

Chapter 270 - The Lorvyn Woods

Spruces, elms and oaks soared like ancient wooden pillars, letting scant rays of light through their wide canopies. The air smelled of pine and resin. There was a sort of tranquility in being back in the wild that Kai couldn't quite explain.

The Lorvyn Woods carried little familiarity with Veeryd—or the lush jungles of the Hidden Sanctuary. The dense mana leaned more toward Earth and Nature, while Water was sparse. Even the creaking of wood sounded drier. Dark green ferns, entwined weeds and wildflowers dotted the underbrush among fallen leaves and branches.

Kai threaded at the tail of the group, stretching his neck to take in his surroundings. Mana Observer had already spotted a patch of pseudo-mana herbs and a red viper nestled in the shade of a bush.

Guess we'll spend the night here...

"Let's move." Daniel rested a hand on the hilt of his knife, carefully prodding his way down a slope. "We need to find a place to camp while we still have light."

"Are you sure they won't follow us?" Kai stepped on gnarly roots jutting out of the ground. Aside from the eerie vibes, there were few other deterrents.

"Yes, only madmen would venture inside a mana zone at night when the predators come out to hunt," the man stated like it was elementary knowledge. "And I'm not just talking about packs of orange creatures, yellow beasts also stray from the inner regions. If you call attention to yourself, it will be mutually assured destruction at best."

Am I back to the Sanctuary?

Kai opted for a diplomatic nod. Most humans struggled to defeat beasts at their grade, and he would also be put to the test if it were a particularly strong species. Some awakened animals grew positively massive at Yellow, or worse, learned to use their innate magic.

I'm not alone. I can't just flee if we run into a wyvern...

People could be an asset and a burden. He had done some light sparring with Flynn when they were in Sylspring, but not enough to prepare them for real life and death struggles. That didn't even consider the other two members of their groups.

Daniel had been hired as a guide and was unlikely to risk his neck for them. As for Rain, the siren would be unpredictable in a fight, in terms of power and teamwork.

Guess we'll figure it out on the go. Or die trying...

Kai was growing a fond appreciation for Dora's old insistence on doing things in the proper order. A single jump ahead had quickly devolved into a series of dubious decisions.

"We'll be alright." Rain gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I've never been to this place before, but it doesn't look too dangerous."

The siren strolled through the woodlands, running his fingers along the bark of a birch as if it were a live exposition. He picked up a pinecone with fascination, smelled it like a flower and added it to the stash of land souvenirs in his backpack.

"Moons have mercy..." Daniel grumbled under his breath. "We must pick up the pace while there is still light."

The adventurer guided them around an owl napping in the hollow of a tree, and a mole rat burrowed under a mound. Both beasts were in the middle of Orange.

The steady rise of ambient mana sank a little cautiousness in Kai's mood.

Entering the Lorvyn Woods had barely slowed the pulsing whispers. The constant prodding at his mind was starting to get on his nerves.

Will they follow us right up to Limgrell?

He *almost* wished the wannabe bandits would catch up to them to get rid of the nuisance.

How strong can they be?

Trekking into the woods, the sun became a soft glow among the treetops. Dark shadows grew between shrubs and crannies to herald the coming darkness. Daniel took out an enchanted light covered by a sheet of iron that illuminated a single direction.

Hmm... that's a good idea.

"We'll camp here." The man stopped in a narrow clearing among a group of oaks vying for space. The branches had grown to form a dome; their thick roots only let moss and lichen grow.

"Here...?" Flynn held up a similar light. The clearing looked no better than another dozen spots they had passed and not particularly defensible.

"Not here, *here*." Daniel pointed towards the wide crown of the oaks. "Sleeping above ground will let us avoid most of the predators. Do you all know how to climb?" He pulled a coil of ropes from his bag, his gaze lingering on Rain.

The siren studied the trees with his head tilted. "I just need to pull myself up there, right?"

“Yeah...” The seeker gave him another odd look before opting to ignore it. “Okay, let’s set this up. Do you have experience securing a camp?”

Kai clamped his mouth shut—Matthew had most definitely never gone in the wild. And shaping trunks with Nature Magic must not be what Daniel had in mind.

“I had some, but on the ground.” Flynn raised his hand.

“Good enough.” The man pulled more ropes and a mottled green canvas enchanted with cloaking runes. “If you need to relieve yourself, go now in pairs. And gather some branches on the way back. We’ll need to conceal the shelter.”

Daniel barked orders to Kai and Flynn and swiftly climbed the bark to look for an appropriate spot. The mana density had made branches grow larger than trunks.

They found a flat nook near the center of the crowns. Numerous layers of leaves already covered it; they bent more branches to conceal it from every angle and tied the mottle canvas to shield them from the weather.

Rain came up last, pulling himself up with hands alone. His fingers dug into the bark as if it were cardboard, leaving tiny, neat holes. “That was easier than expected.” He hopped on the shelter with a grin.

He might as well lean into the noble scion lacking commoner’s sense at this point...

“Hmm...” Daniel stared blankly at Rain and turned toward the boring humans. “Tie yourself to the tree. I’m not dragging your body to Limgrell if you break your neck.”

A rumble of thunder made them look at the sky. The night would be even less comfortable than they expected. The cap was quite narrow for four people, though well camouflaged.

No one brought up the idea of lighting a fire. They dined on salted fish, cheese and hardened bread. “Don’t let any crumbs fall.” The seeker watched them like a hawk. “Bears and wolves have a good sense of smell. You’re lucky the rain will wash away our tracks and our smell.”

The cowl of clouds hastened the arrival of the night, throwing them in pitch-black darkness without a moon. A single pale crystal covered by a cloth was the only light allowed.

“We’ll take three guard shifts. If you notice something suspicious *don’t* shout. Just wake me up to check. I’ll take the last shift, three hours before dawn. Everything’s clear?” Receiving their nods, the man secured himself to a branch and wrapped a blanket around himself. “Good night.”

Daniel had once again overlooked Rain. Perhaps convinced the white-haired was the only true noble-born, and they some sort of retinue.

It's probably not that far from the truth.

The siren was too intent on studying a mana acorn to notice—or perhaps he also considered this normal.

He's definitely not the son of some kelp farmer...

"I'll take the middle watch," Kai offered. His grade meant he needed the least sleep among the three.

"Are you sure?" Despite his attempts to hide it, Flynn looked already worn out by the march. The teen always preferred cities to the wild and must not have crossed many jungles in the last two years.

"Yup. Wake me up in a couple of hours." Kai lay down near the edge of the makeshift platform to avoid protests.

As he rested his head on his bag, the pitter-patter of the rain announced the coming storm. The waxed mottled canvas repaired them from the downpour, though it couldn't stop every stray droplet bouncing on the leaves.

Kai sorely missed the dry shelters he cast in the living wood of trees. Even if he disregarded his new identity to create one, those took hours to complete. Carving one in the rock would have been faster, if there was any nearby.

Give me back my mattress. I didn't miss this one bit.

He tightened his thin blanket around himself. If there was one discomfort the Sanctuary lacked, it was the cold—if you stayed away from the Spike. Used to the warmth of the archipelago, he had underestimated how low the temperature would drop. Madame Le Garde had done a great job padding their clothes for the weather, but the enchantments couldn't compete with the howling winds.

Wet and cold, sleep eluded him, not helped by the waves of grumpiness Hobbes was sending him. The cat had evicted a family of orange squirrels from a hollow and was far from pleased with the collections of walnuts and dry leaves.

You can come if you want.

He wouldn't mind snuggling with a warm furball himself.

No, you know I can't come to you right now. C'mon, you can teleport.

In one of his royal moods, His Majesty was too prideful and lazy to face the storm.

Yes, I'll pick you up tomorrow. Sleep well.

Hobbes shut down the bond, leaving only the relentless whispers in his mind. They had grown into a dull beat after nightfall, showing Daniel's plan had some merit.

They might actually give up by morning... I could use a little Luck.

He glanced at his companions. Flynn stood seated on a branch to peer in the darkness, while Daniel and Rain were already peacefully slumbering.

Good for them.

The more he tried to drift off, the more his worries about Kea crowded his mind—nine days like this would be unbearably long. Sleep came slow and fitful; it seemed he had just closed his eyes when someone shook his shoulder.

Mana Observer swept around him. The rain was still falling. There was no danger, just his guard shift.

"Something's wrong," Flynn whispered, anxiously gesticulating.

Kai sat upright. "What?" Hallowed Intuition was completely silent. "Where? Should we wake Daniel?"

"No, it's not a beast... Rain's gone."

"What do you mean *gone*?" He turned to squint at a blanket half unmade around a bundle of covers and a collection of acorns. "How long has it been?"

"I'm not sure when it happened. I was looking out for threats, not inside." Flynn raked a hand through his hair. "The wind pushed his blanket off. I woke you as soon as I noticed. Spirits, do you think something happened to him?"

"Hmm... he must have left by himself." That was the only sensible explanation given the bundle of blankets to throw them off.

"But why would he do that? Do you think he changed his mind about coming with us? He—he seemed to be having so much fun."

"Calm down." Kai threw a wary glance to where the adventurer was sleeping. "I'm sure he's fine." The storm covered his words.

Could Rain have decided the land wasn't for him and run off without a word? It wasn't the most far-fetched theory.

What even passes in the head of a teenage siren?

“His spatial bag is still here,” Flynn pulled it out of the bundle. “Why wouldn’t he take it with him?”

That was certainly strange. One of the shells in the siren’s bracelet was a spatial artifact, but why leave all his food, clothes and random souvenirs he had gathered? It would cost him nothing to take both.

And if he’s planning to come back, why sneak off without a warning? Did he just go for a stroll in the downpour? Unless...

Kai focused on Hallowed Intuition. The murmurs hadn’t just quietened, they were entirely gone. They had still been pulsing when he fell asleep. Did their pursuers decide to give up in the middle of the night?

Damned siren. I’m supposed to be the one who takes calculated risks.

He massaged his temples. It left him little choice. “I’ll go look for him. I might know where he went.”

“What...” Flynn quickly put together the clues. “I’m coming with you.”

“No. Someone must stay on guard.” Kai gestured to the sleeping adventurer. “And I’ve more experience in mana zones. You know I’m right.”

Flynn pressed his lips in a stubborn line. “Promise me you won’t do anything reckless. If things get bad you must run.”

“When do I ever—

“*Mat.*”

“Fine. You have my word. But I want to put on record that this time it wasn’t my idea to run toward the trouble.”

“I’ll note it down for posterity,” Flynn chuckled somberly. “Why do I always make friends with guys that have more brawn than common sense?”

“Hey! Have you tried looking at yourself in the mirror?”

“At least twice a day. Why?”

Kai rolled his eyes. “Idiot.”

“You’re just jealous,” Flynn smirked, forgetting the situation for a moment.

“Yeah, that must be it.” He stood up, heading for the edge of the shelter. “I’ll be back before you or Daniel realize.”

Without wasting a moment longer, he leaped into the storm and cast a water bubble to arrest his fall. His boots squelched in the muddy ground between the roots. The dense mana would replenish his reserves in less than a minute.

Now I just need to find him.

If the bandits had been stalking them, that narrowed the possible direction. Kai retraced their steps through the woods. Without a speck of light, he relied on Mana Observer to guide him. He had long learned how to navigate a dark forest, even in a downpour.

Drenched in cold water, he leaped between the roots to not get stuck in the muck.

The vibrant whispers of a yellow beast forced him to take a small detour around a meadow. It seemed the storm had deterred most predators from hunting. And the farther he went from the inner reaches of the Lorvyn Woods, the fewer murmurs echoed among his thoughts.

Kai channeled Body Augmentation to pick up the pace and hone his senses.

How could he be so brash?

Going against an unknown number of enemies with unknown grades and skills would be reckless, regardless of personal power. Professions were too numerous and varied to prepare for everything, a single mistake was all it took.

Where has he gone?

Kai was quickly nearing the edges of the woods and about to double back when Hallowed Intuition pulsed. It was faint and directionless as if hampered by an arcane skill.

C’mon, I’ve anticipated green beasts. You can’t yield to some punk.

Pushing with all his 77 levels, he caught a glimpse of the danger. He didn’t have to move far before spotting a flickering light in the night.

Kai restrained Mana Observer and slowly crept forward. Once identified the camp, Hallowed Intuition had no issues buzzing with threats. Five tents were set in a circle—more people than he expected.

At least it’s not the creepy couple.

“Who’s there?” The shadow of a man wielding a spear stood out against the lantern.

The shout froze his blood. *How did he spot me?* Kai was about to retreat when a flash of lightning illuminated a second figure.

Rain strolled out in the open with a relieved smile, uncaring of the storm and the potential bandits. “Hi, are you the people who followed us from Varsea?”