

Chapter 297 - Hunting Shadows

“Turn right a little.” Caeli gestured starboard from the prow of the boat, her face buried in the blotchy map. She had taken charge of navigation since she possessed the only Orientation skill.

Kai followed the directions the best he could in the uniform swirling white. Paddling one side and the other with a single oar, his arms burned from hours of rowing through the shrouded lake.

They had tried crafting an oar from the willows, but the mana-rich wood attracted unwanted critters from the water. The detours to avoid whispers of danger hadn't helped with the tension. He channeled Body Augmentation to ease his burden, too prideful to let Kea take over. The vessel wasn't made to be sailed with one oar, and two would probably still be too few.

Damned stingy sailors.

“I said to turn right *slightly!*” Caeli waved her arm in the other direction. “Now turn a few degrees left.”

“My bad.” Kai bit his cheek, keeping his cool despite the mounting irritation. Everyone was cranky and aching after half a day crammed on board.

They had visited two more islands, both larger than the first, both empty of any sign of the cultists. Lost in the perennial fog, Kai wondered if they would ever find anything. Perhaps he and Valela had misinterpreted a clue, and the Sygian Circle had hidden miles away or wasn't involved at all.

“I see something...” Flynn squinted at the mist. Hobbes napped in his lap, occasionally turning to receive a few pets.

“You're right,” Rain raised his gaze from pondering the lake surface. “There's an island.”

His words jolted the group to attention. The siren remained in a strange blue mood, vaguely gazing at the water. Kea's team didn't know his real identity, but there was no way to hide his casual demeanor in a high mana zone. If they were alone, Kai knew his sister would question him.

Caeli furrowed her brows, studying the map and the fog. Her face distended in relief. “Yes! This is the one!”

That's the same thing you said for the last two.

“Are you sure?” Kai tried not to sound skeptical as he adjusted the course for the third time.

When he tried looking at the waxed map, Caeli folded the paper closed and put it in a pocket. "I am. My brother must be here."

From the conviction in her brown eyes, he couldn't help feeling pity. A month of fruitless search had notably shrunk his hopes of finding the missing people alive. *Still*, if they unmasked the culprits, they could at least stop those madmen from harming more innocents.

I owe Niel at least that.

Enhancing his sight with Body Augmentation, Kai made out a cluster of rocks jutting out of the lake. A shiny black algae grew like a spider web over them. Beyond, the dark cobble shore of an island gave upon leafy trees with drooping branches.

The air was saturated with mana, blue motes fluttered in dazzling patterns mixed with the paler shades of Air mana. It had been since his time in the Hidden Sanctuary that he didn't experience such density.

Spirits be damned, I missed this.

His skin tingled upon brushing those colorful streams. Despite the seeping cold, each breath was like a rush into his lungs. It made him feel alive, more than he had been in weeks.

"Go there," Caeli woke him from the revelry, pointing to a spot where the water was deeper. She hadn't looked nearly as radiant when they found the previous islands. A bright smile now lit her face, months of gloominess swept away.

Does she really believe we're in the right place?

Kai shook his head. Maneuvering the rowboat without getting beached took all his attention. The fourteen years he spent in the archipelago made him familiar with fishing vessels, but he was no sailor.

"You must paddle harder on the left to keep us steady." Kea watched the oar with a critical eye. "I can do it if you're tired."

"Thanks. I got it." He exhaled sharply. "I just need a moment."

"We're wobbling."

"I can see that." Kai gripped the oar with both hands to push them away from the rocks.

A sprinkle of Water Magic could easily carry them to shore—if he hadn't agreed not to cast *unnecessary* spells. Wards weren't the only danger. The beasts inhabiting the mist seemed particularly sensitive to magic, evoking sharp whispers of danger.

Sweat cooling on his brow, Kai sailed past the jutting rocks toward the beach. When the keel rested upon the bottom, they wasted no time stepping into the cold water and dragging the vessel on the dark cobble shore. It was almost routine.

Icy water drenched his legs, not any more pleasant than in the morning. He walked stiffly, goosebumps on his back. Expanding his Mana Observer to encompass the island, the shoreline continued beyond what his senses could grasp.

They secured the boat against a bush of dark green ivy. Kai curbed his impulse to cast Nature Magic to hide the vessel. The no-magic rule irked him, but he had already committed this far. It was *curious* to notice how often he reached for a spell without thought.

Am I too reliant on it?

Kai sat on the levigated cobbles to empty his boots and wring his trousers.

"I can fetch some firewood to warm up." Flynn gestured to the dense vegetation. "A warm meal would be nice too. We have barely eaten anything."

Kea unloaded her backpack from the boat. "Hmm... We could take a pause—"

"There is no time to waste." Caeli looked at the greenery, the spark of excitement in her tone clashing with their unenthusiastic faces. "We're close. I can feel it. And we should still check if we're safe before making a fire."

That's a sensible compromise...

If this island proved deserted, he could freely cast spells, practice Fire and maybe Space. He was close to maxing Astral Pathway, the last hurdle for his profession. While there might be a lesson in learning how to cope without magic, that didn't mean he had to practice now.

Kea looked about to speak when he stepped back. "Okay, I'll scout the area."

"We should go together," Caeli said. "This island looks larger than the others. We must remain close enough to help if something happens."

"Yeah, I'll watch her back." Kai stood up, stretching his legs before they went numb. Trekking through wet weeds and mud didn't appeal to him much, but the sooner they were done with this, the sooner he could warm up.

"And who's going to watch *your* back?" Caeli scowled. "We came as a team. And I've grown up near the woods. Kea, you know I'm a great tracker too."

"I... yes." Kea sighed. "It's just faster with the two of us."

"And what if those criminals attack you?" Caeli huffed. She had stayed behind without arguments on the previous islands; now she crossed her arms and barred their way.

Flynn rubbed his arms beside Rain. His silent glance said he agreed on staying together.

Does she really believe her brother is here? Alive...?

Faced with the determination and hope in her expression, Kai couldn't find the energy to turn her down. The guilt for Niel ate at him, barely held in check by the desire to bring down the cultis.

Spirits, protect him. He stayed out of loyalty even if he was scared. Niel shouldn't pay for this.

"Fine." Kea broke away from Caeli's gaze. "We'll go together." She surveyed the group like a commander looking at a green platoon. "Stay close behind me. Don't wander off for any reason and watch where I step. We can't lower our guard. I don't—"

"No words. No coughs. No sounds." Mari said sternly. Her face was still pale from the injured arm in a sling, softened by a rueful smile. "If you have to say something that can't wait, tap once and wait for the safe signal. Tap twice if you spot a track. And *three* times for danger."

She stood up and leaned on her staff. "Did I forget something? Remember we agreed on those rules together. I'm sure the newbies know them too."

"Yeah..." Kea set her jaw. "We can go—"

"Meeoow," Hobbes called attention to his bedding amidst the leather bags. Waking from his nap, he arched his body and stretched his paws. The ivory claws extended, scratching parallel grooves in the wood of the boat with no effort. Even his fluffy silver tail straightened before swinging down in a lazy arc.

Pleased to see them stand at attention, he acknowledged their existence with a yawn, pink tongue and fangs included. Thoughts of fresh fish and a petting session flowed through the bond.

"Mew." He sprawled on a bag, paws up and large violet eyes watching him upside down.

Oh, don't you play cute with me. I told you we'd be in a dangerous area. We can't stop for brunch.

"Meeew," The regal furball licked his paw, denouncing his disappointment with the accommodations.

Yeah, yes. I know there are fish in the lake. But... No, I can't get you one right now. The water is freezing. Not to mention we're supposed to lay low.

Hobbes abandoned all pretense of cuteness and squared him up with a grumpy glare. "Mrooow."

Sulking won't help. C'mon, I'll find you a snack once we secure this island.

The promise of food appeased his royal moodiness. Righting himself up, Hobbes leaped to Flynn's shoulders and slumped around his neck like a fluffy silver scarf.

"I know. It's not fair." Flynn cooed over him quietly, slipping a piece of salted fish and scratching behind his ear. "Isn't that better?"

"Meww."

Stop enabling that spoiled brat. Kai shot them an exasperated look.

Flynn winked unapologetically. "Don't be envious 'cause I came prepared. "

"Alright," Kea cleared her throat. "The no-sound policy goes for pretty furballs too."

Despite her apparent cold demeanor, her arm half raised to pet the lustrous silver fur before she could pull it back down. With quick commands, she put the team into formation and rehearsed the scouting rules for good measure.

"Make sure your cat behaves." Caeli tapped her foot on the cobbles. "C'mon, my brother's waiting."

"And Niel too," Kai said, petting Hobbes—just to get back at his familiar. The spoiled little kitten understood the situation too well if he bothered to accommodate them.

"Of course, Niel too," Caeli waved it off as if it was a given. "We can save everybody."

Yeah...

Stepping into the foggy woods, Kai joined his sister and Caeli while the others followed a few steps behind. They advanced with caution around the outer edge of the woods. Whispers and humming grew in a discordant melody he couldn't decipher.

The dark cobbles ended in a rocky outcrop that forced them to head inward. Kai scanned the lush vegetation. The muggy ground rose at a steep incline, red beasts nesting in the trees and ground fled at their approach. Vibrant Nature motes swirled in the air, while Shadow slipped from his sight.

Away from human touch and rich with essence, plants thrived. Several orange herbs, roots and mushrooms glimmered in the underbrush. Treasure Sense wanted to pull him in a dozen different directions. He memorized the locations to retrieve a few samples later.

No yellow ingredients. Pity... Well, I shouldn't be too greedy.

They trekked for half an hour without encountering danger, the size of the island exceeded their grasp. Caeli took the lead to keep track of their position with her skill and since Kea was too tired to argue her down.

"He must be here..." Her murmurs got lost in the dripping and rustles of the wood.

There were no signs people had ever come here. No paths, trampled weeds or hints of buildings. Kai focused Mana Observer in a tight area and let the rest of the world fall in the background, vainly hoping to perceive a rune of enchantment.

Spirits, this one's deserted too...

It would take weeks to explore the Lake of Myst fully—if the cultists were even here. How many more islands would they explore? Their supplies couldn't last longer than a week, ten days if stretched thin.

In a mana zone, it wasn't a question of *if*, but *when* something would go wrong. The rowboat could get damaged, or they could run into any of the nasty inhabitants of the mist. Kai himself wasn't ready to give up, but his practical side looked ahead.

What if the search failed?

The only thing worse than giving up on Niel was pushing his friends and family in danger. Kea would be too stubborn to admit defeat.

Someone has to think of an exit plan... If I have to be the bad guy, so be it.

He would bring it up once they were done with the exploration. Caeli couldn't chew his head off if her promises ended in another disappointment.

Skulking past a field of bushes with a zesty smell, they entered a meadow of lilac flowers.

Hmm... Something's off...

Trusting his gut, Kai split his mind to pick apart what gave him the impression. The whispers remained an indistinguishable noise, not any louder. There were no predators lying in ambush, and the flowers didn't look poisonous either.

His companions followed behind, Mari was the loudest with her injury, Flynn the quietest. Rain closed the line, studying the grass and wild weeds. Ahead of him, Kea and Caeli exchanged a series of quick hand gestures to decide where to go. None of them appeared hurt or alerted.

Am I imagining things? What is it... This is too peaceful...

It wasn't the presence of threats as much as the lack of them. Despite the mana density, he hadn't spotted any beast over Red since arriving on the island.

Is it another strangeness of the mist?

Elydes didn't always follow logic when a high concentration of mana—

“...down,” Kea hissed and tackled him to the ground.

Uh?

Unsure what was going on, Kai let himself fall on the dewy grass without a sound of protest. A pair of squelching steps and muffled voices soon came from the distance, freezing his breath in the chest. He didn't dare twitch a finger, his head buried in the cold weeds and lilac flowers that filled the air with a sweet scent.

How...

He had narrowed down Mana Observer to watch deeper and blinded himself. Hallowed Intuition should have warned him, but the whispers of danger barely fluttered. Not thirty meters ahead, a pair of figures clad in black stalked into the meadow, muttering to themselves.

“—longer in this dumphole?”

“Till the praetor's satisfied. Uhm, I think we've collected enough—”

Their voices became too indistinguishable to make out, their shadow disappearing behind a gray pine. With his sister on top of him, Kai wouldn't be able to move even if he were mad enough to risk it.

Did we actually walk into a warded area?

A thousand questions begged his mind for consideration, deafened by the desire for the safety of his companions. Flynn, Mari and Rain were too far back to get spotted—at least he hoped so.

Kai and Kea stayed still for minutes, only hearing each other thumping hearts.

“Get up, they're gone.” Caeli broke the quiet. Standing up in front of them, her eyes glittered with joy. “I told you they were here! We can save my brother and Niel.”

“Lower your tone,” Kea hissed. Her eyes darted to scan the woods with her bow in hand.

“Relax, we're alone. Sounds don't travel far in the mist. We can't let the track grow cold.” Caeli strode where the pair of cultists had disappeared without giving her a chance to replay.

“Wait! We can't—” Kea huffed to no effect and ran after her across the meadow.

Curses! She can't save anyone if she gets herself killed.

Mari stumbled toward them, face pale. “Were those people really...” She shivered, holding her staff as if that were the only thing that kept her standing.

“Are you okay?” Flynn moved more cautiously. Hobbes studied the woods from his shoulders.

“Yes, I’m fine. I— Oh, dammit. Follow me.” Kai gritted his teeth and ran before his sister could fade into the fog.

Caeli had stopped where the meadow gave way to gnarly gray trees. “I swear, I saw them go here...” She paced in a circle, examining a handful of broken stalks. Her hands pulled her dark hair.

“It’s okay.” Kea gently touched her back. “We’ll figure this out.”

“I know what I saw. They stood right here. I—” Caeli ran her fingers along the dull gray bark of the tallest tree.

Mana fluttered, weeds and earth parted without noise to form a circular opening. A stone staircase spiraled into the ground, hidden in darkness.