

Chapter 419 - Camp Talks

As Val and Isadora watched him gaping, Kai bent to swiftly gather up the Moonlight Shards. The last thing he needed was more students spotting the bounty. Unfortunately, hiding the violet crystals in his satchel did not erase the girls' incredulous stares.

He almost wanted to laugh. Hours of being chased by mist wraiths, and the biggest haul they got sat in a hollow fifty meters from campfires full of students. If they realized, this could turn really bad, really quickly.

Damn, this isn't how Luck is supposed to work.

If he knew how, he'd be sending a *very* strongly worded letter to the Guide's customer service; instead, he had to settle for glaring up at the Moons. A tinkle of laughter echoed in his head, soon drowned in the droning of whispers.

And now I'm hearing voices again. Just great.

Hallucinations from sleep deprivation usually didn't kick in at least until twenty-four hours of wakefulness, but he *was* in Veiled Woods. It would fit with the professors' sadistic motto: excellence through adversity.

It's pretty dark and late. Maybe I can convince Isadora that she imagined the Shards. I just—

"Were those *five* Moonlight Shards?" Isadora's high-pitched voice cut through his thoughts. "How did you do it? Was there actually a puzzle hidden in the dead tree?"

Uh, gaslighting her might be harder than expected...

"I... you see..." Kai cleared his throat to buy time, splitting his tired mind to analyze the situation.

Valela stood between them, her wand hidden in her cupped hand, ready for casting. She sought out his gaze, brimming with curiosity, exasperation, and *confidence*. Tension churned beneath her practiced poise, but she had faith in him to resolve the situation.

Kai forced himself to meet Isadora's expectant face. "It was nothing much, really."

"Nothing much? Shards don't—"

"Could you please lower your voice?" He hissed, throwing a look at the campfires that made her shrink conspiratorially. It was a good sign that she hadn't shouted for anyone yet, though she might be playing the long game: act to lower his guard, or figure out how he'd obtained the Shards to find more.

"I— Sorry, I got excited. *But—*" Isadora gesticulated, trying to modulate her whispering. "My team spent an *hour* prodding every nook and cranny in this rotted tree. We even scanned

the dirt and roots. Most teams did the same, and they all found nothing. Then you knocked on the trunk and received *five* Shards.” Her strides brought her right in front of him. Hands set on her hips, she scrutinized him as if the answer was hidden in the pores on his face. “I mean... You must have done something. Shards don’t just roll out by themselves.”

“Don’t they?” Kai leaned on the rough bark, trusting Hallowed Intuition to warn him if she tried anything. As her mouth opened to respond, he continued. “We *are* in the Trials of the Wandering Moon.”

“That—” Her sharp eyebrows knitted, face pensive. “You mean it was just a coincidence? You simply had better *Luck*?”

Oh, more than you know.

Kai gave her a helpless shrug. “I know about the same as you here. But can you tell me you haven’t experienced stranger things in these woods?”

“That...” Isadora chewed her lower lip. “You make a fair point. Though it looked quite purposeful when you touched the trunk.”

“Well, I did channel Nature mana into it.” Kai ran his hand over the scratchy bark. “I opened myself to it. I didn’t expect *that* to happen.”

“Wait.” Valela stepped closer. “You linked your mana to an unknown tree with no idea what it might do?”

“I— Well—” Kai stepped back, palms raised in a pacifying gesture. “It seemed the easiest way to probe the oak. And the husk looked dead. There was very little risk.”

Valela sighed and gestured to the woods around the clearing. “Yeah, it’s not like we’re surrounded by haunted trees. Even if the mist stays, it doesn’t mean the clearing is safe.”

Okay. When you put it like that... it sounds pretty bad.

His apologetic look seemed to mollify her—for now. He couldn’t exactly explain the compulsion he’d felt to reach through the oak. And if he did, he wasn’t sure that would help.

“He was not the only one to try.” Isadora stared down the oak as if it might cough up more Shards. “So it was about channeling the correct affinity... Have you tried prodding it again?”

“Actually, I—” Kai caught Val’s darkening expression. “Definitely *not*. Once it stopped responding, trying to force a link seemed way too reckless, even for me. I doubt it would send out more.”

“Of course.” Isadora scowled at the hollow in the trunk. “Even the Trials of Fate must follow some rules.”

Kai nodded, happy to shift the conversation from his bounty to the mysterious puzzle.

"Maybe it wasn't even my affinity. It could as well be the position of the Moons. Or the spot of bark where I channeled. Or the..." He listed more wild speculation. Regardless of the truth, a roundabout explanation would sound more convincing than insisting to her that he didn't know why the Shards appeared. "There is no way to know unless it's repeatable. Did anyone else try channeling Nature essence?"

Isadora blinked. "... I don't think anyone in camp has a major affinity for it. A few have Plant Magic. Actually, I also have a middling affinity for it. I never trained much."

"Well, do you want to try?" Kai gladly stepped aside.

Target successfully sidetracked.

Despite its grayed wood, the peeled bark possessed the toughness of iron. They continued prodding around the roots and trunk. Yet the oak remained stubbornly unresponsive to their mana. The Moonlight Shard dispenser seemed to have run dry.

The occasional glances from the campfires faded as their hunt produced only blind fumbling.

"Nothing." Isadora pursed her lips. "Ugh! These Trials are so frustrating. At least when it was just a dead tree, I could ignore it. What am I missing?" Her head snapped toward him. "What did you do exactly?"

"I've already told you everything. Maybe it's a combination of requirements and random chance." Kai climbed off a root near the hollow, his arms scratched from reaching inside. "It's gotten late. We should get some rest. This is just the first night; we have four more days."

"You might be right. I've had enough of this." Isadora dusted off her hands and clothes before turning toward the fires. "Why don't you camp with us, Mat. You must be exhausted. And mages should stick together."

Valela's look could have frozen the sea, though the other girl didn't seem to notice.

Kai spoke first, leading them out of the roots. "Thanks, but we wouldn't want to impose on your team." Or give her more chances to steal or extort Shards for her silence.

"It's no imposition. I'm sure they would appreciate the company."

"Mhmm, isn't your brother here too?" Kai glanced at the camp, where he'd spotted another redhead. Really, he was way too tired to entertain Castor's inferiority complex. "Has he gotten over never beating me?"

Quite lucky they entered together.

Isadora bit her lip. "He—"

"It's alright. We can speak again in the morning, *yeeeeah?*" Kai finished with an exaggerated yawn.

Receiving the approximation of a nod, he muttered a few more pleasantries before splitting off for an empty section of the meadow. Beneath his relaxed demeanor, his body coiled, aware of the Shards in his satchel.

Crisis probably averted?

"Finally," Valela exhaled a tired sigh. "I thought she would never stop talking. Huh, what's that look for?"

"Nothing." Kai suppressed a smile.

"Okay, maybe I was a little curt." Valela puffed her cheeks. "But she was being pushy. Do you think she'll—"

Kai signed for silence. "The clearing is too crowded. Let's find a place to camp first." With almost fifty students gathered, no doubt they had many eavesdroppers.

Valela watched the crackling campfires with longing as he headed away, her eyelids already drooping.

"C'mon, there's no need to envy them. Do you have any experience camping in the wilderness?"

"Yes, I have set up tents. With some aid..."

"Okay. Why don't you help me gather dry wood for the fire?"

They moved together to search the nearby treeline for dry kindling before Kai just drained the water from a green branch. It was a delicate spell, but it didn't matter if he warped the wood.

Valela glanced down at her own measly pile of twigs. "That's cheating."

"No such thing. Mages work smarter, not harder." Kai gathered the branches under one arm. "C'mon, I've picked us a spot to settle down."

He aimed for a small ridge along the slope of the clearing, away from larger groups and the trails winding into the foggy woods.

It was amusing to watch Valela fumble with a campfire, though she did not share his option, threatening to bonk him with a stick if he chuckled again. *Which* only made him laugh harder.

Faking a cough, Kai turned his attention to their camp. Earth and Nature mana flowed into the soil. The uneven ground compressed into a sheltered nook. Purple reeds sprouted and wove themselves into two cushioned mats, while the grasses drew back from the fire pit.

"My lady." He bowed aside with a flourish. "I hope the accommodations are to your liking."

"Thank you." Valela sat herself on the living mattress. "It's springy... more comfortable than I thought. Have you done this before?"

"A few times." Compared to his shelters in the Sanctuary, this barely deserved a mention. Necessity had a way to teach how to efficiently reshape the ground.

"You will have to teach me sometime." Valela pulled him by his sleeve, then snapped her fingers at the twigs. The fire caught with a crackle. Warm orange light pushed back the night as they settled. The seeping cold finally seemed to retreat.

Beyond their little camp, students chatted in hushed voices. The mist still drifted through the trees. For one brief moment, they simply enjoyed the cozy atmosphere before necessity reasserted itself.

The black pearl in his palm projected a privacy bubble around them. "We can speak freely now. Just mind that people might read your lips if you face the clearing."

"Mhmm." Valela drew up her legs, resting her chin on her knees, and threw him a sidelong glance. "Did you really get those Shards by accident?"

"Yup! I never lied outright. I have a few guesses, but nothing certain." The Moon of Fate meant the Trails would be influenced by Luck and chance, but not that they followed no rule at all.

Valela buried her head in her knees before lifting it again. "I really thought Isadora would try to steal your Shards."

"*Our* Shards. No argument. A team shares. And Isadora might still try. Acting earlier would have risked alerting the whole clearing. It makes more sense to gather her team and exhort us, while everyone else is asleep."

Valela stiffened. "You mean we're in danger."

"Well, always assume that until we leave the Trials. But I don't think Isadora will actually try to exhort us."

"Why? Do you really trust her?"

"It's not a matter of trust." Kai poked at the fire with a stick. "I just needed to convince her we won't go down without a commotion. They might try to approach us covertly, but attacking would be stupid. That would expose them to the rest of the camp for retaliation. Five Shards are a lot, but not worth that risk. Especially this early in the Trials. Though... people don't act rationally. So we can't lower our guard."

"We could pick a trail and leave," Valela said. "The Veiled Woods won't let them follow us."

"Yes, but we won't know what we'll encounter either, or when we'll find the next safe meadow. From what I overheard, the wraith woods were worse than most. Still, we'll be sloppier without rest. Dawn is only a few hours away."

Valela nodded. "It's about weighing risk. The danger of continuing is greater than that of staying here."

"Exactly." Kai smiled faintly. "Though my judgment could be wrong."

"No, I agree with you. Staying around so many other participants is both a danger and a safeguard. As long as there are many conflicting interests, everyone will be too afraid to act and leave their backs open to the others."

"Well then... we should get some sleep while we can." Kai pulled three folded shirts from his ring. From the assorted supplies he'd spotted around the meadow, a few other students must have spatial storage. So he felt less apprehensive about using his. "Here. Your satchel will make a nicer pillow if you stuff them inside. The fire should last until daylight, assuming it doesn't rain."

"Thank you, Mat." She accepted them, looking thoughtful.

"It's nothing much." He grinned. "I would have been in trouble against those fae wraiths without you."

"Wait." Valela sat upright. "After all that, shouldn't we set a guard?"

Kai winked. "Of course, our stalwart sentinel is already on duty."

"Who—"

"*Mroow*." Hobbes sauntered into their firelight. His fluffy tail swished behind him like a banner.

Valela blinked. "How..."

"He has his way. No one will disturb us till dawn."

I pity anyone who tries.

"Mrow." Hobbes pounced on his cot, kneading his leg with needy eyes. The bond pulsed with disgruntled energy from crossing the Veiled Woods.

Kai scratched the back of his neck and took out a fish jerky/treat.

Yeah, I know, buddy. These woods suck. It's just a few days. You know how helpless we are without you.

“Mew.”

But of course!

The belly rubs, treats, and praise mollified Hobbes' mood. It seemed the confounding trails mainly relied on annoying illusions, and only mediocre spatial components—at least, from the disdainful impressions Hobbes had been sending him for the last several hours. It was a thoroughly annoying affair.

His familiar couldn't navigate the woods, but he could find him by tracing their bond and ignoring his other senses.

After getting his fill of pets, he settled atop of him, tail flicking lazily as he surveyed the clearing.

Kai lay down awkwardly to accommodate him. “Good night.”

“Good night...” Valela still stared, mumbling something about him and Hobbes being fit for each other.

He wasn't sure what she meant, probably just the lack of sleep.

Lying down, he let his brows furrow behind his assured/confident front. These Trials promised to be quite troublesome.

Just hold on until dawn. Then another four days. Easy.

Hopefully, Isadora would keep her mouth shut. Behind her bubbly vibe, her gesture felt more calculated. That could be both good and bad. At least competent people could be relied on to act logically. Usually. But if she spread rumors of their windfall, they could easily obstruct a rival even if they didn't get the Shards.

Okay, enough catastrophizing. Not everyone is some evil mastermind.

Reaching into his satchel-pillow, Kai tried transferring the Shards into his ring. Nothing happened. The crystals clinked in place.

Of course... that would have been too convenient

He'd thought they exuded/had a strange mana glow. There must be more to them than tokens to keep score in the Trials. Though this was neither the time nor the place to study them.

Restless, Kai reached for Hallowed Intuition, trying to recapture the odd feeling when he'd divined the paths. The omnipresent whispering. Were they making the right choice? Should they stay? Or run for the woods now?

The murmurs rose and swayed.

Danger thrummed all around. The woods hummed with it. The warnings meshed together. The feeling slipped through his grasp with vague impressions.

Staying here felt calmer, though perhaps the threats lurking deeper in the Trials simply overshadowed the present ones.

Kai exhaled slowly and released the skill, the throb in his temples already returning. Beside him, Valela's breathing had already begun to deepen.

That's as clear as it's gonna get.

He shifted on the reed mat. Since the Sanctuary, sleeping on the ground had become easier than his bed. You rested when you could; no time wasted worrying. His mind eased with habit.

His eyelids dropped with exhaustion.

It felt as though he'd only just closed his eyes when he opened them again. Sharp sunlight beamed down on his face. Dawn was just cresting above the treeline, piercing the morning mist.

Sitting up, something soft brushed against his arm.

Kai blinked.

Sometime during the night, Valela must have rolled over, taking his arm as her pillow. Morning light glimmered on her auburn hair. Her eyes fluttered open. "Uhm... What—"

"Nothing! It's morning. We should get up." Kai sprang to his feet, face flushing.

Not the time and place. Not the time and place, Kai.

The fire had burned down to glowing embers. Dew glistened across the purple grasses. Students stirred from their camps, their numbers noticeably larger than the night before, almost a hundred students.

Behind him, Valela stretched with a sleepy yawn. Her expression jolted awake as she realized where she was. "Uh, yes. No time to waste."

Whispers stirred, pressing on his mind.

Across the clearing, a redhead huddled around a campfire, speaking with a cluster of students. Hair too short. Not Isadora, her brother, Castor. He gestured toward the dead oak, then in their direction.

Shit.

The whispering seemed to thicken.

Ding

Congratulations, Hallowed Intuition has reached lv100! Requisites for skill evolution met!