

Chapter 417 - A Matter of Perspective

"Keep running!" Kai measured his pace to Valela's. His eyes darted between trees, bleached trunks, spindly branches, and dark purple leaves. The trail wound into the misty darkness. Labored breaths and the thud of their strides rang loud into the silent woods.

Clouds shrouded the moons. The engraved light crystal swung at his hip. Shadows shifted in the corners of his vision, elusive and numerous.

This path can't go on forever.

Whispers spiked.

"Watch out!" Kai stepped into a pivot, digging his heel in the roots of the trail. Water mana flowed through his limbs. A gleam danced along his milky blade as it drew a rising arc.

Long, bony claws clashed against his sword. The fog parted into swirls. The impact jarred his shoulders. His gaze narrowed on his adversary: glossy black eyes, gaunt and mottled features, wiry limbs morphing into mist.

Mana rushed through his channels. With a grunt, Kai forced back the creature and advanced into a lunge. A lance of ice flew above his shoulder. Limbs folded and bones twisted between Valela's spell and the coming sword strike. But the creature couldn't entirely evade them.

Frozen bark splintered behind the creature. Silver blood sprayed across the weeds.

Before Kai could release his spells, a shriek tore through the woods, like a hundred discordant voices. Pain pierced his mind. An instant of broken concentration let his senses slide off. The wounded creature vanished into the woods as the sound continued echoing in his ears.

Again. Dammit.

He couldn't chase it or leave the trail. His attention was split between Valela, the foggy trees, and Hallowed Intuition. Perhaps if he narrowed his focus on Mana Observer... though that would leave him exposed against multiple—

Another broken cry rattled in the distant mist ahead. A third from somewhere at their right, and more at their backs. The shrieks mingled, bouncing between the trees until he couldn't tell their source or number.

Persistent bastards.

It wasn't that he was unable to sense them, but that his attention slid right off them.

"We must keep going until we leave their territory. You okay?" Kai lowered his sword and glanced back.

"I'm... yes... I actually levelled... my danger skill..." Valela controlled her slight panting, a tense edge to her voice. "I never thought I'd be grateful Professor Valdibal made us run laps. You don't need to slow for me."

"Okay. Just tell me if it gets too much." Kai set off at a steady jog without sheathing his sword. Hallowed Intuition allowed him to move with a degree of calculated recklessness. Though he wasn't alone.

Chilling shrieks chased at their heels. The creatures seemed content to harry them from the mist. Quick strikes and retreats. The behavior reminded him of ambush predators testing for weakness. Hard to finish off, but unlikely to swarm in coordinated formation. Hopefully. It was dangerous to assume too much. Perhaps they simply hadn't gathered in large enough numbers.

If I just knew what they were. We're going blindly. This is a test. They must possess some weakness or limitation...

The trail continued meandering. Pale trees rose above a dark carpet of underbrush. More than once, Kai caught himself eyeing apparent shortcuts through the vegetation. The circuitous route practically begging him to try.

Yeah, I'm not that stupid.

If horror movies had taught him anything, leaving the marked path was how people disappeared.

Stick to the trail. Look for clues among the identical trees... Just how am I supposed to— oh, right...

He wasn't alone.

"Hey, Val," Kai called over his shoulder. "Did you manage to pierce their cloaking? It feels like the elusive aspects of Shadow, but not quite. Usually, once you notice those, they get easier to track."

"I... Maybe. I have some guesses," Valela hummed. "I caught a glimpse when you clashed. It's probably an innate Mist affinity, though that alone doesn't explain how they dodged... They might not be entirely corporeal entities."

Kai blinked. "Wait... you mean like *ghosts*?"

Valela snorted a laugh. "Of course, not. Ghosts aren't real, *Mat*."

"Hmm, sounds like what ghosts would like you to believe. What about the archipelago's Spirits then?"

"That's an entirely different category. They don't live on our same plane. And regardless, matters involving the divine don't count toward mortal taxonomy."

"Seems convenient."

Her sigh carried a distinct eye-roll; her mood lightened. "I think we're dealing with something closer to a wraith. Or a hybrid with wraith-like traits. A true incorporeal entity capable of physical manifestation would have killed us.

"They're probably a fae subspecies. It would explain their elusiveness and evasion. And it fits with how the blood on your sword hasn't dissipated. They have several branches that mingled with the incorporeal planes. Fae genealogy is a tangled mess of inconsistencies."

Kai glanced down at the smear. The silvery substance clung to his blade like liquid mercury, reflective and scentless. Uhm, probably better not to inhale it. "I don't remember covering this in any course."

"Incorporeal creatures are usually material for upperclassmen. You need a permit. Professor Hulmus gave me a permit for the higher floors of the library when I was looking for supplemental material."

So naturally, the academy threw them into the first-year Trials.

"Makes perfect sense." A whisper rose uncomfortably close. Kai shot a volley of icicles into the mist as warning, earning a shriek for his efforts. "So... how do we kill them?"

"That... I'm not sure. Magic can work, though its effectiveness depends on your and their affinity. It's strange that your sword wounded them twice. Even if they have a thin incorporeal ancestry, resistance to physical attacks is the most common trait to carry. You'd need extremely rare enchantments or alloys to touch them."

"I was channeling mana into my blade. It's probably that," Kai cut off her speculation, wary of nosy professors. Caught in the moment, he'd taken the spellblade out without thinking.

"That could have helped. Maybe they might be weak to metal. Many fae lineages repelled—"

A murmur crested above the sea of unintelligible voices. Closer still. Shadows shifted between two passing birches. A shape detached itself from the fog at their backs, long limbs unfolding into claws. Kai sidestepped to let Valela move past him and swung behind her.

Her eyes widened in realization. Mana rushed messily toward her wand.

The creature jolted and twisted as the tip of the sword carved a shallow line across it, the form slipping from his attention. A shriek stabbed his ear, cut short when a boulder of gleaming ice careened through the mist.

Trees creaked and snapped above a soft squelch.

A heartbeat later, the woods returned to silence.

Kai released a breath, looking at the gash the miniature iceberg had torn through the brush.

"Mhmm, great shot. I think you might have gotten that one. Sorry for the scare. It came out abruptly." He gently lowered her outstretched arm, wand still clutched in her fingers. He wished he could give her time to process, but the best he could do for now was get her to safety. "C'mon, don't slow down. We'll find a place to rest soon. If the wraith's territory covered the entire Veiled Woods, the accounts you read would have mentioned something."

"That's... a valid point." Valela stared where the creature had vanished, slowly turning away and walking. "No students would pass if they stalked us forever."

"Exactly." He'd already analyzed the trail and mist, applying Space Magic and Hallowed Intuition. There was no clever trick to escape that he could tell. They just had to push through. "Hey, any ideas on how to track fae-wraith hybrids?" Kai asked to distract her.

"Hmm, no. You'd need specialized skills or equipment. A ritual could also work if we— sorry, that's not practical." She picked up her pace. "Though I might have an idea to weaken their shroud."

"Oh, do tell."

"It's just a theory. But if their elusiveness is partly Mist Magic, that would explain why Ice spells fare so poorly. The last spell was also the only one that did damage. When... I accidentally mixed Ice and Light essence." She stiffly said, embarrassed by what most students couldn't do on purpose. "The Light mana was too diluted to be the direct cause, but if it disrupted their concealment..."

"I thought that iceberg had an odd shimmer. We'll need to test it, but that's very good." Kai nodded. "You're basically saying I was right to save your Light reserves."

"I..." Valela sighed over their strides. "That *is* one way to interpret it."

They continued speculating as the run turned to a jog. The slower pace was worth warding off the oppressive atmosphere. Hallowed Intuition alerted him of the periodic ambushes, though the wraith seemed to grow more cautious. Their silhouettes stalked them just off the path.

I'm not chasing you.

Aside from their elusiveness, the mist creature matched the Strength of an average martial student, though they were *far* more persistent. Eerie shrieks haunted them, the mental attacks leaving his head throbbing and his temper short.

Compared to Hobbes' kitty tantrums, you're amateurs.

His eyes followed the unending trail. Overhead, the clouds had finally cleared, revealing the pastel glow of the Moons.

Kai checked his pocket watch more and more often. The ticking minutes reassured him that they must be moving closer to *somewhere*. The question was if the journey would outlast their sanity. His fingers tightened around the watch before he returned it to his ring.

"How long?" Valela asked, even her poise fraying into a curt tone.

"About three hours since we entered."

"Well... there are upsides. My danger skill has never leveled up so quickly. Is this how you raised yours?"

"More or less. Rinse and repeat for several months."

"You're not joking. That must've been horrible."

"Nah, it's not that bad. Is it...?" Kai asked, genuinely puzzled. For once, flashes on the Sanctuary lifted his mood, reminding him how much worse it could get.

Let's not jinx it.

Valela hesitated. "I can't imagine it... If the Veiled Woods are all like this path, I can't imagine even half the students will pass."

That was an optimistic estimate. They would have been in deep trouble without a very lucky combination of skills and advantages.

"Maybe the wraiths would stay away from larger groups," Kai mused.

"Maybe."

"We probably picked one of the hardest paths..." Guilt prickled his conscience. Hallowed Intuition had warned him this path would be the most dangerous, yet he'd still come and dragged Valela along.

"Stop doing that, Mat."

"What?"

"Stop taking on responsibility for my decisions. I chose to come here."

"But—"

"No buts." Valela bumped his shoulder. "I'm tired and sweaty and can barely feel my legs. You're not going to add entertaining, silly arguments to that list."

"Uhm, as you say, ma'am," Kai smirked. "Thank you for coming."

"You're welcome, sir. We'll get out."

"We will."

Even for the Trials of the Wandering Moon, the academy wouldn't leave them wandering for days. Hours though... How many were fair game? Four? Six? Until sunrise? They'd leave exhausted, both mind and body, and still without a single Moonlight Shard to show for it.

Damn, I miss the Mid-Terms.

Even with their dangers and irregularities, at least their path forward had been clear, not left to the whims of Fate.

Despite the confident front, worry gnawed at him. If this was his first night in the Veiled Woods, what about the next four days?

His fingers tightened on the hilt of his longsword. It carried a comfortable weight, even if he'd rarely used it. Hopefully, no one would look closely at the vine motif along the fuller, or the foreign elvish runes beneath. Spellblades of this make weren't common even at Raelion.

Elijah really doesn't cheap out on the gifts. I'll have to prepare something for the next time we meet.

The mist thickened as the night deepened, while the cold gusts leached away the warmth of summer. Kai lost himself in the jog, then a steady walk, side by side on the narrow trail.

Step.

Step.

Shoot a spell at the slippery bugger that crept too close.

Step.

Keeping his senses taut for hours drained him far more than running. But people could surprise themselves when they had no choice—another lesson hammered into him by the Sanctuary.

Whispers swayed. Shadows crawled in the mist.

The wraiths' shrieks lingered longer and longer in his ears, muddying his thoughts, as though the creatures had a personal vendetta against him.

He really couldn't imagine why.

"Uhm, Val..."

"Yes, how long?"

"Almost five hours. But it's not the matter..."

Her wand snapped up from his tone alone.

Kai pointed ahead. The mist swirled. A shape unfolded between the pale trunks, long limbs, and bony claws. Its beady black eyes reflected the glow of their crystals. The wraith hovered motionless.

Then another appeared farther down the trail.

And another.

His stomach sank.

His exhausted mind slid off the creatures. Their features refused to stay fixed, blurring in the mist. More shadows drifted between the trees.

Two.

Five.

Dozens.

Every few moments, another silhouette crawled from the darkness. Others crept down the branches on elongated limbs. They quietly filled the woods. Patiently circling.

Damn it all.

"I think they're herding us."

Valela paled, grabbing onto his hand.

Another shriek rattled the woods, this one much too close.

"It's fine. Keep walking. Slowly. None of them wants to make the first move. Stick to the plan."

Valela nodded, advancing like a stiff marionette.

They had just crossed a slope when movement burst from the undergrowth. A pale blur lunged from their left.

Two more followed ahead and behind.

Mana flooded his veins, jolting him awake. He thrust out his blade without breaking stride. Water Cannon smashed into the lead attacker, while spikes of ice flew to protect their flank. "Run!"

Valela was already moving. The mist swirled around her feet as she cast while running. A flick of her wand swept a fan of ice through the trees. Amorphous shapes recoiled from the barrage, the attacks scattering their forms.

Kai opened the path with his sword as they broke into a sprint.

Roots and moss blurred beneath their strides. Shadows detached themselves from the surrounding fog, their shrieks shattering the stillness of the woods.

Ice rained across the underbrush. Yet for every wraith that retreated, one more emerged from the mist. The assault came in twos or threes as the creatures finally abandoned caution. They drifted between the trees in glimpses of wiry limbs and glossy eyes.

A wraith coalesced directly on their path.

Kai charged. Water essence flowed through his muscles, guiding his sword with easy grace. Steel connected. A sharp shriek and a spray of silver blood cut the night as the wraith twisted and dissolved back into the fog. Yet the brief clash let more creatures catch up.

"Val?"

"Almost ready." Runes glowed over her wand as mana gathered around in shimmering currents. Ice and Light entwined.

Appearing to sense the danger, the nearest wraiths lunged forward.

Yeah, no shot.

Kai stepped to intercept them, flowing between the forms. His sword clashed against claw and bone. The impacts rattled up his arms, guided by Hallowed Intuition.

"Done!" Valela shouted. Light burst between her fingers.

Suddenly, the night became day. The mist retreated as a warm glow expanded outward in a widening aurora. The shadows clinging to the wraiths peeled away. Their distorted outlines snapped into focus.

Wiry bodies folded with too many articulations. Mottled skin stretched over narrow torsos, membranes of mist hanging between their joints. Large black eyes protruded from bug-like faces devoid of nose or lips.

Kai didn't hesitate. Ice lances and Water Cannon tore through exposed bodies. *Shifting* between two wraiths, he swung in an arc. His sword cleanly relieved the heads from their body.

This time the corpses didn't dissolve, flopping to the ground. Dead.

Five damned hours! You asked for it.

The woods filled with flashes of steel and ice. Silver blood sprayed across the trail. Frightened wails echoed, the remaining wraiths in full retreat. Their confidence evaporated even as the radiance began to dim.

For the first time in hours, *true* silence returned to the woods.

"That was easier than I thought. Maybe we should do it again."

Still heaving for breath, Valela threw him a glare. "Let's keep moving before they return."

"Alright, alright." Kai wrenched his gaze away from the emaciated bodies. "These paupers carry no Moonlight Shards anyway."

Really? What a scam.

Valela sighed and shook her head. His attention returned to the open path ahead. Getting back in march, they'd barely trekked over a ridge when their steps faltered.

(Did the wraith attack because they were out of time?)

"Do you see what I'm seeing?" Kai asked, blinking rapidly.

Valela stared ahead. "Light, voices, what appears like a clearing?"

"Yup."

They looked at each other, sharing an almost giddy smile. The glow of crystals shone through the trees.

"If that's another trap," she said, "I'm going to be very upset."

"Anything but another hour of skulking with the wraiths." Kai offered her a hand. "Shall we go find out?"

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Rain strolled down the trail, humming a soft tune, hands tucked in his pockets.

Despite being on dry land, the Veiled Woods had a charming atmosphere. Moonlight filtered through branches, while mist curled between silver-barked trees. The cool air carried the

scent of damp moss and resin. He would just need to find a lake and some nice company to be perfect.

He honestly didn't understand why everyone had looked so tense about the Trials.

An eerie croak came from the canopies. Rain yawned, measuring his timing against the blurred shape, lunging from the fog. Mana flooded his body as he angled his trident at the last moment.

Ephemeral flesh parted. Bones snapped. "Rude." He chided the ugly bird. With a jerk, he ended its suffering and freed the trident. The corpse was already dissolving before it touched the ground.

*Poor thing. Uh...*

Rain bent and picked up a rhomboid crystal from the remains; its faces shimmered with different shades of violet under the light.

*This must be a Moonlight Shard.*

He slipped it into his satchel and continued his stroll. Well, the woods could have used a few squirrels too. That hollow walnut would make the perfect little houses for them.

His pale brows furrowed as he stood on his human toes.

*Is that...*

Climbing up the tree, he discovered another Shard embedded in the trunk. "Well, that's convenient." The crystal joined its twin. The academy had made the objective surprisingly straightforward.

Hours passed in a pleasant fashion, aside from putting to rest the poor creatures, trying to ambush him. Whenever the trail forked, he trusted his Fate to lead him to his goals.

Several Moonlight Shards clinked inside his satchel. Perhaps he'd share a few with Flynn. Rain smelled the crystalline flower he'd picked from a shrouded vine, some kind of peak Yellow herb. Kai would probably like it.

*I should find something for Alden too.*

His cheerful tune pierced the mist as he left a small meadow. The puzzle challenge in the mushroom circle had been elementarily simple.

Eventually, the trail descended a gentle slope. Light pulsed between the trees. The fog thinned. Beyond the crest, the woods opened into a proper clearing with distant voices.

His smile widened. One of his friends must be there.

The Veiled Woods had been surprisingly entertaining so far; he couldn't wait to see what they offered next.