

Chapter 416 - Through The Misty Trail

One more level. Just one for Hallowed Intuition to advance to Green.

Kai swiped away the notification, his stomach knotted with tension rather than celebration. With the sun fully set, swirls of mist curled through the shadowed woods. Clouds drifted across the moons, thickening the darkness beneath the rustling canopies.

The final levels before Green should be the hardest. People spent months, sometimes years, grinding through them. Hallowed Intuition had leveled days prior. If it were just that, he could have explained it through the gambit of divining the paths. The Guide rewarded new applications. But no, he'd been gaining random levels for most of the semester.

How many coincidences before they draw a line? Skills grow through use. It's like... Have I been channeling it subconsciously?

The suspicion had been building for months. By their nature, danger skills stayed always partially active, only...

Why didn't I hear any whispers? Have I not been listening in the right way—

A flicker of shadows and essence to his right. Kai whirled toward a purple-leafed shrub. Mana rushed through his channels. His mind split, readying spells that tingled at his fingertips.

A gust ruffled the bush and licked his neck with a cold touch.

Nothing moved.

Had he imagined it?

"What is it?" Valela whispered, edging closer at his back. An ivory fluted wand that seemed made from ice appeared in her hand—the best and only item she'd brought into the Trials. Since he'd told her about his stay in the Sanctuary, she always carried it in her sleeve.

"I'm not... sure." Kai scanned the slender trees. Mana suffused the woods, flowing through each weed, root, and trunk. The mist blurred and shrunk the range of his senses. Shadows shifted and morphed under the swaying branches. "Might be nothing."

Valela threw him a look that matched his own skepticism.

Yeah, things can never be that easy.

Kai relaxed his shoulders. "Ugh, it probably got scared." Whatever it was, if he couldn't spot the threat, he would have to bait it out. He turned back with a shrug and a smirk. "Probably just some squirrel. Too much hassle to chase it in this dark. I can barely sense anything."

His aura thrummed with ridicule. If the entity didn't understand speech, it would still grasp that.

"Mhmm, right." Valela met his eyes with a gleam of understanding. "Not every awakened critter is worth our time." Her haughty voice and upturned nose made him suppress a chuckle. Still, her body remained tense as she scanned the trees. "The accounts on the Veiled Woods agreed on a few things. If we step off the marked trail, we might not find it again."

Of course...

Kai sighed, his spells still poised to act. Either their nosy stalker wasn't that easy to bait, or it had truly left. The constant hum of danger made it hard to distinguish the threats. Maybe he could divine it?

No. That's too risky.

He wasn't even sure he *could* replicate it, and his temples still throbbed from the attempt. Once he strained a skill, pushing harder would escalate the recovery time. With unknown entities lurking, he needed his head clear and sharp.

"Let's move. Stay close." Kai resumed walking. "Since we left the meadow, we'll need to find another place to camp."

"Uhm, wait!" Valela raised her wand. A wisp of Light coalesced and started hovering in slow circles. The mist swallowed the pale rays after a few strides, but it was enough to walk.

"Oh, neat! How long can you hold it?" Kai took the trail at a slow pace, more roots than ground. His Perception could've still pierced the low light, though a more reliable light would help if the moons were suddenly shrouded.

"Several hours, at least. It costs almost nothing to maintain."

"Can you last until dawn?"

"That..." Valela bit her lip. "It might be close. I've prepared mostly Ice and Fire mana. Light Magic isn't the strongest at lower levels. Naturally, I didn't expect we'd be dropped in the dark like this. But I can absorb—"

"Better you save your reserves." Kai scrubbed a hand through his hair. "You might need Light mana to fight. It will be useful against the mist, and tricky to refill until morning."

After the Mid-Term Trials, he thought he'd seen the worst of it. But the underground maze had been paradoxically much more straightforward: clear the challenges until you find the exit. Simple, if not easy.

The Veiled Woods, instead, evaded any clear strategy.

Confounding trails, magical mist, a sense of ominous foreboding. Still no clue on where to find the Moonlight Shards, or what dangers to expect. His mind darted between each tidbit. From the regulated routine of school life, they'd been dropped in with barely an explanation. Knowing it was a purposeful attempt to throw them off made it no less effective.

Perhaps I underestimated our professors...

His heart picked up. How often had he rolled his eyes at the infamous Moon Trials? And after all their preparations and simulated scenarios, the test still found them wanting, less than half an hour after they'd started. Kai gave a rueful laugh, shaking his head as Valela frowned.

Overhead, a pale violet moon peeked between the clouds.

"Sorry, just thinking," Kai stepped over a root. Perhaps it was finding himself in a hostile mana zone that awakened his instincts and made his mind alert. "We need to think longer term. Five days isn't that long, but neither is it short. We must assume we'll get no true rest until we're out. Keeping our combat effectiveness is our top priority. Your Light wisp will use your reserves and reveal your affinity to any encounter. Each small risk we take will add up."

Valela nodded slowly. "I understand that. But saving my mana isn't worth moving in the dark. And we'll cover more ground with my light."

"You're right. But that's if we don't have a better alternative." Kai smiled. Coming to a decision, he produced an engraved crystal from his ring. The warm glow pushed back the mist. "Here." He held it up from the metal hook for easier use.

Valela accepted it, and she dismissed the wisp with pursed lips. "You could've taken that out from the start."

"Yeah, sorry..." Kai rubbed his neck, his face flushed. "No student walks around with crystals at Raelion. All the academy is illuminated. So this will likely confirm we have a spatial item to anyone we come across."

Valela looked pensive, then mollified. "That's... a good point." In the lawless woods of the Trials, students would be stupid not to try to extort its contents—if not steal it outright. Even if they returned it later or failed, both outcomes promised trouble. "Maybe we can use my wisp," she said.

"Nah, we have no idea how many people we'll encounter. And the smart ones will find out anyway," Kai stated with confidence.

He'd spent years as the underdog; concealing his advantages and treasures had been a matter of survival. It felt too easy to fall back into that habit. But like with Space Magic, what was the point of having an advantage if he was scared to use it?

I don't need hiding if I can kick their asses.

He took out a second engraved crystal, this one lacking a metal harness. After some rummaging through his ring, he found a length of twine and quickly fashioned a makeshift frame, tying it to his belt and leaving his hands free.

Ah! I knew it would come in handy!

Looking up, he frowned at Valela's half-smile. "What?"

"Mhmm, nothing. What else do you keep in there?"

"Just the essentials. Let me see..." Kai scanned his storage. "A couple weeks of rations, snacks, spare clothes and shoes, two swords, a wand, half a dozen daggers, maintenance tools for them, pen and paper, engraving ink, two coils of rope, a few alchemy tools and containers, and some other miscellaneous supplies. Hmm... that's about it." Naturally, he didn't mention money and mana treasures. "Damn, I would have prepared much better if I knew they'd let me bring it into the Trials. Uh, what?" He echoed again, seeing her growing amusement.

"Do you always walk around with food rations?" She asked, much too innocently.

"It's only sensible. As proven." Kai harrumped, waving at their current predicament. The trail wound deeper into the woods, a pale thread drawn between roots and mist. "If you wait until you're stranded to prepare, you're already too late. Now we don't have to worry about food. Trust me, starving is not fun."

"I... well..." Valela reached to gently touch his shoulder. "Sorry, you do have a point."

He strode forward and smirked. "Yeah, I know."

"Okay, you don't have to sound so smug about it."

"But it's fun. It's not my fault, I was cursed with always being right."

Valela huffed and mumbled. "I'm reconsidering my stance on starving."

"How heartless." Kai clutched his chest in his best impression of Flynn. "Do you think butter cookies or caramel cookies work better to eat away my sorrows?"

"You actually brought snacks? How can you eat right now?"

"Uf coursh, I did!" Kai answered, chewing with satisfaction. "Wandering in spooky and potentially deadly woods is no reason to forgo civilization."

"Just give me one."

The banter eased the eerie atmosphere. At least for a time.

The crystals cast a soft halo into the mist, smaller than it should be. They only needed enough to avoid tripping. The woods themselves only allowed a hazy glow. For threats, Mana Sense and Hallowed Intuition would spot them long before their eyes.

Hopefully.

Shadows shifted at the edges of his vision; danger still hummed, but refused to reveal itself.

“Anything else you remember about the Veiled Woods?” Kai broke the unnerving silence. He never thought he’d miss the drone and chittering of insects. Woods should be full of sounds, not this muffled quiet and the occasional creaking. “Or ideas on how long we’ll have to walk? Or what will we encounter?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Valela trailed behind him. The roots encroaching on the path didn’t allow them to tread side by side without stumbling. “There were three entries among hundreds I checked. Maybe thousands. I never thought they’d actually pick these woods. Most records were frustratingly vague. I think the academy deliberately censored the accounts.” She grumbled. “Bloody Moons, the professors must be so smug!”

“Probably. The dean, too.”

“You think Dean Astatares is paying attention to the first years?”

Trust me, I wish I were wrong.

Kai found himself scowling at the trees. “Hmm, let’s go through everything again. Any detail could be important. Use the exact wording if you remember.” Information won battles long before spells and steel.

“Alright.” Valela hummed in thought. Her voice provided a pleasant distraction, though her recount finished too soon. “I wish I knew more.”

“It’s plenty helpful already,” Kai said. “If people taking the same trail truly have different encounters, at least we know the paths must be leading *somewhere*. I had started fearing we’d have to wander five days on this damn trail.”

“I guess...” Valela didn’t sound as convinced.

“And I think I figured out how we can leave,” Kai explained. The flow was subtle, but the mists grew ever so slightly denser ahead and thinner at their back. So, as long as they followed the trail toward the thinner side, they’d eventually leave the woods. “It’s simp—”

The mist shifted, like crooked shadows growing fingers.

Hallowed Intuition trilled.

Mana erupted through his veins with scorching violence.

Kai was lunging toward Valela before he realized. His hands closed around Elijah's spellblade. "Down!"

The pale-silver blade struck something solid. His arms ran numb with the impact, yet his gaze refused to focus on his target. Attention seemed to slide off the thing in both his sight and mana sense, its proportions twisted between heartbeats.

Then Earth mana flooded into his arms. The deadlock broke.

A blur of pale bone and formless shadows flew back. The thing ricocheted off a birch. A shrill cry like nails on a chalkboard and broken glass. Kai suppressed a wince, forcing his brain to focus.

Deep rends splintered into the trunk. Long limbs unfolded. Mottled skin stretched over a gaunt frame. Large black eyes reflected the moonlight like glossy glass. Its cry echoed in his ears.

Mana surged through his channels, heartbeat hammering. The compressed sphere from Water Cannon hurled forward as icicles erupted from every angle around the creature.

Behind him, Valela raised her wand. A massive lance of pale ice streaked forward.

The creature made no sound, twisted unnaturally between the attacks. Ice shattered against the trunks. The canopies rustled, but the creature seemed to twist away from his attention. The next moment, it was gone.

A smear of silver blood glistened on his sword, the only proof the encounter had been real.

Kai stood tense like a bowstring for several seconds, waiting for another attack. His senses heightened to a point, listening for any clue from Hallowed Intuition, mana still pumping through his limbs.

His eyes darted over the still woods. The same unsettling, muffled silence as before.

The mist drifted lazily between the trees.

Ten breaths.

Thirty.

Over a minute passed without a sign; only then did he lower his blade a fraction.

Valela lowered her wand slowly. "What was that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I think it actually ran away this time." He studied the ichor left on his blade. "Damn, it could've at least coughed up Moonlight Shards. They didn't even tell us what they looked like. They might be a flower, a root, or a crystal."

“We’ll know when we find one. If it’s gone, we can—”

One of the pressing whispers had barely settled when a shrill cry echoed in the distance, and the whispers in the back of his mind intensified.

“I’d say it just ran to call its friends.”

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Rob dashed through another curtain of mist, eyes surveying the same milky trunks and skeletal branches. No landmarks. No recognizable terrain features. His measured breaths were the loudest sound in the woods, his boots enchanted for silent strides.

The voices of the other students had long faded. A risk, but they’d been dead weights.

Of all Trials of Fate, the academy had to pick the Veiled Woods.

*Where is he, where is he, where is he?*

Nearly four hundred students had entered along with him from between Mana, Martial, and Artisan Studies, but not the *one* he needed.

He checked the blood compass, the brass alloy cold against his palm. The needle continued to spin erratically. Sixth Sense had been gnawing at him since they entered the Trials, and the feeling was only intensified.

His nails dug into his clenched fists.

*Find him.*

He came upon a fork in the trail, three paths yet again. The woods twisted into the darkness. Distances felt wrong. He went left again. Ignoring his sense of direction, telling him he was running in circles, he trusted his skill and compass.

His legs burned with his enhancing skill, but he didn’t slow.

The needle kept spinning.

Failure was not an option.

*Where is he...*

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Alden paused atop a moss-covered ridge. The woods sloped gently toward a still pond, the moon reflecting onto the silver surface.

Something was amiss.

Was it only the billowing mist?

Ahead and behind, students advanced in cautious clusters. Thirteen altogether. The discovery of the pond had quieted the bickering for the moment. A soft hiss came from his collar. Nibbles squirmed beneath his shirt, sharing his unease.

Alden scratched his familiar's beneath his chin to reassure him. The snake had been agitated since the translocation.

"Let's proceed. We must be close to a Shard." Sebastian Elcarin, their self-appointed leader, strode downhill alongside his cadre.

Joining a group had appeared prudent given the unknown environment, even as temporary allies. Had it been a mistake? They wouldn't betray him, if for nothing else than the fear of the consequences. Still, he kept his guard up.

Descending the slope, his gaze drifted into the mirror pond. He stepped cautiously on the slippery roots.

He almost wished he'd landed with Mat again. For how reckless, infuriating, uncouth, *and* exhausting his roommate may be, he exuded a strange sort of contagious confidence. And he'd never proven unreliable—at least in things that mattered.

A low hiss came again.

I know, Nibbles. I noticed.

Alden studied the mist, the sensation of being observed tickling his neck.

Something was most definitely amiss.

And he disliked not knowing what it was.