

Chapter 212 - Evacuation

A thin drizzle fell from the cowl of clouds, the night was lit by dim crystal. Everyone was cold and miserable, patience was stitched together by the common desire to get away from the epicenter of the anomaly.

The order of evacuation had come as they set foot back into the main camp. The emergency barges were bound to arrive *soon*. There wasn't space for everyone, a group would have to march along the western coast before getting picked up by a second round of vessels. Only a small team would remain near Kawei's ruins to report on the situation.

When they left the Vastaire site, the spatial tears had given no sign of dying down, and the mana levels were still growing. No one was able to descend into the underground complex to verify, but the consensus was that both summoning chambers must have been destroyed.

Thankfully, yellow beasts were equally vulnerable to spatial rends, and half the howls carried torturous notes of pain. The remaining half would be more than enough to overwhelm them, but in the absence of humans, the beasts were happy to battle it out among themselves.

Another piercing roar echoed from the jungle. People had stopped screaming after the first dozen, most even stopped flinching. They hurried faster to pack and carry supplies in silence.

Many soldiers and mages had been killed or severely injured, piling on top of the losses of the previous accident, just a few days prior. If the military hadn't given the evacuation order, Kai wouldn't have been surprised by the guards deserting.

And who could have predicted this...

To be fair, nothing had happened the last time the governor quarried the Vastaire sites for stone, though that had been before the anomalies started. The destruction of the summoning chambers must have shaken the failing enchantments in the Hidden Sanctuary.

Kai stuffed his dad's journals inside the spatial bag; the scholars had kept a few volumes for themselves. Sonya and Darlo had drowned him in questions, only held back when they had been called to be consulted by the command. Makyn and Valela had also disappeared when they left the Vastaire site.

A young guard in a blue uniform knocked on the door to their shared room. "Kai Tylenn? Come with me. You'll be on the first vessel to Eastwin."

No drenched nightly march from me. Yay!

"Thank you, but I'd rather wait with the others. They should be back soon."

"The remaining scholars will be evacuated in the second round. You need to be ready to embark when the barges arrive, we can't delay your departure."

“Why are they not coming?”

“I wasn’t informed, sir. I’ve received orders to bring you on board.” His tone and eyes prayed and demanded to not make things difficult.

Kai suppressed the desire to argue. “Give me a second.” He did one last sweep of the room to check if he had forgotten something. There were dozens of spare sheets of paper, hopefully nothing important.

He double-checked the latches of his spatial backpack before walking into the cold drizzle outside. The last thing he needed was soggy books. The sea churned restlessly two hundred meters from camp. Still no sign of the barges.

Medics hustled between the rows of injured near the shore. Kai stopped counting the missing limbs after getting to ten. The metallic smell of blood was thick enough to pierce the rain. Spirits knew how many more laid dead in the ruin, or the belly of a beast.

Should I have told them about Zervathi...?

The moaning of the wounded deafened the calls and filled him with guilt. Could he have prevented these deaths? Even disregarding the consequences for his own person, there was no certainty Seryne wouldn’t have proceeded with the excavation anyway.

I don’t want to imagine what will happen when the Republic learns about the hidden realm.

Things were bound to get worse before they improved. He still had some notifications pending. He pushed them away, not in the mood to look at his gains when he was surrounded by so much death.

The guard left him with a crowd of people staring at the dark horizon, mainly mana professionals and crates of supplies. He briefly considered going to look for the scholars. In the night and chaos, he was just as likely to miss them, and even if he found them, he didn’t have the authority to evacuate them.

Kai casually wandered under a large turquoise umbrella. The owner was facing the opposite side, ranting with his colleagues. No matter the situation, the mages couldn’t stop squabbling over who was right. It was probably their way of coping with stress.

“The spatial veil between dimensions will heal itself.” Mage Chev’s voice rose over the rest. “If permanently damaging the veil were so easy, every land on Elydes would be a wasteland.”

“You also said there was no chance of instability this large, Mage Chevinsi.” A female responded, her figure hidden by the crowd.

“Yes, and you agreed with me, Mage Alynna. We were clearly mistaken about the origin of the anomalies. They aren’t accidental teleportations but portals. You saw the drakes emerge from an unstable spatial bubble before they attacked us.”

“That blob of spatial energies could have been anything,” Alynna said. “We didn’t take any proper measurements, it was likely the byproduct of an erratic teleportation. Why would anyone open a gate to use it like a teleportation? The mana cost alone would be ludicrously inefficient.”

“These enchantments are incredibly ancient and not working as intended. There could literally be a million reasons. We have no idea of the Vastaire’s capabilities.”

Alynna loudly scoffed. “Look around us. We’re in a mana-starved archipelago that barely qualifies as a Red area. We can’t assume this is the work of some magically advanced civilization just from a piece of overengineered runecrypt. If none of us recognized the runic alphabets, they must have been inferior to the Acaelei’s runes and forgotten by time.”

“That’s a ridiculous leap in logic. We don’t know enough about the situation eight millennia ago, and mana density can shift over eons.”

“Not this drastically. That theory has never been proven.”

“It has! Your old timely bunch just refuses to accept reason. Rubarth and Cervanni have published six volumes with their surveys of the Almani peninsula, the meta-analysis of the essence sediments shows that—”

More unknown names were thrown out like Pokémon trainers trying to counter each other. Kai quickly lost track of the conversation. If that’s what mages were like on the mainland, he was glad he didn’t receive a formal education. It was somewhat reassuring when an Earth shaper threw out the idea of a sub-dimensional space and was laughed off.

Should I hope they figure out the truth?

It would be easier to figure out how to get into the Hidden Realm with the help of someone who knew how it worked. His pact with Zervathi didn’t require him to be the first inside, or to go alone. The problem was if the Republic allowed him inside at all...

I do need to get there ‘before the gates fully open’. I don’t think breaking those enchantments helped my schedule.

The word *fully* gave him hope there was still time. For now, he’d wait and see how the situation developed. The mana researchers were convinced the spatial instability would settle down, though the timeline began another fierce debate. Their speculations ranged from hours to months.

A wave of relief swept through the crowd when four flickering lights appeared on the horizon. The barges soon became more distinct on the dark sea and lined up to approach the single

pier. Two officers checked a list of names before letting anyone through with just a small scuffle when two diggers tried to sneak aboard.

This situation sucks.

The injured boarded first, followed by the mages. Kai stuck close to Chev. While mana professionals could be exhausting, he needed all the information he could get. The hold of the ship was occupied by crates, bodies were pressed on the deck.

“Uhm... Mage Chevinsi.” Kai lightly pulled his sleeve.

The redhead turned, lowering his gaze on him. “What are you doing here? Are you alone? May the Moons light our path.” He elbowed another passenger to draw seven points on his heart. “This wasn’t the place for a kid, even before all this madness. You’ll get sick if you stay out here under the rain, I’ll—”

“There is no need to worry about me, Mage Chevinsi.” Kai took the required advice with a patient smile. “May I ask you a question?”

The man looked around at the crowded deck and shook his head with a scowl. “Go ahead. I doubt we’re going to get a chance to rest before reaching land.”

Kai bobbed his head to satisfy the man. “Uh... Is it true what you were saying earlier? Are the beasts really coming through a gateway?”

“You’ve been eavesdropping on our conversations.” Chev looked at him disapproving. “Being born in a rural place isn’t an excuse for bad manners.”

Don’t glare. Don’t glare. Don’t glare.

“I’m sorry,” Kai lowered his gaze, repentant.

“Well... I can’t fault you for looking for a distraction in this situation. Indeed, a gate is the most reasonable explanation. The question is where they are coming from.”

“Can’t we just jump in one to find out?” Kai mused while his heart tensed. That would be much easier than to *‘find the Altar of Covenant on the highest peak’*.

Unless I end up in a beast’s den... But there must be a limit to their numbers if they all come here.

“We’d have to find a madman willing to jump into an unstable spatial gate.” Chev chuckled and patted his head. “It’s nice to be a young dreamer.”

“So it would never work...?”

“I guess it’s *theoretically* possible. I can’t be sure without a careful analysis. Awakened beasts are much more resilient than humans, one would most likely die, squished or sliced

by spatial forces. Or those gates might work one way only, stranding you in the empty space between realms.” Chev pursed his lips. “And it’s also possible they aren’t gates at all, but just a bubble of Space energy ferrying the beasts between two places.”

Let’s put them as the very last resort. Zervathi would have mentioned it if the solution were that easy.

Kai didn’t need to fake his disappointment. “I see... There is no easier way to distinguish a gate?”

“Hmm... I heard that with some stable portals, you can see your destination like watching through a window. But I’ve never witnessed it myself, gates aren’t practical in low mana areas. Now, let’s go search for a dry place in the cargo for you.”

* * *

Kai sat on his cot inside the buzzing zeppelin bound for Hawkfield. A spotless sky outside the round window lit the cabin. He had directly embarked when they touched land in Eastwin. He wasn’t entirely sure if it was Seryne or Valela who was pulling him along, or what they were planning to do next.

Better than being left behind, I guess.

It was time to see what the whole debacle had netted him.

Profession XP (Domain): 1534

It was a little morbid how death always brought such rewards. The XP was another step towards his advancement. Yellow before fourteen was becoming a much more concrete possibility.

1533 XP are equivalent to one and a half gold mesars if I bought the Republic’s Distilled Essence... Some people must have money to burn.

Ding

Inner Calm (lv1) – Calamities, pain and death won’t chip at your rationality. Assess the situation and decide the best course forward.

I can learn to do most of those things on my own with experience, though ignoring pain would be neat.

It was infinitely better than Pain Resistance since he could level the skill through its other aspects without hurting himself. He’d consider it when he unlocked more slots.

Ding

New Feat: Giant Slayer - You've contributed to the defeat of numerous yellow beasts, proving your ability to cross the chasm between grades. You are awarded: +1 Favor!

Getting involved in deathly shenanigans sure is profitable.

He'd probably not get more from killing yellow beasts unless he defeated a hundred. Favor would strengthen his bond with Hallowed Intuition, which had leveled for the fourth time since he found two enforcers outside his door a couple weeks ago.

A knock woke him up from his musings.

"Come in." He called, already knowing who was there.

Valela entered his cabin, closing the door behind her. She raised her hand to stall his question and took out her cube enchanted against eavesdropping. "Better to be safe." The dark circles under her eyes made him suspect she hadn't closed them since the accident.

"Make yourself at home," Kai gestured to the cramped space. The cabin was even smaller than the one he got on his way to Kawei, and he had to share it with another person.

"Uh... thank you," Valela scanned the place with a glance, and took a seat in the second cot. "I'm sorry that I didn't contact you sooner. The matters demanding my attention kept piling up once we reached camp."

"Is everything alright? I mean, besides the obvious fiasco."

Valela winced. "You can't imagine, ours wasn't the only site hit. Every ruin on the archipelago spewed out beasts after the summoning chambers were destroyed."

Blood drained from his face. "You mean they also experienced spatial tears?" He couldn't even imagine the destruction.

Yatei's mercy, what if they destroyed all the summoning chambers?

"No, it wasn't as extreme in other places. There were two or three beast attacks per site. The teams recognized the mana gathering and dealt with them. The spatial instability on Kawei appeared to have settled down. Or at least, the scout teams didn't see any more beasts exiting the ruins in the last..." she checked a pocket watch. "Thirteen and a half hours."

Not the apocalypse yet then.

"What are they going to do about all the beasts on Kawei?"

“Scouts will be posted to keep an eye on the situation, but probably nothing for now.”

“Nothing?”

“It’s possible they’ve not informed me of their plans. Most settlements are on the other side of the island, and there are no nearby villages after the relocation seven years ago.” Valela said. “Yellow beasts can’t sustain themselves or mate in the thin mana of the archipelago, so they’ll weaken and be easier to hunt.”

Not what he would have chosen, but it wasn’t a terrible plan. “Thank you for informing me.”

She gave him a tired smile. “You’re welcome. The military will probably suspect our relationship after you escaped the accident with us.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you saved our lives. I—” she pursed her lips and stared at her shoes. “I thought I’d be able to keep a level head no matter what happened, especially after last time. But it all happened too fast, and I didn’t know what to do. Again.”

Kai chuckled at her peeved face. “I heard no one can be good at everything. It’s normal to panic in dangerous situations if you’re not used to it.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Spirits, they’ll definitely suspect us if we behave like this.” They share an awkward smile. “Anyway, do you know why we’re going to Hawkfield?”

Valela raised an eyebrow. “No one told you? The military suspects there is an undiscovered Vastaire site near the heart of the Veeryd jungle.”