

Chapter 418 - Cursed Luck

Moonlight filtered through the canopies, making shadows dance over the trail. Flynn stalked around the gnarly roots, senses drawn taut, his breaths hidden behind a scarf. A dagger flicked in and out of his hand to keep his fingers warm.

These woods can't continue forever. Just one more mile, then you can rest. Just another mile, he repeated the mantra for the umpteenth time.

After hours of relentless trekking and prowling mist creatures, he found he preferred leaving exploring eerie woods to bards' tales. Let impavid heroes trudge through muck, battle horrors, and reap the glory. He was fine, cheering for their spooky exploits from a tavern with friends and a mug of ale.

How could the mainlanders call this summer?

As the night wore on, the cold fog seemed to seep into his clothes and bones. His feet hurt from carefully picking his way across the uneven ground; his mind turned sluggish from the constant tension and vigilance.

A sharp prick from the dagger on his palm jolted his thoughts awake. He wiped the drop of welling blood before the scent could attract danger.

Sloppiness got people killed. And he intended to live a very long life.

Just one more mile.

The first meadow he'd come across made him foolishly assume he'd find more. That had been several hours ago.

Ahead, the trail branched into the fog. Mist drifted between silver-barked trees. Flynn rubbed the shell charm around his wrist and rounded on the right, following his Hunch.

What he wouldn't give to snuggle with Wisp right now. The hum from his bond skill brought a comforting warmth in the back of his mind. He was glad he hadn't brought Wisp along. The Trials of the Wandering Moon were too dangerous for a wee stoat.

I knew I should've rubbed Kai's head for Luck this morning. Maybe something would have stuck.

His own fortune thus far had been... less than sparkling.

At least, the last chittering centipede that jumped me had a sparkly Shard—

A rustle caught his ears.

Neither Hunch nor his Perception skills triggered, yet his instincts told him that wasn't the wind.

His stomach sank.

What are the chances it's just a fluffy rabbit?

He continued jogging, no hitch in his strides, giving no sign he'd noticed the stalker. His thoughts raced through the options. Run? Fight? Hide? What kind of monster hunted him?

Another rustle, somewhere closer.

Fog swirled in his peripheral vision, muddying sound and light. Mana Sense and Heightened Senses yielded no results. The woods held to their unnatural stillness. The sensation of being followed persisted, like an icy prickling itch at the back of his head.

His instincts screamed that the monster on his trail was unlike anything he'd encountered.

His hands tightened around his throwing daggers.

The extraction bracelet dug into his wrist. One teleport, and it could all be over. Just as he'd dared to hope for more... There'd be no cushy fallback plan for him. He didn't have the connections to repeat the year, and he wouldn't borrow more of Kai's money. Dropping out of Raelion meant—

No.

He may not be a monster like Kai and Rain—he was painfully aware of his limits—but he refused to concede.

A *crack* and a rustle sounded again. Closer still.

His skills failed to catch any clue. Cold sweat trickled down his back. What kind of monster could elude his Perception so completely? Not something he could face head-on even if he drained his Lightning.

Then just don't make it a fair fight.

Putting his weight on a root, Flynn flared his mana and activated Dash, exploding into a sprint. The trees blurred past. Wind whistled past his ears. His heart hammered against his ribs.

There.

The trail forked into three paths up a ridge. Five strides away. Three, one—

Shadow Magic wrapped tightly around him, erasing his presence and footsteps. With a sharp turn, he vaulted over a shrub on the left trail. His body twisted to avoid an alder. He

grabbed onto a low branch to slow his momentum, his knees bending to absorb his landing, and crouched in the mist-choked undergrowth.

His back pressed against the rough bark. In the night, he stood as good as invisible, fingers clenched around the hilt of his short sword, spells ready. The trail stood a few paces away, locked within his senses.

He forced his heartbeat to slow and listen.

Silence.

The presence following him had vanished.

A gust rustled the canopies, the sound different from before.

Where are you?

Flynn didn't let himself hope he'd lost the creature. He stood motionless in the brush, muscles drawn tight for action. Beasts or humans, they all had a limit to their patience. Eventually, the stalker would reveal itself.

Counting in his head, seconds pooled into hundreds. Then thousands. He ignored his cramping leg and remained as still as the trees.

Upon reaching three thousand, he dared to take a swallow breath. A few minutes later, he carefully stood up. Shadows still wrapped around him. He took a step to peer at the misty woods.

Nothing.

Perhaps some of Kai's Luck had rubbed off on him—

A cold breath kissed the back of his neck. A sharp snap.

Flynn jolted in panic. An iron grip closed on his sword arm before he could take a step.

"Caught you." A lilting voice whispered in his ear.

Flynn froze. His expression flashed through a dozen contrasting emotions before settling on an unconscious smile. Tension drained from his shoulders. His muscles uncoiled. For the first time since entering the woods, he truly relaxed.

With a shake of his head, he noticed his own smile and replaced it with a justified scowl. "Did you really have to do that? I think I lost ten years of my life." He turned to face the culprit.

Rain tilted his head. Standing amid a carpet of purple weeds, his pale hair and features gave him an ethereal appearance, fitting with the plumy mist. At least, until one noticed the

amused quirk at the corner of his lips. "Sorry, but you'd agree with me if you'd seen your face. I didn't know humans could make such expressions."

"Jerk." Flynn folded his arms with a harrumph. He didn't question how he'd seen his face from behind him. "You could have at least made it quick. I was freezing and cramping, sitting in wait."

Rain reached to rub his arm apologetically. "I didn't actually mean to drag it out. I was about to come out when you sensed me. Few would have noticed. Then you took off at a sprint and vanished. I almost missed you. You've gotten quite good at cloaking. And it took me a while to sneak close without you noticing."

"Hmm, is that supposed to make me feel better?" Flynn snorted, already struggling to look upset, ignoring the fuzzy warmth from the compliments.

"Well, it depends..." Rain leaned to rest his chin on his shoulder, looking at him with a pointy smile. "Did it work?"

"I—" Flynn swallowed and turned away—that face was entirely unfair. "Not in the slightest."

"I see... seems I'll have to work harder to earn my forgiveness." Rain slumped sadly and pulled up his satchel. "But maybe these could help." The shimmer and click of several Moonlight Shards came from inside.

How many did he— nope. I don't wanna know.

"I will not be bought with some shiny baubles." Flynn wrenched away his gaze with a vehement shake. "Those are yours. Though... I may allow you to assist me in finding more... And to escort me out of these cursed woods."

"Always too kind."

"Of course, I'm extremely magnanimous. How did you track me down so quickly?"

"Just got lucky." Rain gave a nonchalant shrug and stepped aside for him to go first. "I told you I would find you."

"That you did." Flynn brushed his shoulder as they returned to the safety of the trail. He suspected the enchantment on the shell charm might have aided that *Luck*, but let Rain enjoy his smug air of mystery. "Let's see if you can find us a place to rest too. I've had enough scares for a night."

"Right this way." Rain confidently strolled down the path. The violet moon peeked among the clouds. "Want a snack?" A bag of caramelized nuts appeared in his hand. "The rations they gave us taste like sawdust."

"Uhm, thanks." Flynn threw a handful into his mouth. The sweet, crunchy treat made him forget his aching body for a moment. Spatial artifacts were such cheats. And he was totally

jealous. "Dun't tink I've forgiven 'ou yet," he said through a mouthful of snacks. "You're buying me dinner too."

"I wouldn't dream of skimping. I already have a place in mind." Rain chuckled, then his eyes narrowed on him. "What's that?"

Flynn followed his gaze to the cut on his palm. "Oh... Just a couple of scratches. Nothing much."

"And that?" Rain frowned at the slight limp Flynn had been trying to hide. Lying still in wait had made his muscles grow stiff. His body was probably a tapestry of bruises beneath his clothes.

"A beast. It's dead."

"Good."

"Stop glowering, I'm fine."

"You are now. What did you encounter, exactly?"

"Nothing much." Flynn scrubbed back his hair as Rain nailed him with an expectant stare. He sighed. "Well, guess all my Luck went into running into you. I landed in a meadow with fifty strangers. The only group I could join was led by this smarmy highnose. The guy might as well have rubbed his palms and monologued about how he planned to use us as meat shields. No subtlety at all."

"That... sounds unpleasant." Rain's gaze sharpened. "What was his name?"

"Huh, no one important. A mist monster ambushed us twenty minutes after we set off anyway." Flynn threw himself in a dramatic rendition of the fight.

"Oily tentacles dragged screaming students into the fog. Skills and blades flailed ineffectively. Any chance of fighting back shriveled when our 'leader' tried to shove me forward and run away. The team immediately broke down. I didn't stop to watch what happened next. I barely managed to keep to the trail. When I looked back, I was alone." Flynn finished with a shrug.

"But things improved after that," he quickly added. They hadn't really, but seeing Rain's dark expression, he opted for some artistic license. "Now, enough about me. How did you get all those Shards? Have you met anyone else? Faced anything spooky?"

"It's been... fun." Rain brightened as he spoke. "I crossed a few clearings. The Shards really aren't that hard to find. I've simply collected what I come across. Aside from their camouflage, the beasts are quite docile too."

The more he recounted, the more Flynn's eye started to twitch.

Really, what did I even expect? Of course he tried to pet the mist hamster and found a Shard.

Rain knitted his brows. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Nope! Sorry, I got lost thinking." Flynn took in Rain's spotless clothes and perfectly tousled hair and let out a small laugh. "I'm glad you found me."

"I did promise." Rain's cheeks flushed.

"Yeah," he grinned. "Uhm, think we should look for Matthew? You know, before he gets up to some ridiculous and reckless plan without us. I wouldn't know who to lord my height over if something happened to him."

Rain chuckled. "I'll see what I can do. These woods are strange."

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"Hold up." Kai raised a hand.

In the darkness and silence, a glow filtered through the mist with the echoes of distant voices, their words too muffled to distinguish.

Valela paused beside him, her breathing labored and strands of hair messily stuck to her face. "What is it?" The hope in her eyes dimmed. "Do you think it's an illusion?"

"What? No, they're likely real students," Kai said. The whispers were too soft to forewarn a trap. "I think we're as safe as we can be in these woods. The mist wraiths... They've actually stopped following us."

Even after their counter-ambush, the creatures had continued stalking them. Not anymore. The constant background murmurs hadn't vanished, but one of their ominous notes had finally fallen silent.

Valela blinked, some of the tension draining from her shoulders. "We're... actually safe?" She took a step toward the flickering light. "We should—"

"Get our stories straight." Kai caught her sleeve. "Let's not be rash. Other students might not try to eat us, but they can be troublesome in different ways."

"But..." Valela bit his lip. She clearly wanted to argue, but refrained. "There could be someone we know."

"Then we'll meet them prepared," Kai was ready to be paranoid enough for the both of them. After hours being harassed by wraiths, it'd be easy to lower their guard. That's when most people made mistakes. "We can afford a moment to gather ourselves. And—"

"Right, your ring! Sorry, I should have remembered." She fumbled to untie her engraved crystal.

"It's fine. We're all tired." Kai stored away their lights, then hesitated with his sword.

Every martial student would have entered with their weapons, and the academy probably scattered more throughout the Trials. Plenty of logical explanations. Taking out the scabbard, he slid the white-steel blade into its bark-colored sheath, enchanted to look entirely unremarkable.

*Good to go.*

A few quick Water and Earth spells removed the worst of the dirt from their trek through the woods. They briefly discussed their stories and emergency plans.

"How do I look?" Valela smoothed the folds of her clothes. Despite five hours of running through haunted woods, she could have passed for someone arriving from a ballroom.

Kai smirked. "The perfect lady."

"Idiot," Valela mumbled, unable to hide her smile as she strolled ahead.

"Wait for me." Kai hurried after.

The oppressive mist began to recede between the trunks. The trail widened beneath their feet. A warm glow flickered ahead, accompanied by the crackling of burning wood.

The voices belonged to several students. Kai was confident in beating or getting a draw with any first-year, but that was one-on-one. Profession skills and enchanted equipment made things more unpredictable too.

*I've got no Shards worth stealing anyway.*

Valela's brows furrowed in concentration, trying to pick out familiar voices.

They emerged from the treeline. Kai blinked. The clearing spread over a gentle slope, perhaps two hundred meters across. Grass and wildflowers swayed beneath the pastel Moons. Mist lingered around the edges, as if reluctant to cross into the open space. The gray husk of a massive dead oak dominated the center.

"Thank the Spirits," Valela murmured, her shoulders visibly loosening.

*Dozens* of students clustered around three campfires. Some rested against packs or improvised bedrolls; others milled about. Their uniforms sported the crests from all three courses of study.

*They must've all got here through the trails.*

After five hours of mind-splitting shrieks, Kai enjoyed the murmur of human conversations and let out a breath. Judging by the torn robes, bloodied bandages, and exhausted postures surrounding the fires, many had endured a rough introduction to the Veiled Woods.

“Hey, you! Halt and identify yourselves!”

A trio of armed students with muddy uniforms barred their path. The dark-haired boy in the lead held up a spear; his gaze glanced over his sword before dismissing it.

“Hi,” Valela stepped forward as agreed —apparently, he wasn't very diplomatic. “We’re just students from Mana Studies.”

The trio looked over their pristine uniforms. “I can see. You must’ve gotten an easy trail.”

Valela’s smile turned stiff. “Something like that. Bless the Moon, these are the Trials of Fate.”

“Uh, they are,” the teen grunted. Despite the stern front, his guard had already lowered. “Did you find any Moonlight Shards?”

Valela gestured at their pristine appearance. “Unfortunately, no. We didn’t come across anything much.”

They exchanged a few more questions before the spearman pointed at the fires. “Okay. You can stay as long as you want. Camp rules are simple. No fighting. No stealing. No messing with sleeping students. If you’ve got a problem, take it outside the clearing. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds good,” Kai echoed when the gaze turned to him, finally able to enter the meadow.

Conversations drifted from the campfires. Some students slept in huddled clumps, while more shared animated stories, probing each other for information. From eavesdropping, they had all quite different experiences, and none had encountered the mist wraiths.

Heads turned toward their arrival. A few vaguely familiar faces from Mana Studies blinked in recognition. Kai returned the polite nods. His attention kept going to the dead oak that loomed above the campfires. The area around it was clear of students, but its placement seemed too deliberate to be random.

“We can take a look before setting down,” Valela said, following his gaze.

“Thanks. But I can wait—”

“Matthew? Is that you?” A girl with scarlet hair sprang up from a camp. “It’s actually you! What a coincidence.” Isadora Forlow stepped into the light. “It’s good to see you’re fine. Let me tell you, our journey to this clearing was a nightmare.”

“Hi.” Kai vainly tried to douse the chipper girl. “I’m glad you’re safe too.”

“Indeed.” Valela greeted curtly. “We were just about to find a spot to rest. Maybe we can catch up later.”

“Oh, let me show you around then.”

“Thank you. We’re quite alright. We wouldn’t want to bother your team.”

“It’s no bother—”

“Hey, do you know anything about that?” Kai pointed to the dead oak before the argument could escalate.

“That.” Isadora turned. “The dead tree? Just that. If it’s a puzzle or challenge, no one has figured it out. Feel free to take a look.”

“Thank you, we will.” Before he could move, Valela grabbed his hand with a decisive squeeze. Kai smiled, but sighed when Isadora followed after them. A few students glanced over, but no one else approached.

Up close, the dead husk towered over the clearing. It must have been truly massive in its heyday. Time had peeled back much of its bark, exposing its grayed shell. Deep fissures ran along the wood. Its branches had been reduced to stumps, but large gnarled roots still dug into the ground.

Kai circled it slowly, mostly to buy time. The wood proved surprisingly sturdy despite its dead appearance. Nothing else stood out. No mana, no hidden runes, or hidden features.

*Just a big ol’ dead tree.*

He really felt too tired to investigate more. He was about to turn away when a sudden inkling stopped him. A deep hollow opened in the trunk. The whispers from Hallowed Intuition were too jumbled to tell if he was imagining it.

*Might as well try.*

Climbing over the roots, he moved before the hollow. The pull strengthened. His hand reached out, channeling a tendril of mana before conscious thought. A spark of vibrant mana stirred deep within the oak.

Kai jolted back, hand on his sword.

Nothing happened.

He was just lowering his guard when—

*Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink.*

Like a slot machine paying out, shimmering violet crystals rolled from the hollow and pooled at his feet. Not one. Not two. *Five* of them. It didn't take a genius to recognize them as Moonlight Shards.

*The fuck—*

"Did you find anything, Matthew?" Isadora's cheery voice sounded, approaching behind him. "It's— oh!"

Kai turned to find both girls staring at the pile of crystals.

Kai turned to find the two girls behind him. "Uhm... This is not what it looks like?"

*Cursed Luck.*