

Chapter 296 - Lost in the Mist

The rowboat scraped against the bottom of the lake, coming to a halt a few meters from where the willow branches dipped into the water. Kai stretched Mana Observer over the island as far as the shrouding mist allowed.

Trepidation mixed with anxiety. His knuckles whitened, gripping the sword. From what he could see, there was nothing except trees and critters that barely touched upon Red, already retreating in their dens at their approach.

The surge of relief made his shoulder slackened. He loosened his grip on the leather hilt when annoyance poked his gut. There were hundreds of islets in the lake, but some part of him still expected to find the cultist. It wouldn't be the most ridiculous coincidence caused by his Favor.

Would I even recognize if we were in the right place...?

It wasn't as if the cultists would leave a sign: *'Turn right at the second tree stump and knock on the mossy rock for the Evil Hideout. P.S. Please, take off your shoes before entering. P.P.S. Use the second entrance to deposit kidnapped innocents.'*

A brief check confirmed there were indeed no welcome signs—how disappointing. Hallowed Intuition hummed a vague closeness to his goal, but no significant danger.

Kai didn't lower his guard. Skills and arrays had already proved they could interfere with his ability. He retracted Mana Observer too. Rarely anybody noticed his subtle touch, even among people at Yellow, but that didn't mean never. A living exception sat across from him.

Rain let his hand hang overboard, drawing circles on the water with an absent expression.

"So... what are we waiting for?" Caeli said. "The boat's stuck. We're not going to find anyone from here."

Her voice made Mari jolt away from the rim. Everyone had been lost studying the misty vegetation beyond the weeping willow. Droplets slipped off its branches and *pattered* into the lake.

Almost unconsciously, Kai looked at Rain and received a slight shake—no danger he could detect either.

When have I started looking at him for security? Kai bit his cheek.

Delegating his safety to someone else was a dangerous habit. For all of Rain's kindness and goofy hobbies, Kai didn't entirely understand him—or what he was capable of. Sometimes he acted like a sheltered teen, others like an indifferent executioner. From what they knew, the siren might get tired of the surface and swim back to the sea any day.

Well, we're stuck in the same boat. So that is a problem for future-Kai...

"Keep your voice down." Kea murmured to Caeli, crouching low in the boat. Her tanned leather corset and cloak blended with the bags and wooden boards as she activated her camouflage skill. "We don't know who's watching."

"There isn't anyone here," Caeli said but lowered her tone. "We won't run into the missing on the first try. And this island is too small for a hideout anyway."

Kea squinted at the willow as if the answers to their questions hid in its gnarly bark. "We can't know for sure."

"Hmm... Fair point," Caeli squatted beside her friend. "What do you propose we do?"

"I'll scout the area to see if it's safe," Kea leaned forward. "By myself, I've fewer chances of being detected. If you don't hear me in five minutes, take the boat and run."

Kai put a hand on her shoulder before she could dash. "I should go then. I'm as good as you at concealing my presence. And I've got better skills to detect danger."

"You—" Kea scowled at his hand till he pulled it back. "How good are you at distinguishing tracks? You must know what to look for to scout properly."

"I've spent as much time as you in the wild."

"Maybe. But how many people have you tracked?" She arched an eyebrow in challenge.

Kai pursed his lips. He had plenty of practical experience with beasts, not so much with humans. *This is what I get for telling her about the Sanctuary. Why's she always such a stubborn clam?* "I still—"

"Arguing won't help us pass unobserved." Flynn stepped between them, shushing them with a finger. "We'll go together."

"What—"

"No."

"Look around us," Flynn gestured to the placid lake. Only faint ripples from their boat and the drops from the willow wrinkled the surface. "How far can we run with one oar and no idea of where we are? If they catch one of us, we'll have a better chance to defend ourselves together than to run."

"The pretty boy speaks some sense," Caeli sharply nodded. "It's better if we don't separate."

"Uhm... Thanks." Flynn raised a hand to anticipate any protest. "You two can still scout ahead, *agreed?*"

It does make the most sense.

“Agreed,” Kai said, grateful for the intervention. He got riled up too easily when Kea was involved.

His sister shifted her weight back into the rowboat. “We'll go with your plan.”

“Good.” Flynn showed a hint of a smile. “We should drag the boat to shore. I don't want to find it got dragged away by some lake monster. And stuck here.”

“I— yes. That's a good idea.” Kea pulled back a lock of hair.

When no one else objected, she slipped into the knee-deep water and offered a hand to Mari's uninjured side. Without their weight, the rowboat lifted off the rocky bottom.

Caeli and Rain moved next. Flynn shivered when he stepped into the lake, but didn't complain and leaned lower to hide his figure.

This is why people build piers.

Kai considered leaping on shore—a somersault would be hardly subtle. Full of resignation, he followed the others and rigidly froze when the icy water dripped into his boots, soaking his socks and trousers.

Spirits, I hate the cold. Why can't cults set up their torture chambers in a warm inn?

Each time he got used to the drops in temperature, an increase in Perception made the sensation sharper. A sploosh at his back made him look over his shoulder. A lustrous dark-blue fin crested the lake less than twenty meters away before diving back, a shadow through the veil of mist.

“No sudden movements,” he hissed, forgetting the unpleasant cold.

Dammit. The array on the boat only cloaked us, while we stayed on it.

The creature lingered beneath the surface, swimming in sinuous motion. Dense stream of high-yellow essence flowed within its elongated body. It would have been a dangerous opponent on land. In its home environment, Kai wasn't sure he could protect himself, much less his friends. Not to mention, a fight would broadcast their position well beyond this island.

“What—” Mari widened her eyes when she glimpsed the shadow. She gripped her staff, ready to sprint or cast a spell.

“Walk ahead. Slowly,” Kai kept his tone forcefully calm. With her slinged arm, Mari would only hinder them.

She bobbed her head and moved with a stuttering step toward shore.

A look at his companions was enough to reach an agreement. They followed after her, dragging the boat between them. Each step seemed to take a lifetime, straggling between cautiousness and the desire to run.

The keel of the lightened vessel scraped the shore again. Mari risked slipping on the loamy floor but leveraged on her staff and the willow branches to climb out of the lake. Caeli pulled herself out, failing to hide her urgency so close to safety.

“C’mon.” Kai gestured to Kea to go next.

His sister stubbornly hesitated, looking back.

“C’mon, help me lift the boat,” Flynn grabbed the rim of the vessel and put one boot on the rocky shore.

“That can wait. We must get to safety first.”

“With that *thing* stalking us, the boat is our only means of escape. We can’t risk it. Can you lift the other side?”

“Uh, okay...” Kea strained to lift the vessel using one arm. The other held her belt knife, ready for action.

The lake creature floated in apparent stillness beneath the surface. Part of its body hidden beyond his senses. Kai didn’t dare look too closely for fear of provoking it.

Beside him, Rain stared at the water with a melancholic air, incurant of the threat. “You needn’t worry. She won’t attack while I’m here.” His words were barely a murmur beneath the droplets falling from the willow. “She’s just curious about me.”

Kai blinked, unsure if he had heard right. “*She?*”

“Uh, yes,” Rain distractedly glanced behind him. “She’s female. A kelpie of some kind. I’m not familiar with the species. They’re a rare breed at sea.”

What...

By the time Kai trusted himself to speak coherently, the siren had climbed out of the water, stepping on the lake silt as if it were solid ground. His gaze was lost in thought.

Why didn’t he tell me that sooner?

Kai spared a look at the creature swimming not far behind him.

You’re not going to drown me if I look away, right?

A bubble broke the surface above the beast. Kai had no idea if kelpies could read minds if it was a coincidence or a sign of hunger. Whatever the answer, he hurried to push the stern of the boat out and join his friends out of the water.

Knowing a line of dirt wouldn't stop a high-yellow grade, they delved deeper among the mossy rocky and willow roots. A few seconds later, the kelpie swam a circle and dove beyond his range.

"Are we safe?" Caeli watched the waters, her posture tense and ready to jolt.

"Yeah... I think it's gone." Kai helped secure the boat among the willow trees. No one else had heard Rain's comments. It was probably for the best. He'd rather not explain how his mysterious friend knew the pond creature was a *she*.

Throughout it all, Hobbes continued napping among their bags, pawing the air. No beast, siren or human could disturb a cat's sacred time.

You're such a spoiled baby. A warm fuzzy feeling flooded their bond in response. And it's totally my fault.

"Guess that fish beast wasn't hungry." Flynn leaned his back against a willow trunk.

"Yeah, we got lucky," Caeli gave a wary glance at the lake. "We better get moving before something else finds us."

"I'll scout ahead. You wait here." Kea didn't wait for a reply, pushing the sweeping willow branches aside to walk in deeper.

"Wait," Kai grabbed his scabbard from the boat and nearly slipped on a root in the rush to follow.

"You're making too much noise, *Mat*."

"It would help if I didn't have to run after you."

Kea opened her mouth for a snappy response, then closed it. "Sorry. I'm nervous." The word came out like a strangled whisper, her face hidden behind the leaves of a young willow.

Did she just apologize to me?

"It's okay. Just give me a moment to dry." Kai crouched, focusing not to ruin his boots and clothes. Before he could release the spell, Kea grabbed his arm.

"Don't use mana outside your body. No unnecessary spells till we scout the area."

"What?"

“It’s too risky. You know raw spells are easier to detect than presences or skills.” Kea said and peered at a wild bellflower growing over a granite rock. “We could already be inside a ward.”

“I... Yes, but...” Kai swallowed, resigning to his freezing feet.

During his time in the Sanctuary, he had snooped around wards that could read even intentions. Those years felt like a separate world—a blurred dream—he hadn’t considered he would run into similar enchantments here. “What about Shadow Magic?”

“Only as a last resort,” Kea said, reactivating her camouflage skill. “You can also wait here.”

“Yeah, not a chance,” Kai scooped a handful of cold mud and smeared it over his face—spirits how much he hated it. But he had learned how to Sneak long before spells. Shadow Magic was more effective the more inconspicuous he looked, so he never truly stopped practicing. “Lead the way.”

“Don’t fall behind.” Kea shrugged and skulked into a shrub of bluish ferns. The air smelled of wet earth and lush greens. Her figure melded into the vegetation, an indistinguishable blotch of color.

He knelt and crept through wet weeds, keeping track of his sister with Mana Observer. The ground was muggy and soaked like his clothes. The cold couldn’t hurt him at his grade, but that didn’t mean he didn’t feel it. Icy needles pricked his skin, the temperature was low enough he thought the lake would freeze.

Next time we’re going to a sunny desert, or a volcano.

They circled the outer edge of the emerged land. Channeling mana provided an illusion of warmth that helped him stop shivering. Mist shrouded the trees and shrubbery. A red kingfisher flew away when he bent a branch in the underbrush.

Kai used Body Augmentation to sharpen his senses. There was nothing he couldn’t expect to find on a creepy island inside a mystic lake.

Hallowed Intuition whispered softly. Given the circumstances, he would worry more if it went entirely quiet. He pushed his senses into the ground. Only dirt, roots and some strange hibernating insect he decided not to examine too closely.

Slipping past a thorny bush, they ventured deeper in at a slight incline. A bony white willow no taller than a man grew in the center of the island. The tree glowed with dense mana, though the spotlight was taken by the water lilies floating in a pond between his roots.

“Did you find something?” Kea asked, noticing he had stopped.

“Yup! Three Yellow-tier herbs.” Kai grinned back at her glare. “*What?* There is no one else here.”

From here, he could cover the entire island with Mana Observer. The relatively small size would have been apparent if it wasn't for the fog.

"I'm certain. They aren't here." He stood up and cleaned himself of mud and water with a flick of his wrist, rubbing his arms for warmth. "See? Hallowed Intuition still isn't reacting. We're alone. You can tell the others it's safe. I'll harvest the herbs and join you."

My Favor is worth something at least.

Kea observed her surroundings for a few more seconds before standing up with a snort. "We aren't here to make a quick buck." She dusted her clothes off.

"It'll take a minute to harvest them. You'd rather I leave free gold coins on the ground?"

Kea threw a second look toward the white willow. "How much are they worth, *exactly*?"

"I'm not familiar with this plant..." Kai hid his smile. "But at least a gold mesar. Maybe more. I'll give you fifty percent if I sell them."

"A *gold* piece... Remember, you agreed this was my investigation. For anything recovered during a job, a third goes to the team fund," she said, nonchalant. "I'll take the second third. Now I better tell the others we're alone. Maybe we can figure out where we are from that damn map."

Swindled by my own sister. He beamed, watching her stride away. *Though I only offered a share if I sold them. She has much to learn...*

Humming to himself, the vegetation writhed and moved to open a path for him to the pond. The blue mana flowing into the water lilies made his mind buzz with the potential uses. No, they wouldn't reach the market. The pale willow itself could fetch a decent price if he had the space and time to move it.

Kai closed his eyes to conjure a flickering flame and warmed his hands. The amount of focus required for such a puny Fire spell was disheartening—still more than he could cast a month ago.

Flexing his fingers, he fished the water lilies out of the pond, careful not to break their delicate roots, and stored them in his ring. He had spotted a dozen more mana plants across the island, nothing beyond Orange.

Another time perhaps.

As long as he survived, he'd get more chances for sightseeing. Finding Niel, Caeden and all the other missings came first.

Kai headed back to their boat. His companions huddled around the patchwork map they pieced together from fishermen's stories. Their voices rose in discussion. Rain stood aside, sat on a rock with his feet dipped in the lake.

“It looks more like this one,” Mari grumbled.

“I tell you. We’re here,” Caeli pointed to a different smear on the waxed paper. “It’s the same island.”

“Are you sure?” Flynn tilted his head, studying the picture with a furrow. “It doesn’t look very similar.”

“That’s because the sailor who described it was drunk,” Caeli snorted. “The size and distance from the shore match. We’re here. Close to three islands we marked as potential locations.”