

Chapter 415 - Misty Trails

Crystal globes shed an aseptic light over the corridor. The polished stone stretched from floor to ceiling, smooth and seamless. Ahead, the passage curved to the left towards an opaque threshold. Instructors in dark gray garb marched between the students, shooting stern looks at anyone who stepped out of line or dithered.

After sorting their lots on the way out of the arena, the academy personnel had escorted them to the Summonarium. Conversations dwindled under the looming Moon Trials, only broken by footsteps and clipped instructions.

Without a moment to think or speak, they had been ushered through a security checkpoint and into the labyrinthine hallways of one of Raelion's most guarded facilities. Normally, even loitering was ground for demerits.

Kai stood on his toes, vainly trying to peek through the wall of bodies. Apparently, his Luck was good enough to blindly sort the number he wanted, but not to end up in line together.

You can never rely on the seventh attribute, Dora and Virya's voices echoed in his head.

Falling back with a sigh, the satchel they'd issued to every participant banged on his side. It contained a canteen and dry rations that wouldn't last a day. He adjusted the buckle and rubbed his arms. The warm summer evening had vanished in the cold of the Summonarium. Even the air tasted odd inside. Perhaps it was the ambient composition, made up almost entirely of unattuned essence.

Fewer variables to control. The elemental saturation could interfere with the spatial arrays.

"Ugh!" A girl several rows back swayed, clutching her head.

"There is always someone..." A blonde instructor with shoulder-length hair sighed. Stepping forward to catch the girl, she hauled the student upright. "Slow breaths. It'll pass. Keep your senses tight. You're lucky the anchor bracelet marks you as friendly. The Summonarium doesn't take kindly to being peeked at."

Hmm, I thought the sensation familiar...

Scavenging ruins in the Hidden Sanctuary, just looking at the wrong ward could get him killed. Neither the library nor his textbooks had explained how that worked. But here, Hallowed Intuition again hummed ominously whenever he thought of studying the enchantments within the walls.

It's similar, but not quite... my attention could trigger the ruins, these only respond if I intend to use Mana Observer or another skill. Though it might be because we're marked as friendly...

How did one crack an array without even looking at it?

Quite a conundrum.

Kai adjusted his issued wristband, the metal alloy biting into his skin. The improved design should have fixed the issues from the midterms, though he didn't put too much faith in it. And triggering the spatial beacon to extract them from the Veiled Woods would still forfeit his Trials.

If the bracelet had other functions, they hadn't been explained.

It seems a bit thicker. But the cloaking is the same—

"Eleventh group, step forward! Two minutes forty to the transfer window." The call announced a rapid shuffle on the stone corridor.

Students trailed the adjunct instructors. Crossing the opaque threshold, Kai nearly bumped into the teen who'd stopped inside.

"Hey—"

"Do not block the entrance! Move along." Another official briskly dragged them aside; only then did Kai get a proper look at the massive chamber.

Overlapping circles of silver and pale violet covered the floor and vaulted walls. At the center, a large onyx platform rose between seven pylons. Etched runes spiderwebbed across the structure, inlaid with metal and gems of varying hues.

Professors and blue-robed operators clustered around the pylons and the cube matrices at the monitoring station. Their bodies obscured most of their actions, though several seemed to be slotting engraved rods into recesses of the runic pillars.

A low thrum permeated the air, unchanging regardless of where he stood, as the instructors arranged the students around the raised formation.

The day he'd crossed from the province capital, Nerethi, they had hurried the new students through so quickly he'd barely glimpsed the Summonarium. Months and *many* courses later, he was no closer to understanding its working.

Spatial anchors intertwined with stabilization arrays and folded transit pathways. Just trying to follow the patterns made his head throb.

Unlike that transfer, today they would not establish a portal corridor between two gate points. Instead, they'd use the academy's infrastructure to facilitate a one-way translocation to the Veiled Woods.

"Please step onto the platform, aspirants," a clerk droned in a flat, bored tone. "You are advised to keep all limbs within the marked boundaries. Please, refrain from channeling any active skills and or items during transfer. The academy assumes no liability for injuries,

maiming, sensory staggering, spiritual dissociation, partial fusion, and or other spatially related accidents incurred through failure to comply with its stated guidelines.”

What—

“One minute twenty until the transfer window. Failure to enter the Moon Trials will count as automatic disqualification.”

The ordered lines collapsed as over a hundred students scrambled onto the platform. Kai turned to catch a glimpse of Valela before the mass forced him to follow or be trampled. Bodies pressed shoulder to shoulder. Scowls met muttered curses and anxious complaints.

Despite the ample space, no one seemed entirely sure about where the boundary line stood, nor willing to risk being near it.

Dammit, stop pushing!

Kai answered elbow for elbow until the crowd finally settled. Hemmed in on all sides, he could barely see anything beyond the glowing runes between his boots. Swirling fractal patterns spread across the black stone, inlaid with green-hued metal that pulsed with mana.

Wait... is that... Green chromium?

“Thirty seconds to transfer. Please relax and breathe normally.”

Several students hitched their breaths. One nearby boy bent on his knees, close to hyperventilating; another coughed. Mana flowed through the runes of the onyx platform; the low thrum deepened.

“Twenty seconds.”

His skin tingled. The etched symbols glowed, while the space between the pylons rippled, weaving an iridescent boundary around them.

“Ten seconds. Five... two... one. Prepare for transfer!”

Space seemed to stretch and fold around the platform. A flash of glowing silver. A sickening lurch. The sensation of falling seized his guts as reality seemed to hold its breath. For one heartbeat, existence became nothing but bleeding colors and fractured angles.

Then he was through.

Firm ground. A sharp breath of humid air. Color and dimensions returned into focus as his legs gave out under him. Dewy weeds soaked the fabric at his knees; his palm landed on the slick turf.

They stood in a meadow of pale purple grass. Spindly birches and alders ringed the clearing. A veil of mist drifted over their pale trunks and green-blue leaves. Three narrow trails disappeared into the woods from the north-west side.

Still ten fingers and ten toes.

Kai exhaled and climbed to his feet, the nausea receding with each breath.

The last daylight was fading below the western horizon, though four moons offered their lights among the clouds.

All around him, students moaned and groaned, miserably sprawled across the meadow. All hundred-something participants from Mana Studied. No sign of other groups. The translocation seemed to have scattered them over a larger area, so they only partially piled on each other.

With his eyes on the treeline, he almost tripped on an outstretched leg. More students were regaining their senses. Some gasped like fish stranded on shore, several more gagged onto the grass, their faces tinged with an unhealthy shade of green.

Oh, no, no. Abort! I'm not doing this.

Kai scanned the crowd. His gaze locked onto a pretty head of auburn hair. He quickly made his way through the sickly students, muttering apologies for the hands and limbs he stepped on.

"Hey, how're you doing?" He offered her a hand. "We need to move. Now."

"Who—" Sitting on the grass with her hands splayed, Valela squeezed her eyes as if trying to force the world back into focus.

"It's me." Kai crouched into her line of sight. "I'll explain later."

"Mat? What—"

The first sound of heavy retching came somewhere to his left, immediately followed by several more.

Time's up.

Kai pulled her to her feet, slipping her arm over his shoulder as he half-carried her toward the edge of the clearing. The acrid smell of vomit spread through the addled students like a plague. Soon, even the healthier participants were dry heaving.

Damned amateur teleporters.

"Keep looking ahead and breathe slowly."

Valela made a distressed hum, pressing her hand to her lips for several seconds. "I'm... good..."

As they neared the treeline, curses and nauseated voices had joined the retching behind them. The most present students stumbled after them toward the bushes near the clearing, looking to preserve some scraps of dignity.

Kai took the canteen from his issued satchel. "Here."

Valela blinked and took a sip.

"Better?"

She swallowed and nodded weakly, her emerald eyes now alert. "And thank you for getting me out. You recovered awfully fast."

"Uhm, you know me." Kai grinned, sidestepping the question. Even before his regular training with Spatial Shift, translocations never affected him much. Perhaps another benefit of Zervathi's boon. He followed her gaze back to the meadow. "It's just us here. Unless more groups might arrive, but we were among the last to transfer."

The Veiled Woods stretched into the night; their friends could have landed anywhere.

Valela tilted her head to the moons drifting in the cloudy sky. "Better to spare a little time now than rush ahead blindly. We have over four days to complete the Trials. The starting area is safe. We might not get time to rest later." Her gaze returned to him, brows furrowed. "And you haven't told me how you managed to sort the same number as me."

"Just got Lucky, I guess."

She pursed her lips. "Even if you're Favored, that's not something you can use on command."

Kai arched an eyebrow. "Can't you?"

"Of course not. That's— That's not how it works."

He shrugged. "Is it? Sounds like your sources weren't Lucky enough."

Valela gave him the flat look she reserved for when he was being particularly infuriating, then opted to ignore him. In truth, it had been a close gamble. Outside of danger, Hallowed Intuition's whispers were finicky at best; same for his Favor. But it seemed personally drawing his lot, while holding a clear goal in mind, had nudged his odds. He'd hoped to end with more of his companions, but his Luck didn't stretch that far.

"So," Valela dusted off her clothes, studying the woods. "Unless our friends appear soon, we're not joining a larger team."

“Nah, we already have the best.”

Behind them, students were quickly recovering. Even mages were a sturdy lot with their Constitution at Yellow. The litany of chants and spellcasting conjured streams and gusts to sweep the clearing. The returned energy also revived complaints and arguments.

Many students clustered around obvious friends and allies, while others yet remained there, looking lost. A group even marched off into the trails as if by prior agreement.

“What do they expect us to do here?”

“It’s... scary. Uh, you... Will you really help me?”

“Hey, who took my rations! My satchel is half empty. I counted them!”

“Get off me, you stink!”

“What *no*? I already paid you to follow my lead. Come back here!”

“Stop squawking, Meldon. And get lost. They simply recognize better leadership.”

“You just paid them more!”

“How is it my fault if you come from a House of paupers?”

Without any martial or artisan students to boss around, the meadow split into two dozen factions.

Kai tuned out the quarrels, taking the chance to properly study their surroundings. Essence saturated the woods, dense Water and Shadow, the Nature motes oddly thin in comparison.

Which could mean whatever...

Mist drifted in lazy plumes through the undergrowth, clinging to leaves and knee-high weeds. Squinting at the woods, the bark of alders and birches shifted between pale silver and purple in the low light—probably mana-touched varieties. Milky branches and dark leaves swayed. A distant rustling and creaking of wood. Faint splashing... And echoing peels of laughter—

Kai shook his head, the woods suddenly silent.

Great, I’m imagining things before even entering. No wonder people get lost inside...

The Veiled Woods felt off.

Not hostile. Just... *off*. Unsettling. Perhaps his experience at the Misty Lake was making him biased. The fog was much thinner, barely a veil, yet his instincts prickled.

We did enter the Trials. Focus on what you can do.

Valela brushed a strand of auburn hair from her face. "Did you find something?" Her attention turned to the paths out of the meadow.

"I'm not sure... But we should move soon."

"Why? More groups might still arrive. And we're safe here. If we set off now, we don't know when we'll find another place to rest."

They'd all known the Moon Trials might start at night. Upending their sleep schedule was probably another part of the test. Even at Yellow, exhaustion would dull their reaction and judgment. And they still needed to plan for five days.

Resting now and heading off fresh later wasn't a bad idea.

Only...

"Are we really safe here?" Kai gave a pointed look at the rising voices across the clearing.

The Head Examiner had clearly stated the Moon Trials' lack of rules. For now, the bounds of civility kept the altercations from getting physical. How long before the groups started extorting individuals for their rations? How long before a disgruntled student fought back?

The whole situation felt primed to explode. They'd received just enough rations to fight over, but not last them for five days. And getting dumped in a heap of gagging bodies hadn't helped the tempers. With their future on the line, it might well turn into Lord of the Flies.

Even if he ended up winning, getting into a fight at this stage would be a loss.

Valela knitted her brows. "Do you think someone might really attack us?"

"Each student who gets eliminated is fewer competition for the closed spots."

"Yes, but most years they don't even fill them." She huffed. "Whatever the rules say, the Trials won't stay forever. People will talk. And it's not like anyone has any Moonlight Shards yet. They'd risk ruining their reputation for nothing. It's just foolish!"

Kai smiled at her incensed expression. "You may be right. But people aren't always logical. Will anyone really care who cast the first fireball once the fighting starts?"

He also had another reason to leave.

Kai thumbed his ring on his finger. No one had come to requisition his spatial storage this time. The instructors had let them through with whatever they carried. Around the meadow, several students were covertly stowing their jewelry and patting their pockets. Better if he didn't wait till everyone realized.

Valela brushed a bump in her sleeve. "Did the instructors forget to—"

"I don't think they forgot. Probably some lesson in being always prepared or some such."

"You mean— oh, bloody fates! I should've come prepared." She muttered more curses, her cheeks puffed up, and glared at his chuckle. "Let's just move." She turned to the three trails. "What path do we choose? They look equally creepy to me. Can you spot any clues?"

"I don't think there are any," Kai said. "Remember, these are the Trials of the Wandering Moon, not of the Blue Moon of Mind. And if you're right about the Veiled Woods, the same path can lead people to completely different areas."

"But that's—" Valela let out a slow breath. "I don't think I'll like these Trials much. So should we just pick blindly?"

"Hmm, not necessarily. Luck isn't always random."

"You mean..."

"Watch my back. I want to try something."

Trusting her, Kai edged closer to the woods and turned his focus inward.

Nowhere did Hallowed Intuition say it only worked with impending danger. Most of the time, the whispers were too faint and fragmented to interpret otherwise. But he'd caught glimpses on occasion. Usually, when a path could have a significant impact on his future, or involve people strongly tied to him.

What if more factors combined?

Crouching down, he brushed his fingers through the cold, wet grass, imagining himself walking down each path.

The whispers always brewed in the back of his mind.

Three paths led into the misty trees. Three possible futures.

All carried danger from the Moon Trials, but they weren't the same. He wasn't sure if he was imagining it: the longer he listened, the more distinct they sounded.

The leftmost path hummed with low, steady beats. Smooth and winding and quiet, scattered with glittering pinpricks.

Turning to the central one, a sharper drumming made his heartbeat spike. Quick and frantic. The rush of conflict. With the warm inkling shining at the end.

He pulled back, a throb growing behind his eyes. He moved to the last on the right. What if they went down there—whispers spiked, washing over him with a pounding frenzy. An

hungry thrill. Drumming mayhem, fire, and chilling danger. Shadows hummed with smiles and hidden knives. Beneath it all rippled a familiar lull and... a tinkle of laughter.

Kai wrenched himself back. His arms whirled to keep the balance. His head throbbed. Slowly, he massaged his eyes and got back up to his feet.

Valela hovered beside him, her face warring between worry and curiosity, but holding back. "Are you okay? Did you... sense something?"

"Yeah, I think so..." Kai dusted himself off. The Veiled Woods still stretched with chill mist and shadows, their rustles carrying quiet threats. "I wouldn't bet everything on this. But the left one feels like the safest." He pointed. "A few potential nuggets, but not much going on. It seemed almost boring." His hand shifted to the central trail. "That one felt more dangerous. It'll probably involve fighting. But it'll also be faster and with better rewards, I think..."

Valela let out a sigh. "Professors love to repeat that risk and opportunity go hand in hand..." Her brows furrowed at his silence. "What about the rightmost one?"

Kai grimaced. "That's... the most dangerous one. And confusing. Like it could unfold in a lot of different ways. Most of them bad."

"That's... the most dangerous... and confusing. Most of them bad."

"Then we can just avoid it." Sha pressed her lips, studying him. "Why do I feel like there is a but coming?"

Kai bit the inside of his cheek. "I think we'll run into someone I know if we take that trail."

"That— Are you sure?"

"As much as I reasonably can. I never had the conditions to try this before."

Valela nodded, staring off at the woods. "So you think they'll be in danger if we don't go?"

"That, I'm not sure," Kai admitted. "The danger and their presence could be unrelated, but..."

"You don't want to risk it."

"...Yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. The fact that path also held the most potential rewards perhaps skewed his decision. "We don't need to both get in danger. If you pick the left path—"

"What?" Her gaze snapped back toward him. "I'm not leav—"

"You bastard!"

A furious shout ripped across the clearing, followed by the crackle of fire and a wave of heat. Students screamed. More furious voices, spells and chanting erupted across the meadows

Oh, shit.

Valela met his eyes, jaw set with familiar determination. Without needing words, they turned to run toward the right path.

Spells roared at their backs. Weeds whipped their calves.

Several other students seemed to have reached their same idea, heading for the trails in panicked sprints. Kai grabbed her hand, afraid to lose her in the chaos. Luckily, most mages were not particularly athletic. And they'd been standing close to the treeline, putting them ahead.

Trees rushed past as they took the rightmost trail. The purple grass thinned beneath twisted roots and patches of dark moss. Mist drifted between the trunks in curling ribbons, concealing the farther route.

Once sure no one was following them, Kai slowed to let Valela catch her breath, then abruptly stopped. "Do you hear that?"

"What?" Valela braced her hand against her knees, heaving. Auburn locks messily fell on her face. "I... don't... hear anything."

"Yeah, me neither. We didn't run that far. We should still be hearing the fight."

"That—" Valela swallowed, suddenly alert, looking back.

Pale birches stretched into the mist, branches swaying and creaking. No signs of another student having taken their path. No shout or spellfire. Not even the droning of insects or bird calls. Behind them, the Veiled Woods resembled more a painted backdrop than an actual living forest.

A flicker of movement caught the corner of Kai's vision. He spun around, shadows shifting between the mist and trees.

Ding

- **Hallowed Intuition (lv98>99)**

A shiver crawled down his spine.