

Chapter 287 - Thickening Mist

Kai grimaced as the cold air stung his face. Before awareness fully returned to him, his senses scanned across the empty room for threats. He was pleased with how quickly the habits he developed in the Sanctuary returned.

The arrays he had scribbled on the windows and door showed no sign of breaking or manomission, though he knew that wasn't always reliable. Mana Observer spread through every inch of the newly rented house for signs of intrusion.

Separated by a thin wall, Flynn slept, buried in pillows. Rain was missing from the adjacent bedroom, and had already moved to the living space. He sat at the center table, browsing his growing collection of carved animals. When the skill brushed him, he tilted his head and waved through the wall.

How can he always notice...

The warmth of the bed enticed Kai to lay five more minutes and forget about the world. He considered relenting, then his worries crushed the temptation. Hallowed Intuition thrummed, low and ominous. The sign was so subtle he wasn't sure when it had begun, sometime in the two days since visiting the Hall.

Demanding more clarity from the skill would be like asking a fish to recite poetry: utterly pointless. If he focused his Mind, he could brush a sea of tangled murmurs. Danger loomed near with no indication of its nature or when it would strike.

Kai suppressed a shiver when his bare foot touched the cold stone tiles. The day prior an apprentice tanner had gone missing, dispelling any hope that Harry's fiery death had rattled the abductors into hiding. The girl lived in the northern outskirts, there were no witnesses or traces of struggle, just two heartbroken parents worried for their daughter.

If our numbers are right, there are over thirty missing. They must have left a clue somewhere. Where do they bring them...?

The abductors moved like wraiths, coming and going with the mist. A long sigh escaped his lips, creating a fleeting fog in the cold air.

I need to get some heating arrays.

The Red-3 density could sustain enchantments that would have required manual recharging in the archipelago. And empty houses for rent were another thing the town wasn't lacking. Kea's place had been too small to host them permanently. So they found a nearby building that *should* be visible from across the street.

Kai drew back the frayed brown curtain, airy plumes of mist swirled outside the glass panes, an ever-changing pattern of monotonous white. It had been less than a week since they

arrived at the lake of Myst, and he could swear each day was colder than the last. An ever present nuisance as if to remind him he wasn't welcome here.

Don't worry, the feeling is mutual.

He slipped into proper clothes, pressing his lips when the icy shirt touched his skin. The fabric had been enchanted to shield him from the cold, but only *once* he wore it.

Before coming to Limgrell, he had never wished that his Fire affinity were higher—satisfied with his lot—now that was becoming an everyday occurrence. Training was going slow. With his meager talent for the element, it might take months to cast the most basic cantrip.

I'll just buy some heating enchantments. There was an enchanter shop near the square...

He already had too many side projects to engrave arrays himself. Studying the jagged runes he recovered at the tower and the diary from the *Intrepid* took precedence. There were also dozens of places and missing people to check, on top of the list of names they took from Harry. The tasks kept piling up with little reward.

"Morning," Kai walked into the living room.

"Morning. I made you tea!" Rain perched on a high stool, wearing an unbuttoned half-sleeves shirt, unbothered by the cold. He proudly gestured to a steaming cup already set with an underplate and a spoon.

"That's for me?" He took a seat. "Thanks."

The siren grinned with expectant eyes, immune to Limgrell's gloom. "I saw you were awake. And you drink tea every morning."

"Yeah..." Kai sipped the dark amber liquid, hiding a grimace at the sour taste. The leaves had been infused for too long. "It's perfect." He let three sugar cubes drop out of his ring.

"Isn't this what friends do?" Rain beamed. "Uhm... Do you think Flynn will like it too?"

"He'll definitely appreciate it." Kai smiled. After all, it would be cruel to douse such enthusiasm. He was amused to see the siren pick the tea leaves from a tin box one by one. Without turning to look, a cup flew out of a cabinet into his hand carried by three droplets, more water condensed inside and a blue fire sprouted under it.

"Is that Fire Magic...?" He blinked at the brightness.

The siren glanced at the flame heating the cup he was holding as if it wasn't worth mentioning. "I'm not very good at it. Mother said it was a waste of time. You know, there is not much use for fire in the depths."

"I see... then, it's good you're not there anymore," Kai took another sip to drown the spike of jealousy. He had accepted they were born of two different worlds, but damn, did Rain have to beat him at everything?

The unaware siren peered at the strings of bubbles inside the cup with a studious look. "I can teach you if you want. Though I only know a couple basic cantrips."

"I— if it's not a bother." Kai already owed him for staying in this cursed town to help his sister. He would bet his ring the siren definition of *basic* was very different from his own.

"No bother. It'll be fun." Satisfied with the temperature, he added the leaves with fire still going. "Minor affinities can be tough."

Kai bit his tongue seeing Rain butcher another tea with intent focus. They idly chatted about spellcraft till Flynn joined them.

"You both up." His friend stifled a yawn with a hand. His smile turned stiff when he tasted the tea. "That's *good*. Thank you, Rain."

"Really? Think I can try making dinner tonight? I always wanted to try cooking."

Oh, boy... Guess he's not good at everything.

Kai rested his chin on his hand to hide a chuckle. They finished breakfast while Flynn diverted the siren from his culinary endeavors. It was nice to forget the crazy conspiracy infesting Limgrell, even if for just a few minutes.

"I have to go meet Niel." Kai rummaged through his ring for a silver pocket watch—the sun outside would be no help to tell the hour. "I want to visit the location of yesterday's abduction. Maybe there is something they missed."

"Wait up!" Flynn downed the last of the tea and went to grab his coat. "I'll accompany you."

"It's okay. I just have to cross a street."

"People disappeared by crossing a corner. No one moves alone."

"What about Rain?" Kai grabbed his scarf from a chair. "He'll be stuck here by himself."

The siren looked up from smelling the tea box. "I'll be fine." He materialized a pile of human trinkets on the table. "I need to make an inventory of what I've got. And Mari lent me some interesting books to read."

He can probably take care of himself better than us... Memories of a dark forest resurfaced; rain and blood mixed in the mud, and so many bodies. Raih might be sheltered and inexperienced, but he was most definitely not defenseless.

Flynn threw on a black coat and a wide-brim hat. "Okay, stay safe. I'll come back for lunch."

"I'll try cooking something." Rain said with a bright smile.

Guess I'll eat at Kea's house.

"Let's go." As soon as Kai opened the door, wispy tendrils of mist extended like ghostly arms into the house. He hurried outside, struggling to see beyond a few meters in front of him without his skills. "And I thought it couldn't get worse..."

"It's unusual even for those around here." Flynn rubbed his arms. "Kern said it never gets this dense before the peak of winter, if it does at all."

"Kern?"

"Met him at the *Wandering Sage* last night. Nice guy. He mends nets down at the docks And gets really chatty after a few drinks. I think he also hates this town...."

"How did you convince a local to talk?" Kai stood in stunned surprise. "I had to basically beg the vendor to buy a notebook. It was as if they were doing *me* a favor to take my money."

"Have you tried being irresistibly charming?" Flynn winked. His grin never faltered when he was met with silence and a flat look. "The locals aren't so bad, a little paranoid perhaps. But who can blame them? You just gotta show them you're also human. Alcohol helps, especially if you're the one paying."

Bribe and get them drunk. Such sound advice.

An iron fence appeared through the fog, Kai squinted to make out the apartment Kea was renting beyond. A clumsy skill washed over them before the door opened a crack.

"You're early. Come in," Niel threw furtive looks at the mist, quickly shutting the door behind them. His face had grown paler in the last days. "Just give me one minute and I'm ready."

With the new leads to investigate, the house had only grown more messy. Kea and Caeli had left to check the names found at Harry's place. If they located the next victim before the abductors, they could set up an ambush, though the disappearance of the apprentice tanner wasn't boding well. She hadn't been on any list.

"I'll stay here till you're back. Taverns don't fill out before dusk anyway." Flynn went to join Mari hidden by a pile of books and documents, happy to bring on a one-sided conversation with her.

Kai enjoyed the heated house just enough to miss it when they were back on the streets headed for the northern outskirts. Niel walked beside him, his tired gaze on the fog, fiddling with the belt where he kept a short sword.

They walked into the thickening mist, their steps echoed by Hallowed Intuition thrumming.

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Rain stored the carving of a bird with wide grumpy eyes and a hooked beak, the creatures of the surface were all so strange and fuzzy. Pity he couldn't touch a real owl. How did feathers feel? How did it feel to fly?

His mother would slap him for such silly thoughts. Sirens were made for the ocean and nothing else. But she *wasn't* here. The thought clenched his stomach, he still expected one of her guardians to jump out of a cabinet and drag him back.

Weeks had gone by since his escape, but he didn't delude himself into thinking she had given up. Be it a day or a century, defeat wasn't something his mother contemplated. Still, going on dry land had been the right choice.

He was *free*.

The call of the sea bothered him sometimes, a yearning for the waves, like a thirst that could never be sated. A part of him was missing. It wasn't just his innate gifts fading, the world itself seemed to lose its glimmer, his senses growing duller.

There was a reason if exile on the land was a punishment on par with death, and far more shameful. Eventually, he would need to return to embrace the deep or go mad with the *rattles*. It might take years if he was lucky. He heard of sirens spending decades on land, but not on their first outings. Perhaps that was his mother's plan?

She'll wait a long time then.

Rain fidgeted with the shells on his bracelet. A pale conch veined in gold—Leima's gift—carried wards to hide him from dozens of scrying schools of magic. The array was too intricate for him to make out and more valuable than the spatial silver shell. Yet, he didn't doubt his mother would find a way around it, especially if he touched the sea where sirens' magic was stronger.

Rain shook his head, he was being silly. What was the point of leaving the sea if he still lived in her shadow?

His mother would always scheme, he had simpler and more direct problems to face. He promised Kai to help his sister, and Kea was honor-bound to recover her teammate before they could leave.

Hmm... are they making a move?

A presence had been spying on them for the past day. Rain hoped they would get hasty and strike if he were alone, but they kept their distance. And now the spy was gone entirely.

He waited in case it was some kind of test, leafing through a bestiary of landbound creatures. A dozen pages later, he was sure the presence wasn't coming back to target him.

Pity. What are they waiting for?

Villains always attacked the protagonist in novels, and half of the stories he read were old reports of actual events. Why were these abductors so incompetent? Should he go out into the mists? There had been disappearances inside houses as long as the target was alone.

Depth. I should have expected some deviation in real life...

Shady conspiracies and cults worshiping fallen gods were another subject he had studied, be it in stories or from eavesdropping on his mother's private meetings. Though he never thought they'd be quite so *frustrating* to flush out.

The pesky presence refused to commit to a proper assault. Could they know it was a trap? No, he had been careful not to reveal any hint of his skills since coming to this gloomy town. If the prey wasn't taking the bait, he'd just have to find another way.

The fog was growing denser outside, but vapor was just water: only fools would use water against a siren. Rain glanced at the empty cups on the table. He had said he'd stay in this shack till they returned, but he needed to leave if he wanted to help Kea and keep his promise.

I'll come back before they do.

He pulled the teacups in the sink. Something had gone wrong brewing with the tea, though he wasn't sure exactly *what*. Both Kai and Flynn had lied to save his feelings. That was... *odd*, and also nice in a weird way. Strangeness seemed a persistent characteristic of land creatures and culture.

Don't get distracted.

Rain pinched his cheek, he had a mission to accomplish. Marching to his room, he laid his land clothes on the bed, those they bought in Varsea and a few he found at the market. Everything here was so cheap.

How many should I wear? I should have asked Flynn...

The air outside was warm compared to the depths, but humans had strange taboos about going around naked. He wanted to wear an appropriate number of layers to not call attention to himself. Two shirts, an enchanted leather coat and three scarves should do it? Maybe a hat or two? Kai often complained about the cold.

Better to exceed. At most, I'll store them in a conch.

Donned into an appropriate number of clothings, Rain tightly tied the laces of his boots. It had been a week since he tripped himself, and he intended to keep his streak. Feet were

clumsy compared to fins, but that was more a result of moving through air and not water, locked to skulk on the ground like a crab.

You're getting distracted again.

A thousand land curiosities always called his attention. He grabbed another hat for good measure; it was made of blue wool with a fuzzy ball on top. Ready, he walked into the mist outside toward the Hall of Seekers.

There was another lead Kai had mentioned and suddenly abandoned. From the snippets Rain overheard, he had an inkling about what was going on.