

Chapter 278 - Looming Darkness

“What is this?” Kai scrunched his nose at the slimy substance coating his finger. He rubbed his index and thumb, before using Water Magic to wash it away.

It's almost like...

The clues clicked into place, and one of the mysteries unveiled.

“It looks like a clutch of eggs of some kind,” Rain voiced his thoughts, prodding them with his nail. “You were attacked by a swarm of creatures in the mist, right?”

“Yeah...”

Guess we know why the fairies were so angry.

With every answer more questions arose. The enchantments must have stopped the cloud creatures from approaching and retrieving their offspring. Either by mistake or compromise, it also kept the last floor of the tower safe from the mist.

“Hmm, Mat...” The siren pulled his attention back gesturing to the casket. “I think we’re out of time.”

The decay must have quickened when they opened the lid. The inky runes sizzled, wispy plumes of Darkness rising from the jagged symbols. Hallowed Intuition’s silence told him the runes meant to consume themselves without any explosion.

Dammit!

He scoured the ring for his dad’s pen and a leather notebook, and furiously scribbled down the fading arrays on a blank page. His eyes darted between the casket and paper, strained between the desire for accuracy and the need to jot down before it was too late. Approximation wasn’t a word known to enchanter’s, every broken curl and sharp angle had to be precisely copied, otherwise the runes would be no better than doodles.

The foreign language of power was vaguely reminiscent of the runes used by the invaders of the Hidden Sanctuary, though it could be due to the bias for their grim aspect. Most of his knowledge came from wracking his brains with Runic Scholar and educated guesses; he lacked the pillars of a formal education.

There isn’t enough time.

The sizzling had turned into a muffled cracking, the inky web symbols flaked and burned with enough heat to warm his fingers.

“It’s about to shatter,” Rain warned. “Shouldn’t we do something?”

Before Kai could ask what he meant, the siren grabbed the clutch of pearlescent eggs with both hands. In one flare of Darkness, the glossy wood charred into a pile of ash, destroying their only lead.

Hmm... it's more than we had earlier.

Kai had managed to sketch down one side of the casket and wouldn't trust the accuracy of more than a tenth of it. He glanced at Rain. "What do you mean to do with those *things*?"

The siren looked like a child who found an injured bird in the garden. Only, instead of a cute sparrow, he was holding a slimy glob of bubbles with the tiny opaque form of horror fairies floating inside. "I couldn't let the decaying enchantments kill them."

You sure would have if their bloodthirsty parents had chased you.

From their glow, the clutch was equivalent to an orange-grade ingredient. While Kai preferred working with herbs, the novelty might net him an extra level. It was worth getting over his squeamishness.

I could dry them first...

"No!" Rain held the eggs closer to his chest, narrowing his eyes. "We're not killing them. They're babies."

Did he have to grow fond of a bunch of alien eggs?

"We can't walk back to Limgrell with them in hand. Unless..." Adventurers probably sold infused material.

They might also fetch a good price.

"And we're not selling them either." The siren broke his dreams. "I've got enough money."

"If you keep spending with no income, your coins are going to eventually run out." From the stubborn look the boy leveled at him, he wasn't swayed. Kai raised his hands in surrender. "Fine. But we're not keeping them."

"I wasn't intending to. I don't know how to hatch them."

Spirits be blessed.

There was nothing left in the stone chamber aside from ash and earth. The dampening power in the ground persisted, likely powered by some other buried array. Judging by how fast it waned, it would crumble long before they had any shot of finding it.

Kai pushed the dirt back into the hole and compacted it till it was indistinguishable from how he had found it. If whoever set the trap came to check, they wouldn't suspect anything.

The idea of waiting in an ambush floated in his mind. According to the wisdom of detective TV shows, culprits often return to the scene of the crime. Though that might take days, and he had no idea how strong this mastermind was.

No reckless actions. This still feels off...

"We should go back before they close the gates," Kai said. Tired of climbing up and down, he was tempted to cut a hole in the side of the tower. It was almost certain the walls contained no enchantments, though the old building might collapse on their heads. He turned to see the siren whisper to the creepy clutch of eggs.

"Uh, yes. I'm coming."

They took the stairs one final time. Upon reaching the windows on the third floor, Rain stepped through the stone opening and smoothly floated to the ground on a bubble of water, still cooing at the gooey eggs.

While Kai could also *easily* do the same, his reserves were strained by the battle. With the strangeness going on, he opted to spare his mana and climb down like a lowly human. A veil of feathery mist hung around the green slopes where the tower was located, cloaking the sky in white.

Rain looked at the eggs in his hands with a furrow in his pale brows.

"Have you decided what to do?"

Please, say we sell them.

The siren slowly nodded. "We should give them back." Without further explanation, he strode toward the shores of the Lake of Myst.

Spirits, tell me he's not going to chase those fairies.

Kai groaned and hurried after him, almost slipping on the wet weeds. "Wait for me."

The waters were only a few hundred meters away. A mirror-like surface that extended to the misty horizon, only broken by a thicket of silvery reeds and a smattering of isles further in.

Its tranquil appearance was a deception, the mana in the waters too dense to be peaceful. Spreading his senses, Kai quickly spotted a group of red eels hidden in the muddy bottom and a pike swimming further in.

“May the Deep enact their judgment.” Rain lay the pearlescent clutch of eggs on the still water and cast a gentle wave to push them away. His gaze grew morose as they drifted away, their gleam soon concealed by the mist. “Okay, we can go.” He turned to head toward the town.

“What—” Kai stood rooted to the loamy shore, relieved to be rid of creepy embryos and vexed that his payday was floating away. He ran to catch up with the siren. “You know they’ll probably get eaten by a beast, right?”

“Yeah.” The siren didn’t look too upset. “The survival of each creature means the death of many more. I can only give them a chance.” The words carried the weight of a learned lesson, and there would likely be little point arguing about it.

I still would have taken the money.

In the rush to reach Kea, he hadn’t realized how many miles they had run, though he appreciated the time to ponder. He had solved a problem only to find a dozen more. From the enchanted casket, his sister had embroiled herself in quite the predicament. The sinister events were likely linked with the disappearing people, and she wasn’t going to walk away.

Kai took out his notebook to browse the runes he jotted down. In the suffused glow that pierced the mist, his scribbles were crooked and smeared beyond the jagged shape of the foreign alphabet. They shared a faint similarity to the ones he had encountered in the Sanctuary, familiar in a way he couldn’t quite place.

Have I seen these before?

Given Zervathi’s resentment for the invaders, Kai had never studied their markings in-depth, more focused on the flowing elven script that allowed him to escape.

And why is it always Darkness?

There were the wards sealing the hidden realm, then the cultish pirates at sea, and here again the casket. Always traces of the same element. Was it a coincidence? He was aware of common prejudices against Darkness, though he attributed them to ignorance. No affinity was inherently evil.

Do spells shape our character? The thought was disquieting to consider, and fraught with contradictory examples. *An element specialized in concealing and devouring probably wouldn’t be used for charity work.*

“I think you copied that line wrong...” Rain’s sudden voice made him jolt. The siren snooped at the notebook, pointing to a twisted scribble. “And this one too...”

Kai resisted the impulse to slam pages close. “How do you know?”

"I memorized them. Well, a piece of it." the siren tapped his temple as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I was watching the runes before they broke. Uh, is your memory skill low?" He rubbed his forehead with an abashed look. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. Is it rude to inquire among human friends?"

The teen's uncertain look dampened Kai's blooming embarrassment: knowing how foolish it was made little difference. Arcane Enchanting and Alchemy both helped him remember their related knowledge, though Herbology was his only true *memory* skill. And Kai was quite sure Rain referred to a more general ability. "I don't have one."

"Oh... none?" The siren showed no mockery, only perplexity. "Then how do you remember the subjects you learn?"

Headaches and sleepless nights?

"I didn't have a formal education," Kai muttered instead.

The last true lessons he received had been at the estate—when he was *eleven*. Despite Dora and Elijah's best attempt to cram every speck of knowledge into his skull, their time together had been too short, and his skill slots too precious to waste on something that could be remedied with hard work.

Rain nodded. "After I saw you weave spells, I made a foolish assumption. I hope I didn't offend you."

"It's fine. You don't need to apologize." Kai took it as a compliment to his lopsided magic skills.

They walked a few paces in silence before the siren spoke again. "If you want, I can go over your notes with what I remember."

"That... would be quite helpful. Thanks." Kai swallowed his pride at letting anyone see his ugly scribbles and offered him the notebook.

Rain peered at the journal with the subtle smile he reserved for land curiosities. Once he studied the binding and smelled the paper, he took out a quill with a coral handle to draw without slowing his steps.

By the time they encroached upon the gate, the sun painted the fog with the warm shades of twilight. The siren twirled the pen between his fingers and stored it away. "This is all I'm confident about. I hope it helps. It's not any alphabet I've studied, though I also didn't complete my education..." His gaze turned distant at the mention of home. "We won't get much out of it unless you recognize these runes."

"I don't, but I've had some experience studying forgotten scripts." Flipping through the pages, Kai's brows rose higher and higher. Rain had copied well over half the enchantment—all written with a precision even a gnome like Edgar would approve of.

A thorn of envy poked his mind despite his best efforts to suppress it. The circumstances of their birth were so different, there was no point drawing comparisons, *still*, controlling his thoughts wasn't that easy. At least till another idea struck his mind. Why lament the tutors who followed the siren since his gilded crib when the teen seemed so willing to share?

I have to stop whining and start using what I have.

The same guards at the gate recognized them and easily let them through with a smile from the siren. They strolled across the eerily empty streets for the inn where they had left their bags.

A conversation with his sister was long overdue, though it might be hard to get her away from her team without attracting suspicion. Knowing she was safe had relieved his largest worry. For today, it was best to let Flynn handle them and see where their hearts stood. The boy would know how to patch up his official identity.

Inside the *Weeping Heron* where they lodged, the hostess greeted them with a scowl. "Your excursion went well I reckon. How many nights do you plan on staying? I'll give you a discount if you pay ahead."

Did she hope we wouldn't be back for the bags?

"Do you have anything to eat, madam?" Kai ignored the look and ordered roasted eels, stew and rye bread for both. He hadn't eaten anything since morning and healing potions always left him starving.

They sat on a stool in the common room of the inn. Kai studied the notebook while they waited for food. He couldn't begin to guess how the runes worked, but there were more universal elements he could judge. Spacing, composition and the density of the patterns. Whoever inscribed these was quite good, perhaps around his level.

"Tell me." Kai drummed his finger, smiling at the unaware boy. "What do you know about enchanting? Any other hobbies you have?"