

Chapter 277 - Misty Truths

Kai had crossed an ocean and the untamed lands of the mainland, faced pirates and bandits, gone through more unforeseen accidents than he cared to admit. With his sister standing before him well and alive, it had all been worth it.

I made it in time.

He stepped forward, arms raised, about to run towards her when he became conscious of all the eyes on them. There'd be plenty of cracks to fix in his cover without adding more. The journey to the continent could explain many changes, but not the people he knew from the archipelago.

Mom should have warned her of the situation.

The question was how much Alana had managed to explain. Woken from her stupor, Kea abandoned her bow and strode as if she intended to march over him. She stopped in her tracks within arm's length and studied him with an unblinking gaze.

"Uh, hi," Kai reciprocated the look, trying to recoup the changes he missed in over two years. "I'm Mat—"

The punch caught him in the shoulder, not strong enough to seriously hurt him, though not a light tap either. "Ouch." He massaged his arm. "What was that for..."

Kea pulled him in a tight hug, nestling her head beside his neck. "I— I had to make sure you were real. You're... really here..."

"I'm..." He gulped to keep his voice steady, whispering. "I'm sorry I made you think I was dead."

"Uhm..." She hung her weight on him. "Flynn insisted you were alive... but why... why didn't you come back sooner..."

"I..."

What could he say? The truth hardly changed what he had put his family through.

"I came back as soon as I could."

Kea continued to hug him amidst the fog, accepting his answer with a low huff. There was so much they needed to say, so much to catch up on. But not now. Beyond her, the trio was observing them with intent gazes, Caeli was already coming closer.

Not even a moment of peace...

Was that too much to ask? Having their reunion without worrying about how breaking his identity could mess up their lives? The world keeps turning, uncaring of who it crushed or inconvenienced.

There'll be time.

Kai was about to speak when Kea pulled back. Her arms still held onto his, while her face was an impassive mask. "It's nice to meet you again, Mat. We should talk later."

"Yes, I..."

"Mrooow." Hobbes grumbled at his feet, peeved at being ignored. He gave Kea the stink eye.

His sister jolted back before finding the source of the noise. "A cat? Where did you come from?" She leaned in to pet him but the furball turned and swatted p her hand with his tail.

"Hobbes is my familiar—"

"Is he really yours?" Caeli lost any interest in them upon seeing the fluffy silver ball. "Here, kitty kitty!" She extended her hand, palm up, with a baby voice.

From the height of a domestic cat, Hobbes managed to look down on her. His violet eyes weighed what punishment befitted such impudence: to think *he* had to move to get scratched—simply preposterous.

Caeli giggled at his grumpy face, then raised her head to glare at Kai. "How could you bring him to such a dangerous place? What if the fairies attacked him?"

It would have made all of this a lot easier.

"I—"

"Kea, you're safe," Niel reached them with a bright grin, throwing a curious glance at Hobbes before focusing on him. "I guess you already know Mat."

Mari walked behind him. Her eyes darted between them to make sense of the situation.

"I told you to wait inside the tower." Kea rested her hands on the hips, her scolding look reminiscent of Alana. "Tell me you didn't fight a swarm of yellow fairies. You could have all gotten killed."

"Well, you left us little choice," Caeli stopped her attempts to coax the cat. "You were gone for hours. What were we supposed to do? Did you find a way out?"

Kea crossed her arms with a harrumph. "I was getting close."

"Actually, it was my fault for convincing them to go out." Kai rubbed his neck.

“You...?” His sister pursed her lips and shook her head. “These three should have known better.”

“Huh, how do you know each other?” Niel peered at them. “Don’t take it personally Mat, but I was half convinced you lied. Kea never mentioned you.”

“We’re more like acquaintances. It has been a while since we last met.”

“Really? It didn’t loo—”

“Mat!” Two more figures approached through the thinning fog. Rain stayed aside, taking in the scene with a furrowed brow. Flynn hurried closer to scan him for injuries before turning to Kea with a relieved smile. “Thank the spirits you’re fine. You made us all worry. Why don’t you reply to more letters.”

“Sorry, I’ve been busy,” his sister muttered without her usual edge. “You didn’t have to come here...”

“Of course, I did. You know I’m a sucker for trouble and creepy towns. How could I let you have all the fun? I missed you.” He leaned to hug her.

Kea bit her lip but didn’t pull away. “Uh... Thank you for coming.”

She has really changed...

Another round of greetings and presentations between the two groups brought everyone up to speed.

“So, you were the family friend Mat told us about,” Niel gave Flynn a friendly pat—apparently they had already met. “It’s good to see a face from home.”

“Who else could it be?” Flynn also gave a nod to Mari though without any recognition. “What about the other guys that traveled from the archipelago?”

“Oh... It’s just us now,” Niel smiled bitterly. “They thought the mainland would be different, and the case in Limgrell didn’t help. The last two left for Arphusa a month ago. Though we got Caeli in exchange.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The girl snapped at him. “You’d be lost without me.”

“Nothing. You’re much better than them.”

“Oh.” She turned away with a slight blush. “Thanks. Anyway, why did you all come here?” Her gaze lingered a second on Rain who smiled politely. “Kea’s right. While I appreciate it, you all didn’t need to come.”

“*Really?*” Flynn craned his neck to look at the ancient stone tower. “So you weren’t just trapped in there waiting to get finished off? What even happened...? Mat suddenly disappeared into the mist. Then it suddenly cleared up”

Niel scratched his jaw. “It’s a bit of a long story. We might have been in a little trouble if Mat didn’t help...” The young man turned to him. “Your skills with mana are amazing. How did I never hear about you in the archipelago?”

“I’ve never seen someone cast spells like you,” Caeli said. “Isn’t that right, Mari?”

“Hmm, it was quite something.” The girl nodded, quite timid with all the new faces.

“Did he?” Kea’s intense stare soon turned disinterested. “You must show me sometime.”

Is she acting?

“I would have gotten killed without you watching my back.” Now that the pressing danger was gone, the questions on everyone’s mind threatened to flood him. “How did you end up here?”

Caeli kicked a patch of the dried grass. “We were set up! They know we’re getting close to finding out what is going on with this town, and they want to shut us up.”

“We don’t actually know that...” Mari drew circles on the ground with her staff. “We’re not that close to solving the case. There could be many other explanations.”

“I’m not giving up till we find Caeden.” Caeli pressed her lips in a thin line.

“And neither am I.” Kea nodded, the mood quickly turning somber. Caeden must be the team member who had gone missing. From Valela’s information, it had been some time since the disappearance.

Niel shifted weight between his feet. “You know he could be—”

“Don’t you dare say that!” Caeli pointed a finger to his face, her lower lip trembling. “We don’t know that. We don’t...”

The wispy mist whirled around them, shrouding the sun and darkening the day. Kai wasn’t sure of the group’s dynamics, but convincing Kea to leave might be even harder than expected.

Taking advantage of the silence, he tapped Flynn’s back with a silent request.

The teen dipped his head to show he understood. “Well...” he clapped his hands to break the atmosphere. “I don’t know you, guys. But I don’t want to remain out here a moment longer. We can decide our next steps in front of a warm meal. This mist is freezing my bones.”

“Now, that’s a great idea.” Niel clapped his back. “Limgrell isn’t the most hospitable town, but I know a great tavern.”

The circle of murmurs didn’t take long to agree, eager to reach a sheltered place.

“You’re not coming?” Kea noticed that Kai wasn’t moving.

“I want to take a look at the tower. It reminds me a little of the ruins we have in the archipelago.” He smiled, getting more information wasn’t worth revealing his own. “You can go ahead without me. I’ll reach you in a little while.”

“Are you sure?” Niel went to fetch his shield. “Even if the cloud fairies are gone, this place is still a mana zone. I’ve seen more than one adventure get mangled by red beasts because they were caught unprepared.”

“I’ll stay with him.” Rain spoke up for the first time. “We’ll return before dark.”

“I could also—”

“They can look after themselves.” Flynn waved away the worries, stopping by Kai just long enough to whisper. “Just leave them to me.”

Kea gave him one last glance, clearly wanting to say more. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

We’ll talk later.

The group was swallowed by the mist and soon disappeared from his other senses. Kai couldn’t wait to get to a warm place, though he had to figure out how to explain his elemental magic—the teleportation especially. For now, his best policy was to avoid them.

Thank the spirits I didn’t show my sword.

“Your sister seems to be doing fine.” Rain swept away the fog around them with a distracted wave. “Mat... I’m sorry if I couldn’t get to you. When I realized something was off with the mist, you had already disappeared. There is still something weird...”

“With the ground. Yes, I noticed too.” That was the second reason why Kai decided to stay behind. If someone tried to kill his sister, they’d learn the consequences of messing with his family.

What kind of trouble did she run into...

Rain lay a palm on the withered grass. A pulse of mana swept around them. “There is some kind of large-scale array to restrict our skills.”

That’s quite a roundabout way to get rid of someone. Hmm... we’d better hurry.

“Do you know where it’s located?”

The siren shook his head. “I’m not familiar with this enchanting style, but it’s rapidly decaying. They must have set some countermeasures to cover their tracks.”

This affair is just getting shadier.

Kai pushed Mana Observer into the ground, finding much less resistance than he expected. Looking at the misty meadow of wild weeds and the crystal lake further on their right, there weren’t any obvious signs of hiding place to look for. No doubt it had been cloaked too.

Unless... it can’t be that obvious.

“I want to check inside the tower.” Kai walked up to the colossal stone structure.

Rain followed him, amused by the climb. Without a swarm of voracious cotton balls, it only took minutes to slip inside the window and descend to the ground floor.

“What are we looking for?” The siren scratched a line along the rock.

The stones of the pavement were aligned with almost no seam, except for one square of compacted ground. Mari had said there could be some old enchantments hidden within the foundations. It felt quite strange that someone had gone through the trouble of setting up this trap and then forgot such a glaring detail. Sure, the team would have been trapped till they starved or went out, but still...

Whatever it is, there must be something.

Kai channeled a pulse of Earth mana to scan the buried section. His spell was eroded by the waning force, not before he managed to see the tower indeed continue for another floor—perhaps more.

There were no signs of runes or enchantments, though he had expected them to be cloaked anyway. He didn’t have enough mana to excavate the entire floor, and time if Rain was right about the array decaying.

Guess I’ll just have to get lucky.

Kai gathered his elemental motes and focused on Hallowed Intuition and Treasure Sense for any hint. He wasn’t sure if it was just a phantom impression or the skills working when he got the sudden whim to search two meters below on his left.

Come to me.

He grabbed onto the patch of underground and delicately pulled upward. Earth writhed and wiggled, rising to pile on his sides. When he thought he had been holding onto just a pile of

mud, a black lacquered corner poked out of the dirt, followed by more sharp sides till it revealed a casket with a silver latch.

“You’re really good at this. This was really well cloaked,” Rain crouched to observe closer. “I’m not familiar with these runes...”

“What— Oh...” Inky black symbols had been engraved across the casket. Kai struggled to make them out against the black wood; using Mana Observer only marginally helped. The jagged symbols were vaguely familiar, though also different from anything he had met before. Each line simmered with a swirl of motes. “They’re channeling...”

“Darkness,” the siren concluded for him. “The element works quite well to conceal and suppress.” His fingers traced the casket up to the silver latch. “I don’t think it’s rigged to explode.”

Oh...

“Thanks for checking.” Hearing no whispers, Kai carefully lifted the lid. The insides were laden with another web of inky runes. In the center lay a pearlescent substance that looked like soap bubbles with some opaque forms floating inside.

He poked it with his index, jolting back when the shapes inside moved.