

## Chapter 272 - Cleanup

Bodies lay strewn around the battlefield illuminated by eerie crystal lights. The downpour covered the stench of blood and insides, though it couldn't hide the listless eyes and severed limbs. Everyone dead, in just over a minute.

*It's over...*

With the tension of the fight dissipating, the cold water made Kai shiver. His clothes were drenched and covered in mud. A Water and Earth spell made the worst tickle out of his trousers before he turned to the siren. "You can't go on a suicide mission without telling anyone. What would have happened if I didn't come?"

"I had everything under control." Rain said with a harrumph.

"Did you...?" Kai arched an eyebrow, actually curious about the answer. The last volley of fireballs had looked pretty close to turning him into a grilled fish.

The boy chewed his lip, staring at his boots. "I'm not used to fighting on land. I didn't think it'd be so *clumsy*."

*If you call that clumsy...*

A jumble of mixed emotions tugged at him. Kai threaded toward the siren, ignoring the butchered bodies. "Let me look at your wounds. What you did was foolish and reckless."

*Spirits, is this how I look from the outside?*

"It's nothing." Rain looked to examine his cuts and blistered skin with a slight grimace. "I always heal fast anyway."

Kai poked the boy's ribs where a spear had split his jacket, the shirt beneath was already drenched in blood. It was red—just like a human, though a shade brighter.

"Ahi!" Rain flinched back. "Why'd you do that?"

"That doesn't look like nothing. And it'll get worse if it gets infected."

"Sirens don't get infections. Their blades weren't imbued in poison or a rotting curse."

Kai sized up the stubborn teen with all his patience. "We aren't in the sea. Have you ever gotten injured on land?" If dirt or mud healed inside the wound, Constitution would let him survive, but wouldn't spare him the pain.

The siren examined his cut, suddenly hesitant. "I— I'm not sure..."

“Do you want to take the chance?” Kai waved a hand to redirect the freezing downpour away from them. “If it infects us we’ll have to open it up again.”

“You’re right…” Rain shifted weight between his feet. “And I’m sorry for leaving without a word. I thought I could make it back before anyone noticed but I got lost in the woods. How do you orient yourself when trees all look the same?”

*That is not the issue.*

“Experience.” He replied tersely and pulled back his wet hair. “What were you thinking coming here *alone*?”

“Huh… you were worried about being followed and attacked. So I fixed the issue.”

“By *blindly* running into a group of marauders and getting yourself killed?” Kai struggled to keep his voice from rising. His gaze fell on the vacant eyes lying around them. All these people had come here to rob and likely murder them too. *Still*… Part of him wondered if there could have been another way.

Rain was seemingly unaffected by such a dilemma, paying the corpses no more attention than the rocks and weeds. “I asked them to leave. They wouldn’t. If you let your enemies live, they won’t fear retribution and ambush you when you’re weakened.”

*That’s quite bleak.*

Kai recognized the tone used to repeat a learned lesson. It was easy to forget that behind Rain’s naive curiosity and friendly smile, the boy wasn’t human. He had been brought up in some abyssal palace by scheming sirens.

*I should have expected it.*

Apart from a few culture shocks early on, morals hadn’t differed too much from Earth in the peaceful archipelago. *But I’m not there anymore.* He had landed on the mainland for less than a week and had already met a band of adventurers willing to kill him if they could get away with it.

With the right conditions and incentives, humans were capable of far worse. By adding supernatural powers and alien races, the equation only got grimmer.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” Rain tilted his head. “I know you’re worried about your sister. Now we can reach Limgrell without watching our backs.”

“Yeah,” Kai pressed his lips together. He did feel more secure without the whispers pulsing in his mind, though the corpses of the fallen hardened his words. “What were we supposed to think if you died here without anyone knowing? *You* said you wanted to travel with us. You can’t just,” he gestured at the broken trees and lifeless bodies. “On your own.”

Rain looked at the destruction, any reply dying in his mouth. “I... understand.” He hung his head low. “It was irresponsible to come here without consulting with anyone. I’m not used to having companions, though... that’s just an excuse. I can’t fix this, but I promise it won’t repeat.”

“Hmm,” Kai muttered. Despite his irritation, he could have hardly hoped for a better result. Despite how alien the siren was, they still had some common ground. “Let’s check your wounds and get back before Flynn freaks out.” His gaze lingered on the dead. “We can get to a drier place first.”

“I can hold the spell.” The siren overimposed on the dome shielding them from the storm. The only mana ripples were the streams of motes flowing to refill his reserves.

*And I thought the scariest part about sirens was their charms.*

While it was hard to judge Rain’s Water Magic without knowing his Spirit and Mind, he definitely didn’t skim on skill training.

*Let’s just go back...*

Kai walked around a severed head, headed for the thicker woods for cover. Given the crimes the adventurers planned, it was unlikely anyone knew they were here. No one would be coming looking for this mob of wannabe bandits, and the mana forest would swallow the clues.

*I can’t leave them like this...*

Mana Observer spread over the ruined meadow; vibrant green and brown mote flowed toward his fingers in preparation. There were twelve bodies and more spare *pieces* that complicated the task. Once he had locked onto everything, Kai released the spell into the ground.

Roots and earth writhed to bury what had been breathing humans just minutes before. Those empty eyes would find rest beneath the earth. It was probably better than they deserved, he doubted they would have given them the same mercy.

Rain knitted his pale brows at the scene. “You’re really good with multicasting. Do you use Mind Construct or Parallel Thought?”

*Is this what it means to have been born among the elites?*

To hope the siren had missed any of the spells would mean deluding himself. Kai stopped beneath a young elm and shaped the branches into a makeshift umbrella to protect them from the rain, the roots rising to make two stools. “I use Split Mind.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that one’s good too.” Rain tested one of the gnarly chairs with a curious look. “One of my tutors had it. She said it was a chore to learn.”

“Yeah,” Kai hovered to take a look at his wounds. All but the one on his side had already stopped bleeding. It was quite deep, ending just before it nicked the bone. “Hmm... Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What grade were you born at?”

“Huh, Yellow ★,” Rain said as if it was nothing much. “My father believed any higher would be detrimental and lazy.”

*What the fuck!*

Kai halted opening a jar. Being born at the grade he had spent most of his life reaching... His mind went blank when it tried to come up with a response. It wasn't like the thought had never crossed his mind and yet, how could someone draw their first breath at Yellow? It was unfathomable. Not only that, Rain's phrasing implied his parents could have aimed for higher.

*That must be why they're called the higher races...*

Once his thoughts reconnected, strangely, a weight had been lifted off his chest. What was the point of being upset when it had never been a race to begin with? They were sons of two different worlds—any comparison was pointless.

“You were born at the beginning of Orange, right?” Rain said, in an obvious attempt to fill the silence.

“I... no... I was born at the bottom of Red.” At this point, keeping up obvious lies would be more counterproductive than useful. No one liked to be treated like an idiot, and expectations of trust were more likely to be repaid.

“Uhm, Flynn told me... I must have misremembered.”

“You didn't. He was trying to keep my secret. Brewing is one of my main occupations, but I'm not the son of a hermit alchemist.”

Rain's inquisitive gaze showed no surprise. “You don't have to tell me anything.”

“I know.” Kai used Water and Earth Magic to clean his wounds and offered him a balm. He had visited five Alchemy shops in Varsea to refill his stash of potions to acceptable levels. “My real name isn't Matthew, but Kai. I had to change my identity after I ran into some... *complications.*”

Rain finished dressing the wounds, his eyes went wide before he reined it in with a blank look that hid a thousand thoughts.

“C'mon,” he sighed. “Ask me what you want to know.”

The boy didn't hesitate. "Are you the son of someone important? Is that why you are on the run?" His eyes glimmered with intrigue. "Did they try to kill you to steal your inheritance?"

*Do sirens also have tropey stories?*

He gave him a wry smile. "My family is as ordinary as it gets. I was lucky to find some really good teachers when I was young. The rest is just training."

"I see..." Rain rubbed his chin like a detective assembling the clues of a crime. "Did you find some kind of *treasure*? It could also be some secret knowledge that a cabal of powerful sorcerers wants to keep hidden at any cost. Were you forced to fake your death and run before they silenced you?"

Spirits, that was... a surprisingly accurate description of what happened.

*Is my life some sort of telenovela?*

"Something like that. I'd be grateful if you'd keep it hidden and keep calling me Mat."

Rain drew three fingers over his face in a solemn gesture, his intense gaze thrumming with excitement. "You have my word. I won't speak even if they torch my soul."

*That sounds a little extreme...*

Kai placed a hand on his shoulder with an equally earnest look. "I appreciate it. *Now*, we should probably go back. Flynn must already be losing his mind."

That finally pierced the siren's daydreaming. "I should apologize to him too." He leaped to his feet, taking a step toward the dark woods before stopping. "Er... Do you know how to get back?"

*And how did you plan to come back alone?*

Kai shook his head. "Follow me. I'd still like to get some sleep tonight."

The storm had quietened to a drizzle. He retraced his steps by following the higher mana density and a good dose of luck. A pack of howling wolves battling some other beasts forced them to take a detour before spotting the oaks where they had built their shelter.

Thank Yatei, both Flynn and Daniel were still there—it would have been a nightmare if his friend had come looking for them.

*If he's the responsible one we've crashed past the bottom.*

They silently climbed to not wake their guide—who had somehow managed to sleep through it all. Flynn was chewing his nails raw standing on guard, and noticed them first.

“You’re alive.” He pulled the siren onto the narrow platform and into a hug. “Uhm,” he lowered his voice and awkwardly stepped back for how the branches allowed. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry,” Rain said with a downcast look. “I acted without thinking...” He briefly repeated his apologies and oath.

Kai barely had time to lift himself when Flynn gave him his own crushing hug. “Thanks, we’re alright.”

“You took so long to come back. I was going crazy.” The teen raked a hand through his hair, more pulling than scrubbing. “Are you, okay?”

“Yeah, it was quite the distance.”

“I wouldn’t have gotten away so lightly if Mat didn’t come.” The siren still looked a little forlorn. “But now it’s all resolved.”

*It’s nice being appreciated.*

Flynn turned to stare at him. “You didn’t do anything reckless, *right?*”

“Of course not,” Kai patted his back and gestured to the sleeping seeker. “You’ve stayed up far beyond your guard duty. We should all go rest. There will be time for explanations in the morning.”

His eyes narrowed. “*Mat...*”

“I’ll stay up to guard,” Rain quipped, already sitting in position.

Kai was all too glad for the distraction. “That’s not necessary.”

“It’s the least I can do. And it won’t affect me even if I skip sleep for a few days.”

*Spirits, is there some advantage you don’t get?*

“If you insist.” He threw a thin blanket over himself and grew a vine to tie himself to the tree. “Good night.”

With his most pressing worries solved, Kai slipped into the restful emptiness in seconds.

It was far too soon when dawn forced his eyes open.

He rubbed his arms to warm himself, shaking the dew off his clothes and cover. The smell of wet greenery and a chill breeze swept any remnant of slumber from his mind. Kai stretched his arms and legs. Sleeping on the tree branch has left him a little sore—nothing that a little stretching couldn’t fix.

The sky had cleared to a piercing blue. Kai did a quick head count, everyone was accounted for and already up. Flynn and Rain were chatting on a branch, their words and faces blurred by the siren's wards.

Daniel was retrieving his mottled tarp from the shelter, throwing them the duo wary looks.

"Morning." Kai sat up.

The seeker jolted and almost fell from the tree. "Morning," he grunted, acting as if nothing happened. "We should get moving. We're losing daylight."

*What's up with him?*

Daniel quickly distributed tasks to dismantle the camp and get them back on march. "We'll eat on the way and move toward the outskirts. Just because most predators hunt at night, it doesn't mean we're safe."

Throughout the morning, the man never mentioned their pursuers. He must have either woken up last night or deduced what happened from Rain's light bruises. While Madame Le Garde's travel clothes had been enchanted for minor self-repair, the cuts from the fight were still evident.

*Some blessed quiet.*

Hobbes joined them at noon to get his dose of scratches and mount on his backpack like a king on his palanquin. Without the whispers plaguing his mind, crossing the Lorvyn Woods and the Rustling Hills seemed more like a fun, if rushed, excursion.

Kea waited for him in Limgrell.