

Chapter 210 - Unfortunate Encounters

The pink snout turned into a bristled muzzle with three pairs of tusks: a yellow boar the size of a minivan stood on stout legs. The iridescent bubble collapsed on itself, cutting a few hairs on its stubby tail.

Anomalies shouldn't appear outside the summoning chamber, yet they did. The consequences for breaking those enchantments were worse than he imagined.

They're portals, not teleports.

How did he not see it sooner? No one had witnessed the appearance of a beast and lived to tell the tale. The portal that brought the terragon and the wyrmling must have allowed more than one to pass. The connections must be growing more stable, perhaps due to the failing shackles of the Hidden Sanctuary that Zervathi mentioned.

His lack of knowledge of spatial magic left him with more speculations than facts. Could he cross them to get to the Hidden Sanctuary? Should he? It seemed—

Oink!

Fifteen meters across the chamber, large beady eyes studied him. The boar puffed a warm fetid breath.

The group came to a forceful halt behind him. Kai didn't dare avert his eyes, hand on the hilt of his sword. There was no time to strategize. While the hall was more spacious than the corridors, a stocky beast and twelve people would leave little freedom to maneuver.

Space and ambient mana swirled with no sign of abating. The boar barred the way forward, and the spatial tears spread at their backs, extinguishing any chance of retreat.

Can't we all be friends? Would you mind moving your... moderately-sized butt out of the way?

The boar took away his indecision by charging. Its hard-nailed feet skittered on the ivory floor, eating the distance in a breath.

"Watch out!" He couldn't block a frontal assault or spare the Mind to check on Lou and Valela. Empower flowed into his legs. Hallowed Intuition had the decency to give him more precise directions.

When the boar was one stride from running over him—too close to adjust—Kai dodged left and released his Water spell. A layer of ice coated the floor of the chamber.

The ice immediately cracked under the weight of the beast, making the boar skid out of control. Three tons of pork barreled past him, a shield of water pushed him out of the tusks' way.

Lou was on the right flank, and the group had the common sense to disperse to the sides, except one man who spent an instant too long frozen in terror. The boar trampled over him with a sickening crunch and crashed into the opposite entrance.

Kai landed with a roll. One look at the bloody mincemeat on the floor was enough to know the man was already dead.

Fuck. Should I press the advantage to kill it?

Spells wouldn't be enough, he'd need to use his sword up close to carve the thick hide. If he failed, he might get entangled in a long battle. Yellow beasts were stupidly resilient, the sea serpent had taken minutes to die even as he ripped at it from the inside.

"Move!" He waved the frozen guards to the next corridor. "Now!" The spatial rends blinked within his Mana Sense range, expanding outwards. The boar might barely squeeze through the passage, but it was better than waiting here. They just needed to reach a chamber with a link to the towers and move outside.

Half the group hurried past him, Valela stood by the doorway commanding everyone to move forward. She stared at the bloody remains on the floor, face pale, a wisp of light floating around her.

As the overgrown swine was already getting up, barely dazed, a colorful string fluttered into existence, cutting crimson ribbons in its side. The beast let out a shrill squeal and crashed into a wall to escape the spatial tear.

Sorry piggy, you should have taken the friendship deal.

Ferla dashed towards it shrouded in Shadow. Her spear glowed with mana. Wielding the weapon with both hands, she planted it through the skull of the panicked boar.

Eeeeeek!

The boar jerked to slash the bodyguard with its tusks and forced the woman to abandon her weapon and retreat. The boar refused to peacefully die and thrashed madly despite the stick in its brains.

The bodyguard appeared beside him, grabbed Valela and dragged her away. "Hurry, miss. It'll take a while to die, but it won't be able to follow."

I wouldn't be so sure...

"That was s— Fuck!" Kai dashed for the corridor.

With a wet grunt, the boar charged in their direction, blazing with enough mana to visibly glow. Its black eyes were blind with rage and pain, the broken shaft of a spear poked like a horn from its head.

Why me? I didn't do anything!

Kai cast another ice spell on the floor, but the berserk boar trampled over it without even slowing. He was ready to vault over it, though Hallowed Intuition had warned him he would be safe. By Fate or its cracked skull, the boar missed the tight passage and caught the corner of the entrance with its head.

The walls of the chamber shook. The beast didn't get up this time, dead or unconscious. Kai didn't go back to check.

Blinking motes swarmed together. "Dodge right!"

Valela veered her run without hesitation. An iridescent string zoomed through the corridor on their left, it sliced the immaculate walls before dissipating. Kai closed the line behind her, hoping that whoever led the group wasn't fleeing in panic. The rends were sparser, but Space mana was still dense and frenetic.

Earth, rocks and moss coated the floor, slowing his run in the dimmed light. They crossed three chambers before stopping. Mud squelched under his shoes. A cascade of vines dangled from the opening in the ceiling, letting through a gust of chill breeze.

A man and a woman in blue uniforms were already upstairs, divided between keeping guard and helping the others follow. They were Yellow while most of the guards below were Orange. In the rush to run no one had thought to take a rope. The mud sucking on their feet hampered them from taking a proper jump.

"You go first." Valela assumed a commanding tone between her labored breaths, gesturing to the uncertain guards.

"Miss." Ferla used the harsh look she usually reserved for strangers. "We're here to protect you. Let us do our job, we're losing time."

Valela bit her lip. "What if they can't make the leap—"

"Make space." Kai stepped forward but no one paid him any mind. Without the imminent threat of death, his authority had already expired.

Damn. It was nice while it lasted.

"I can make a ladder." Kai pushed through the blockade of bodies, he didn't stop to explain and cast a vibrant ball of mana. The vines hanging from the aperture writhed and grew thicker, extending like ropes to the floor. "They'll hold a couple of people if you guys upstairs keep them steady."

The guards gaped at the magic display, some awed, some wary as if the vine bridge might rise to strangle them.

What? Have you never seen a competent mage?

“Now would be a good time to move. We have no idea how far the spatial tears can extend, and I’d rather not find out.” The yell got the desired effect.

Valela was placed on the leafy vines by Ferla and reluctantly climbed.

When Kai stood aside, the guards threw him strange glances, refusing to meet his gaze. It would have been nice if someone attempted to make him go first, but it didn’t matter. With Hallowed Intuition and his spatial affinity, he had the greatest survivability, even higher than the yellow grades.

“You should go,” Lou said, guarding the three tunnels leading into the chamber.

Huh...

Arguing would only waste more time. “It can hold both of us.” Kai climbed the vines, he lifted himself up with his arms alone.

Shouts and rumbling growls echoed from the main group—spirits willing, it wasn’t another stone lizard. Yellow beasts shouldn’t be a problem with the number of yellow soldiers the military brought. Once they escaped the spatial instability, they would be fine.

Well, most of them...

Kai pushed back the flashes of limbs and torsos, there had been no chance they would listen to him. He couldn’t help such a large group.

I had fucking told them this would end badly.

A flood of thoughts and worries threatened to sweep his mind, ramifications from what happened today. It wasn’t time to analyze them. Kai stepped on the upper floor, the pale light of a dying sun peeked from the next opening.

The ceiling was low, the guards had formed a line to help each other up. Casting another ladder of vines might save a few seconds, not enough to bother. The mana was still noticeably denser and chaotic, but there had been no spatial tears since Kai observed the area with Mana Sense. He took Lou’s hand to hoist him up.

“Thanks.”

“You too. There was no need to close the group, I’m more suited to spot the threats.”

“Then shouldn’t you scout ahead?”

Kai shook his head. “The spatial anomalies are expanding from the summoning chamber, the main danger is underground. And shouldn’t you be protecting Valela for your mysterious plans?”

She was already in the upper chamber with Ferla at her side. The princess threw worried glances at the group below with a bone-white wand in hand.

“She has enough people looking after her.” Lou sighed, meeting his gaze with clear eyes. “Kai, if you didn’t come to warn and lead us out, we would have suffered many more losses. You’ve already helped enough, let me do at least this for you.”

What do I say to that...?

“Uh, okay...” he crouched to touch the vine stair, hoping he didn’t look *too* awkward. He had done some experiments since the last specialization. Instead of casting a spell, he pulled on the mana still present in the plant. The vine withered beneath his touch, returning about half the Nature mana spent.

I still have room for improvement.

“That’s new.” Lou positioned his large frame to shield him from the main group, the seriousness replaced by a wry smile. “You know, sometimes I’m tempted to shake you upside down to see how many tricks fall out.”

Kai rolled his eyes. “You’ve seen almost everything after tonight.” It would be hard to hide his Space affinity, though it was possible the military hadn’t noticed in the mayhem. He could blame his ability to sense on Hallowed Intuition, it wasn’t *entirely* false.

“Almost.” The bulky teen looked amused.

“Yes, *almost*. What kind of mage reveals all his tricks?”

“Hmm, most of them I believe. At least among those I met, they were all eager to show off their abilities if you gave them an excuse.”

If they were like the Earth half-mages, that’s not surprising... It must be an ego boost to come to the archipelago where there are almost no mana professions.

“You shouldn’t take as an example the mages you meet, and I’m technically an apprentice. Also, I’m not the only one with a few tricks, I saw a few glowing skills here and there. What are *you* hiding, big boy?”

Lou stared at his boots with an awkward look.

“It’s fine. You don’t have to tell me if you’re forbidden by *you-know-what*. The last thing I need is carrying your unconscious lumbering body out of here.”

“It’s not that,” Lou lowered his tone to a whisper. “They’re mostly evolved skills. I’m not particularly magically talented, but I’ve got a small affinity for Water and an average one for Darkness.”

That was easy. I should have asked sooner.

“Cool.” Kai had his suspicions after the fight with the toad. He didn’t know much about Darkness, except it shared a link with Shadow, though not as strong as Water and Ice, or Earth and Stone. While Shadow was focused on concealing and slipping away, Darkness was about expanding and devouring.

Lou chuckled. “That’s not the reaction I usually get.”

“It’s just an affinity—.”

“Hurry up, we need to get out of here,” Valela yelled from upstairs. There was a single guard apart from them. A graying man at Yellow helping those who needed a push.

“C’mon, you go first.” Lou smiled.

“Fine.” Kai was about to take the runner-up when Space mana surged. In a split second, an iridescent bubble swallowed half the chamber. Hallowed Intuition screamed of danger.

Rotting ancestors, are you kidding me?

There was no time to jump, the only way out was back into the tunnels. A pair of long hairy legs poked into the room two meters from him, followed by another identical pair and the most disgusting spidery face Kai had ever seen. It had eight bulbous eyes and a pair of fangs larger than any respectable arachnid should carry.

I’m so done with this shit.

The spider let out a rasping screech—no arachnid should be allowed to produce sounds either. The monstrosity tried to emerge from the portal with its fat hairy body.

Fuck no!

Kai raised his hand. He didn’t waste time for efficient casting, he directed every mote of Water mana in his body forward. A wave flooded the beast to push it back, replacing the screeches with a low gurgling.

The spell wouldn’t harm a yellow beast. It didn’t need to. While Kai didn’t know the first thing about Space Magic, he knew two things. Those portals were unstable, and he was good at destroying cups.

Maintaining the jet of water, he gathered the Space mana he had stocked since Zervathi boosted his affinity and threw it at the pulsing bubble. No visualization, who needed precision when you just wanted to mess things up?

The bubble writhed and fluctuated wildly as the spider glowed with Shadow mana and pushed back the wave. With a whistle, the portal collapsed on the abdomen of the beast. Shreds of meat, chitin and green ichor exploded into the chamber.

The rear of the spider wasn't bisected as much as obliterated. The surviving head and hairy legs slumped on the floor, and Mana Sense confirmed that not even a yellow beast could survive that.

Kai retched at the slimy *something* that landed on his shoulder, there was a sour taste in his mouth he didn't wish to examine. He remembered once finding a barrel of fish gut left to rot for weeks in the sun - this was so much worse. Without hesitation he turned the water jet onto himself. He spit, retched and washed himself again.

"Are you fine?" Valela shouted from above, covering her nose with a handkerchief.

"Never been better. That was the most disgusting thing I've ever done."

Lou stood still with his eyes closed, dripping green ichor and unidentified organs. "Please, help." He spoke without opening his mouth.

Kai considered teasing him, but that would have been too cruel even for him, so he summoned a second flow. In such a short battle, he had burned through more than half his Water mana.

Lou didn't have to beg Kai to be the first one out. Pumping his legs with Empower, he jumped to the upper floor. Trees were visible through the windows. Most of the group was already out and Kai was eager to get away from the reeking chamber.

A red twilight tinged the sky above the jungle in the west. Screams, growls and roars. A group of soldiers and mages stood in the middle of the ruins besieged by four bright yellow signatures.