

## Chapter 222 - Calamity

Kai scrambled off the chair, grabbed his sword and almost tripped on his backpack to get out of the long closet serving as his room. He extended his senses through the ruins. It was time to roll the dice.

People shuffled around him in a frenzy of activity on par with the churning mana. Essence was streaming into the underground tunnels just like in the recorded anomalies, but the Veeryd's site was unique. The already dense mana was rising beyond anything he had experienced before.

From the remains in the basilisk's den, the beasts must either be summoned more frequently or in greater numbers. Ranks of men and women ran with wrinkled uniforms to their assigned tasks for the emergency. Everyone had received orders on how to behave in case of an anomaly, though the unease remained palpable.

When dealing with obscure magical phenomena there was always a degree of unpredictability. No amount of preparation could guarantee their safety. Kai could feel tense anticipation brewing in his gut. The last few anomalies had brought grim surprises and acquainted him with death.

*Calm down, this is the chance you need.*

Being an external contractor, Kai had not been made privy to the internal plans. His only duty was to be available for any command. He set himself by the door of the officer's chamber, sword hanging from his belt and wand stored in his pocket. He was the personification of a model soldier ready to be deployed.

*You're looking too eager.*

Improvisation set his face in a somber grimace just in time for Seryne to emerge from her room flanked by six other officials. Given the position he chose, her eyes soon landed on him. She waved him closer without stopping her march. "You'll join the team heading to the summoning chamber."

*So much for not forcing me into danger. Not that I can complain.*

Kai strode after her, trying to find a place in the group of people. "Yes, ma'am."

Bert scrunched in a scowl. "Ma'am, we don't need—"

"Not now." The captain hushed him down with a hard glance, turning back to him. "Be ready by the western exit in one minute."

With a curt nod, Kai headed for the designated place. He had been cultivating the image of a kid in way over his head, resigned to do what he was told. His contribution to the scholars' research had been negligible, and his only talent was Hallowed Intuition.

From the two levels in Improvisation, he was doing a discrete job at it. Apart from Makyn, everyone else hardly seemed to realize he was there. The more they overlooked him, the easier it would be to steal the Altar from under the Republic's nose.

Thirty people assembled in the western chamber, with more joining each second. There were only two possible ways to deal with a mana anomaly: bunker down or go to meet it head-on. From the soldiers he overheard, Seryne had made plans for both, thankfully she hadn't picked a cautious approach in the end.

*Hmm... Makyn might have helped sway her decision.*

Kai hadn't failed to point out the disastrous consequences that the appearance of another beast with innate Earth magic would have brought. Not only could it ruin their plan to trap the basilisk underground, but the summoning chamber could also be destroyed. Spirits knew what the consequences might be.

"Fall in! We'll head out immediately." Captain Seryne came to lead the group personally.

*Well, I didn't expect that. Though she's bringing most of the camp with her...*

Around fifty people had formed up, two-thirds of the soldiers and most of the mages. Only the support personnel and the blue contingent from the council remained in camp.

Valela and her cohort came to see them leave. Her face was a blank canvas. Knowing her, she must be vexed at being sidelined, but she still preferred to keep her contingent out of danger given the choice.

Nelynna and another Earth shaper stepped forward to unlock the exit. Boulders and slabs of ivory rolled over with a staggered rumble. The departing group smoothly divided into three teams to be more maneuverable inside the narrow tunnels.

A vanguard of twelve people jogged into the dark first. To his surprise, Seryne placed him in the main group behind her and an old mage. If he were to take a guess, his safety wasn't what she was worried about.

"Speak up if you perceive any danger."

Despite being away from the action, Kai was relieved. He wasn't that eager to face the basilisk again. He'd be close to the people making decisions to react accordingly.

*It'd be so much easier if the Altar was some random rock no one cared about. Why does it have to be in the jaws of a basilisk?*

Kai exhaled a slow breath as they moved out into the tunnels. He had tried not to indulge in pointless commiseration, but heading towards danger, he couldn't help cursing the evil lizard. That King had turned an easy quest into an uncertain venture with its greed.

He'd continue to search the ruins for the slim chance the artifact he perceived on the basilisk wasn't the Altar, but at this point, the chances were very slim.

It had been a couple minutes since the disturbance started, colorful currents of mana still streamed underground. The flow of essence was in complete chaos. While Mana Observer had proved it could pierce the basilisk's cloaking, he held little hope of spotting it in these conditions.

The group marched at a reckless pace, weaving around the obstructed passages for the summoning chamber in the center. Kai was forced to run to keep up with the yellow professionals.

Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, he felt exposed without his faithful porter watching his back. Makyn had been assigned to the rearguard who followed from a distance to ensure the basilisk wouldn't strike the main group from behind.

In an ideal scenario, the soldiers would ambush any confused beast as it stepped through the spatial bubbles, collect the carcass and head back to camp. If there was one thing Kai had learned, it was that plans rarely went smoothly.

They might have missed a second chamber in the initial scouting. Though the most worrying unknown was the King. Would it quietly give up its snack without a fight?

Beasts grew more powerful by hunting and consuming other creatures. Kai didn't know enough about the biology of a basilisk to tell how many meals would make a difference, but any chance that the monster might advance to the late stages of Yellow had to be avoided at all costs.

The stench of death and rotting carcasses welcomed them in its den. Kai couldn't help gagging even if he expected it. The vanguard made space to let them enter and secured the only entrance.

"Do something about the smell," Seryne ordered, carefully stepping on the grimy floor.

The graying mage nodded with an equally disgusted expression. He chanted arcane words under his breath and summoned a gust of wind to sweep the room. Without proper ventilation, the spell hardly made any difference.

*We actually made it in time.*

Mana was still swirling, countless iridescent motes whizzed around them. Subdued whispers of danger tickled his mind, not yet to alarming levels. If Kai had to pick a problem, it might be

the number of soldiers. While the summoning chamber was large, forty people would leave little space to maneuver in a battle.

Reaching an agreement, Space mana swarmed in the center of the room.

“It’s coming,” Kai warned.

Multiple gazes snapped between him and the forming anomaly. “Be ready to engage.”

A pulsing bubble emerged from nothing to light the chamber in shades morphing from violet to green and teal. The soldiers arranged a circle of spears and shield bearers with archers and reserves behind them.

The whispers rose as the gate writhed and bent on itself to expand. Spatial magic was a fascinating sight when he didn’t have to run for his life. Dimension appeared to lose any sense of logic when he peered into the forming gate. The space inside was sometimes larger and smaller.

*Could you move faster?* Kai glared at the anomaly.

A dozen mana professionals were already waving their bizarre, enchanted instruments and taking notes. At this pace, the Republic would put together this wasn’t a teleport.

*Damn, you’re getting chunky.*

Spirits willing, the size of the bubble was just a side effect of the abnormal mana density and not a measure of the threat. The gate continued to twist and swell like a balloon floating a palm off the ground. It was in no hurry to pop a beast out and get the show going.

Worried murmurs spread through the ranks at the nerve-wracking wait.

“Silence,” Seryne commanded. “Strike as soon as you have line of sight and don’t give it any time to react.”

With another mind-bending shift, the bubble presented a clear surface fraying at the edges. White, green and black swarmed like blobs of color on a pale silver canvas to create a drawing of wriggling lines. A green patch wrapped around ivory and brown spots with darker shadows moving in between.

*Shit.*

Kai looked around the chamber. Most had a look of deep puzzlement, but there were also sparks of understanding.

The old mage squinted at the portal through a monocle. “That’s not possible. It looks like—”

A dark furry shape with curved fangs pounced out of the gate. It had six limbs and a snout somewhere between a feline and a bear. Kai had no time to examine the creature. Its growls turned into gurgling sounds as it was pierced by six spears and many more arrows.

*At least that worked.*

Kai retreated with his back against the walls of the chamber and clutched his wand.

Despite its mortal wounds, the yellow beast still struggled. Burning mana shone around its forms when a spear through its skull put an end to its suffering. Just in time for another six-legged bear to jump out of the portal.

Without a shred of hesitation for the unfamiliar environment or a look at its dead companion, the beast used the distraction to charge the encirclement. Shields glowed with skills in response, the soldiers quickly served it with the same flurry of strikes, but the ranks were compromised when a *third* bear arrived.

*How many more are there?*

With three creatures the size of small cars, the confines of the chambers were getting crowded. The portal had shrunk with each beast that crossed it, back into a writhing mess of iridescent colors, but the damage had been done. Any person with a brain could tell it was a portal, worse yet, it even showed a glimpse of the plane on the other side.

Seryne stared with spirited eyes, not at the soldiers fighting for their lives but at the spatial gate. "Could it be...?"

*If I said no, would it help?*

Probably not. And his emergency plan to jump into a portal was equally doomed. Whether the yellow beasts were attracted by the anomalies, or the Hidden Sanctuary was chock full of them, it'd be like facing the basilisk on his own.

*Wait a second, where is Makyn?*

Kai scanned the people in the chamber, skulking to the entrance. The rearguard should have caught up with them by now.

*Fuck. He must be alright.*

“Ma’am.”

Seryne turned to him with her eyelids wide open. “Another danger?”

“No, it’s the—”

“I don’t care. You don’t understand what this means! The high command will all want a piece, but it’s mine. I found it...” her voice turned into incomprehensible whispers.

*Either she lost it, or she put together the pieces.*

“Ma’am, it’s important—” Hallowed Intuition howled in his mind, urging Kai to pay attention to the fight.

The portal had blinked out of existence. The soldiers had managed to kill the second six-legged bear, one more lay dying in a pool of blood and a fourth one was engulfed in burning essence. Not just to his mana sight, actual flames danced on its pitch-black fur growing brighter.

“Kill it now!”

If the soldiers heard him, it was too late. With two spears stuck in its torso, the creature stood over the bodies of its companions and released a roar like a living pyre.

Kai just had time to raise his wand when the flames burst forward to swallow the chamber, a wall of water formed to meet the surging inferno. He channeled more mana into the shield to stop it from evaporating and expanded it to include more people.

Beyond the rippling spell, the fire quickly consumed the oxygen of the chamber and died down. A searing wave of air washed over him when he lowered the barrier, the rot replaced with an unpleasant burnt smell.

*Fuckfuckfuck!*

At the epicenter of the blast, three soldiers had turned into charred husks together with the spiteful bear. Further away people moaned in pain with severe burns, some saved by their shield skills or high attributes.

Kai cast his hose spell to cover the chamber in a drizzle and lower the temperature, overwhelmed by the amount of destruction around him. He didn’t know how to help.

This wasn’t how this was supposed to go even in his worst-case scenario. Elemental affinities meant those mutant bears had been at least C-rank and they got *four* of them. In a moment the situation had turned into a bloodbath.

A dozen people were down with severe injuries. There was another clear patch where a mage had summoned a transparent shield, while more had found shelter by jumping into the tunnel. The soldiers run to help the fallen companions and distribute healing potions, though those would hardly be enough.

“Captain, what are your orders?” Bert was unscathed with the rest of the vanguard guarding the entrance.

Seryne stared at the scene with a transfixed look. “We need to retreat to the camp. Now.”

“What about the wounded?”

“Have someone carry them, we can’t waste time. This is a matter of extreme urgency.” She scanned the devastation with a grimace. “Where is Sargent Makyn?”

Bert avoided her gaze. “The rearguard never reached us. We were still waiting for them when the anomaly appeared.”

“Cursed gods, why can’t anyone do their job? We can’t wait for them.”

“I’ll prepare wounded to be transported, but we might not have enough men to carry everyone and protect ourselves from the basilisk.”

“Then leave the dead behind and get them later. I don’t care how. Just find a way to get us moving.” Seryne waved him away and went back to mutter to herself.

A rising anger woke him from the shock of the event, Kai marched in her way. Keeping himself from shouting in her face was the hardest thing he had done today. Only his worry for Makyn made him maintain a tone of forced politeness. “We’re in the den of a basilisk, you can’t just leave them behind to get eaten. If we send someone to search for the rearguard we’ll have enough people to transport everyone”

“When I’ll need the option of a child, I’ll let you.” She scoffed. “You don’t even understand what’s at stake. This is more important than any one person, I need to contact the mainland immediately to salvage this.”

His nails dug into his palms. Self-control wavering. Would it be so bad to stab an officer of the Republic? To think he had extended his shield to save her from the fire.

*What an idiot.*

Kai was about to vent a long list of curses when he perceived a new group approaching the chamber. Only two people remained from the rearguard, leaking trickles of light.