

Chapter 206 – Digging Deeper

~Come.~

Kai followed the ethereal whispers, he couldn't tell how, but they were different from Hallowed Intuition. Indistinct voices called him forward. A vast ancestral presence at the edge of his consciousness reached out to him.

~Come closer.~

He didn't realize he had climbed down the ladder into the chamber till a figure barred his path. He stopped half a step short of crashing into a bright saffron robe. "Huh?" Kai looked up, jolted awake.

The man had flaming red hair and a stiff upper lip. His enchanted robe did nothing to hide his yellow grade. "What's a child doing here? We're trying to work. Where are your parents?" He scanned the hall over his head.

Kai vainly tried to hold on to the sensation. The bizarre pull dissipated like a dream upon waking, leaving only the awareness that something had happened. He scowled at the annoying guy. Few things triggered him more than being called a child.

There was no trace of the whispering presence. The chamber had been cleaned of debris, spotless ivory stone marked by cracks and claw marks. Thank the spirits, the terragon had left the hall before going on his destructive rampage or there'd be nothing to inspect.

"We're scholars." Sonya descended beside him with a beaming smile. "Investigating the link between Vastaire remnants and the anomalies. And you are...?"

"Mage Chevinsi." He puffed his chest like he expected them to recognize the name. "I pursue mana theory and mastery. And I'm also an expert in spatial magic."

A bit self-obsessed.

Kai gave him a second look. "You know Space Magic?"

"I—" his face turned a shade closer to his hair. "I studied its underlying principles and workings."

"So you can't cast any spells." Kai spelled out loud, head hung low. Space was such a confusing affinity, it would have been nice to meet another user—even if he was a douche.

"We can't choose our affinities," Chev harrumphed and crossed his arms. "I'm the best theoretical expert you'll find in this archipelago." A few chuckles echoed from the other mages in the chamber. The red-head silenced them with a glare.

"Is there no one who can use spatial magic?"

Chev scratched his non-existent beard. “Child—”

“I’m almost thirteen.”

“*Kid*, it’s rare to have a major affinity for Space, and rarer still to learn how to use it. There are a couple of people with a minor affinity,” he glanced over his shoulders, raising his tone. “But it’s too low to do anything with it. It’s better to use tools to detect the spatial residuum and study the mana ripples with our skills.”

“I see.” Kai nodded. He had no idea if what Chev said made any sense, but he didn’t mind playing along if it earned him more information. Even basic magic knowledge was inaccessible in the archipelago.

“Anyway, you shouldn’t be here. Haven’t you heard about the beasts? This place is dangerous. How can the Republic stoop so low to bring a child?” He shook his head. “It’s embarrassing. I didn’t think things were this bad on the frontier.”

Does he live on the moons?

“Well, I’m already here. Can’t you show us around Mr. Mage?” Kai said with a naive smile. Since the guy interrupted him, he might as well make himself useful. “You seem to be very knowledgeable, sir.”

“Well, I’m—”

“That’d be wonderful,” Sonya joined in. “It would save us so much time to hear the opinion of an expert. And, who knows, maybe you’ll get inspired from a different perspective.”

Chev blushed under her intense gaze. “Sure, miss. I needed a break anyway.”

Several crates and tables had been set against the walls. Food rations, water and a wealth of enchanted equipment Kai couldn’t wait to *borrow*. Despite the two dozen people present, the space hall was large enough to not be cramped.

What was that strange call?

He stretched his ears and mind for any mystical sign. Nothing. It was a little disturbing how he had followed the whispers, but he couldn’t perceive any malicious intent even now. His own instincts told him to go. Either the presence meant no harm, or it was a whole other level of scary.

It can’t be a coincidence it happened here. It must be linked to what’s causing the spatial anomalies. They might even have the same cause.

Iridescent Space motes blinked everywhere he looked, twice as many as in the sea serpent’s chamber. His higher Mana Sense and specialized Inspect played a factor, but the difference was stark. The double teleport had left a mark.

Kai absorbed the particles flickering close to him. Mindful he was in a room full of mages, he suppressed the impulse to reach for them with his mana or hands. No one suspected he had an affinity for Space, and his hidden aces were running dangerously low.

Chev walked them to the center of the chamber, gesturing to an empty patch of air. “There are clear traces of spatial magic, and the dimensional veil is thinner. It might be why this place was chosen in the first place.”

The mage took out a sphere made of seven interlocking rings, each piece covered in runes. The inner golden loops spun with snappy shifts contrasted by the slow motion of the outer layer. “What’s strange is that the ripples tracing the origin of the teleport lead nowhere. Not concealed, but it’s as if the anomaly came from here.” He gestured to the chamber. “That’s obviously not possible...”

Kai half listened as the man rambled to himself. An argument broke out between a group of mages near the end of the hall. A few worrying words caught his ears. “What are they talking about?”

“Huh?” Chev gave them a distracted glance. “They want to excavate the chamber to look for a spatial array or anchor.”

What!

“You mean they want to rip apart this place?” Kai struggled to keep his tone even.

“Nothing so drastic. More like carefully bisecting the stone to look for runes.” Chev waved it off. “The anomalies must be linked to the ruins since no beasts appeared from the sites that had been destroyed. It’s not too unusual to hide delicate enchantments beneath the rock to keep them safe, and it would answer many questions.”

“Can’t we look for it *without* wrecking the ruins?” Kai said with a choked voice.

“Trust me, we’ve been trying for months. Well, *they*, I’ve just joined. Though I can assure you that whatever it is, it’s hidden extremely well. We won’t make any breakthrough unless the stiff faces have been hiding a fourth circle mage specialized in mana analysis.”

His mind whirred for a way to stop this. “Wouldn’t the workers who mined the sites have found something if there was an array beneath the rock?”

“Maybe.” Chev shrugged. “It has been many years since, from what I heard. Any sign has probably been erased. I don’t want to speak ill of them, but workers are often brutes. I wouldn’t be surprised if they destroyed the enchantment without realizing it, or they noticed and ignored it.”

“Still—”

“Kid, your passion is admirable, but let the experts do their job. I’ve studied mana for nine years at Akantha to become a researcher. This is our best shot at finding a clue and stopping the accidents. Now’s time you go, don’t you have a nanny or something to look after you?” He looked around. Sonya had gone back to the other scholars. “Wait, kid! Where are you going?”

Not again.

Kai strode away. Suddenly, everyone in the chamber seemed to be discussing how and where to mine the ruins. The earth mages wanted to use stone spells, others argued that magic might ruin their finding. Better to use a professional chisel and scalpel.

This is madness.

Why was everyone’s first instinct to cut apart something they didn’t understand? What if they broke it further? His eyes darted about, desperate for a ray of hope. He spotted a familiar figure talking to another mage.

“You need to stop them!”

“Excuse me a moment,” Makyn said to the woman dressed in a ruby overcoat who turned up her nose. He dragged her to the side with a scolding look. “Remember the part about behaving?”

Kai matched his gaze. “They want to destroy the chamber. The beasts began appearing after the governor mined the sites for stone. What if it makes more beasts appear?”

Makyn studied him with stern eyes before sighing. “Not here. Follow me.”

They climbed the ladder to a nearby room. The soldier took out a black crystal ball glowing with sound and cloaking runes, it projected a bubble of mana around them. “Speak.”

“The beast attacks started rising seven years ago, right after the governor quarried the Vastaire ruins. They broke something that lasted eight millennia. And this is the result. Now, you want to smash more things before understanding what’s going on.” Kai heaved for breath.

Ice-boy watched him unruffled. “We know.”

“What do you mean *you know*?”

“You aren’t the only person who can read numbers.” Makyn studied him with a pensive look. “But we can’t sit still. The attacks are increasing, and this is our shot to find a solution.”

“What if it makes the situation worse?”

“It’s a risk. Do you have a better idea?”

“I—” Kai squeezed his brains for a solution. “We can keep searching. It’s not been a full day since the anomaly.”

“Many people have been looking into the beast attacks for almost a year, and for months into these ruins. There might be a clue we missed, but it’s unlikely we’ll find it anytime soon. If we wait and still make no progress, it’ll be worse when we’re forced to excavate the chamber.”

But—

No matter how he racked his brains, Kai couldn’t come up with a solid argument.

“Everything will be fine. The situation might look overwhelming, but the Republic deals with much harder cases every month.” Makyn looked about to pat his head when he pulled his hand back.

Is he trying to comfort me?

“I’m fine.”

Makyn’s expression fell back to stone. “Did you discover anything useful?”

“Actually, yes,” Kai reported his and Sonya’s speculations about the arrival of the stone lizard and wyrmling.

He wandered back into the summoning chamber, eavesdropping on the mages. Sometimes wisps of mana wove around them. Any of his questions was met with scorn and invites to scam.

“Where did they find these haggard historians?” An old hag laughed with her colleagues, not even pretending to lower her voice. “The solution is clearly magical. If they let me open the ground, we’d be done before supper.”

Are mages all insufferable jerks?

Being forced to wake up at dawn to search the ruins hadn’t helped the overall mood. He didn’t understand half of what they said about dimensional ripples and tears, but he kept gathering a stash of iridescent motes for emergencies. He might have been more helpful if he had taken the Space Magic skill.

Not that I have any idea what to discard.

Kai joined with the scholars, discussing the glyphs etched in the wall. They compared his dad’s notes and their own experience to put together a rough translation.

The People (Vastaire) thank thee [untranslated deity’s name] for the guidance through the darkness (waters?) to receive the Blessing of Wealth (Abundance?). May your eternal expanse (ocean?) and shelter (shore?) remain untouched by [untranslated section].

They had poured over the obscure verses since the anomaly happened in this chamber. Unless they recovered more information, there was a limit to what they could achieve before falling into guesswork.

It was a mystery how Rellan had arrived at most conclusions. Kai suspected it involved a couple decades of dedicated work and multiple profession skills. Not something they could emulate.

Is this unnamed deity the entity behind the calling? Does it have anything to do with Yatei and Kahali, or did the great spirits appear with the humans?

Kai massaged his eyes. It would have been easier if information about gods wasn't considered taboo. Could gods move to new places? Did physical distance even matter for them? He lacked the fundamental basic knowledge of the subject to reach any conclusion, and it was the same for the others.

Except for Sonya, they were scandalized by that line of thinking. "Merciful Moons!" Darlo hushed any question. "The nature of gods is not something mortals should wonder about, least of all a child."

"Forgive me." Kai did a discreet job of hiding his sarcasm. He moved to less heretical questions before the man's exclamations called attention to him.

Were the beasts the blessing mentioned in the text? A bunch of ravenous monsters was an odd thing to be thankful for, unless they summoned them to be slaughtered...

It feels like I'm reaching. You put something underground to protect it or control who has access.

The summoning chamber where the toad appeared was no different, except smaller and less crowded. He had shared his expertise without holding back, and they still hadn't gotten far from where they started.

Is cutting apart a chamber the only solution?

"You go ahead, I'll reach you in a moment." He waved Sonya to go on, the other scholars had been all too eager to leave for the surface.

What time is it?

Globes lit the ivory chamber. They must be well past dusk judging by his grumbling stomach. With the whirling of activity and people, his escort was nowhere to be seen. The chamber was empty beside a few abandoned crates and a table with a jug of purple juice.

Kai pushed Mana Sense and Inspect for any hint, the result was the same as the previous twenty times. Nothing. While the mages and mana experts had been a disappointment, there were a few yellow grades between them. If they hadn't found anything, he stood no chance.

Hmm... I might as well try.

He had a single advantage that might make the difference. Iridescent Space motes fluttered in a blob refracting green, blue and red. More than he had ever gathered at once.

I've got nothing to lose.

With elemental magic, the more precise the visualization and intent, the more efficient and powerful a spell was. Repetition then helped refine a cast till it became second nature. This had only become more important after he specialized Mana Sense. Kai ignored all those lessons and focused on a single desire.

Show me the origin of the spatial anomaly.

Thousands of painstakingly converted motes scattered in a spectacle of electric colors around him. They flickered in and out of reality, some disappearing into the ground, others just blinking out of existence.

Kai stood in the empty chamber. Seconds ticked by.

It was a long shot anyway.

Ding

You've been offered a bargain by the god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi: *Free my vessel from the ancient shackles and receive wondrous rewards.*

Do you wish to accept or refuse the bargain? Be warned that a bargain is a binding pact, and you may receive punishment for an infraction.