Let me see."

What's this about?

Mana Sense wasn't picking up anything but plain stone. With a perplexed frown, Kai closed in to the opening to see. The mages huddled in a circle, obscuring his view till they were forced to step aside for their captain.

A web of inky and glowing lines marred the ivory floor in chaotic tangles. The runes were too small to read even with his Perception, and continued beneath the floor revealed, more complex than the zeppelin or the crafts in Edgar's workshop.

I can't believe they were right...

Enchantments that masked themselves weren't a new concept, though not even the gnome had managed something so seamless. It was on the level of Virya and Elijah's cloaking, too far beyond his abilities to measure.

To think they lasted for millennia...

"Stop there, kid," a soldier barred him from jumping below with a stern look. Already tense for the development, it wouldn't be ideal to test their resolve.

Kai squinted to make out the network of thin lines from above. Black splintered symbols interwoven with a flowing script that shimmered in the light. He couldn't make sense of them, and the issue wasn't just their size.

Those aren't the same runes I learned.

Runes were a written language of power capable of channeling and shaping mana. These enchantments used *two* entirely different alphabets and tongues. The glowing lines vaguely reminded him of the runes engraved on the Fate Fulcrum; he'd need to examine them closer to be sure. While the sharp inky lines were completely alien to him.

Chev and two other mana researchers ordered everyone back. "Uh... they look like an archaic elvish dialect, and these resemble the old shade sigils."

"As much as a merman resembles a siren's butt. No, that's—"

In a series of crystal snaps and puffs of mana, the flowing filaments came undone. Losing their anchor, the jagged inky runes quickly followed suit and dispersed in dark wisps.

A wave of ominous murmurs soared in his mind, the intensity rising with each second. The direction of the threat was nebulous—probably the result of spatial interference. Though ultimately the danger would appear somewhere.

I had fucking warned them.

“Stop gawking and do something,” Seryne yelled, pointing her fingers at the fading enhancements. “We need to study and figure out the anomaly.”

Waking from their daze, two researchers stepped forward to attempt to stop the runes from decaying. “There is nothing we can do, ma’am.”

Kai didn’t pay them any attention, adrenaline rushed into his limbs ready to bolt. Should he stay with the elite soldiers or seek safety away from there? The troops threw weary looks at their surroundings but maintained their confident demeanor.

They got into ranks on the upper level while a team of seven formed a perimeter around Seryne, who was still yelling at the mages.

Should I warn them?

Defeating multiple yellow beasts shouldn’t be a problem with the military might gathered here. None of them would listen to a child, and the howls from Hallowed Intuition kept worsening.

Kai dashed to where Valela and Lou were standing in the blue group. Ferla stepped forward to stop him, spear raised.

He halted with a glare. “Something dangerous is coming, we need to leave.”

Valela pursed her lips, likely annoyed he had approached her in the open. She waved her bodyguard off. “What’s happening?”

Not again. Can’t you do as I say and argue later?

Kai gritted his teeth and forced his tone to stay level. “Remember last time? This one is worse.” Probably. It was hard to interpret the manic whispers. He’d rather cry wolf for nothing than stay underground, waiting for another stone lizard to blow them up.

Valela shifted her gaze between him and the unraveling runes in the chamber below. “Let’s move towards the exit in case—.”

The rumble in his head spiked.

A wave of spatial particles burst from the floor below, flooding outward into the ruins.

That's not good.

An iridescent string formed above the exposed runes. A mana researcher extended her hand to prod it before thinking better. The strand drifted through her arm. Her confusion was replaced by screams of agony as her arm flopped to the ground in a gush of blood.

Fuck.

The spatial distortion innocently blinked out of existence, but more fluctuating threads of rainbow colors grew and shrank. A yellow soldier got bisected at the waist, his sword clattered to the floor in two useless pieces.

Screams and commands tore the air as the expedition jumped into frantic activity. The confidence evaporated from the soldiers and the ranks loosened. The portly mage rushed to climb the ladder. His rush sent the mana professionals into a full-blown panic, trampling on each other to reach safety.

They should have brought more ladders.

Kai got no more time to ponder the gross lapse in logistics, the spatial distortions were floating to the upper floor and beyond into the ruins. A clot of Space mana condensed before his nose. "Dodge!" Kai ducked and threw himself to the side as the deadly string whizzed over him.

A spray of warm blood splashed on his face. One of the guards of Valela's escort held the bloody uniform at his side with a pained grimace.

"Head for the exit. Now!" Before she had finished giving commands, the dozen people in her group were moving with some semblance of order. Two guards carried the weight of their injured companion.

A pair of hands grabbed Kai and lifted him on the go. "Are you injured?" Lou didn't look at him, eyes fixed on their surroundings for the spatial distortions. They formed without warning, whizzing through the air and disappearing just as quickly.

Kai got to his feet. "I'm fine."

Chaos had fallen into the military ranks, retreating towards the edges of the upper level and into the side corridors. Blood and screams soaked the air. This wasn't something they could fight.

Why couldn't it just be more beasts?

The stone bridge leading outside was fifty meters from them. The flamboyant Earth shaper was somehow already climbing it, his purple hat lost somewhere in the rush. A two-meter-long multicolored string formed before him. To the man's brief Luck or Favor, the spatial tear didn't drift towards him, but downwards cutting through the bridge like butter.

The passage collapsed in a roar of rock and dust, destroying their direct route to safety. Dirt and mud fell over the rubble from the surface.

Fuckin—

“Dodge left!” Kai Empowered himself for an abrupt turn. For once, no one doubted his command and jerked to the side. An iridescent thread zoomed on their right.

“Head for the corridor.” He dashed to the nearest exit across from them. There was no time to care about what everyone else was doing. If he slowed down, they’d have to worry about tears from behind too. “On our right!”

The distortion nicked Ferla’s arm who pushed Valela out of the way. The stern woman didn’t glance at her wound, getting the princess on her feet and continuing to run.

The Space density still climbed, mana swirling around them. Kai found himself at the head of the group. With Hallowed Intuition warning of danger all around, he pushed the limits of Mana Sense and Inspect to scan their surroundings. “Left!”

“Duck.” He dove into the dark corridor as the immaculate ivory was slashed. The group followed behind, all the eleven mana signatures were present despite a few bright bleeding wounds.

Kai raced ahead, aware that the cramped corridor could turn into a death trap at any moment. They needed to outrun the spreading spatial distortions. The next room had a single door leading deeper, he was about to dash for it when the mana swirled again. “Halt!”

A colorful bubble barred their exit, standing strangely stationary. His doubts didn’t last when a bristled pink snout emerged from it.