

Chapter 295 - Ambush

Not waiting for the enemies to get any closer, Kai cast a layer of ice over the pier and condensed the mist into an opaque sheet. Five glowing presences charged toward them—all early Yellow—while the fisherman who gave them away stayed back.

No words were exchanged. The burly shieldbearer running at the front slipped on the ice, bringing two others down with him and sending one splashing into the lake. Kai's relief was short-lived. In a moment, they were on their feet again, closing their formation and advancing more cautiously.

Who are they?

Kai hesitated to cast lethal spells. Were they cultists, a team of corrupt guards, or just a mob? If he got embroiled in a fight, would there be reinforcements coming? Too many unknowns and no time to find out.

We can't face them here.

At his back, Mari and Rain had boarded the rowboat; Flynn bustled about with the oars and cut the mooring line.

"We can take them." Caeli drew her rapier as if intending to fight.

"The boat. Now!" Kai ordered, not in the mood for negotiations. His sea serpent sword in hand, he used the lake's water to crush the pier poles linking them to shore. The old wood construction *creaked* and shifted under his feet, threatening to collapse entirely.

Whether it was his words, the unsteady ground or Kea dragging her, Caeli got into the vessel with a growl.

"Mat! You get in too!" Flynn shouted, trying to row away from the berth with Mari.

"I'm coming—" Kai halfway turned when a sharp whisper made him raise his guard. A black fletched arrow hit his sword with a sharp *clink* at eye level. The blowback pushed the blade against his temple, nicking his eyebrow. A warm line of blood trickled down his face, triggering a rush of energy from Kahali's Retribution.

Can they see through the mist? Well... I'm not the only one with Mana Sense.

Cloaked by the fog, the archer drew back his bow for another shot, channeling bright sparks of mana into his arrow. Ahead of him, the three standing attackers advanced between the solid parts of the pier and the shallow lake.

Not wishing to test their skills, Kai cast a hail of ice needles to slow them. Alarmed shouts rose from the dock. Kai ignored them and leaped into the boat without looking back. The

vessel dangerously tilted where he landed, dousing him in freezing droplets before the water buoyancy rebalanced the scales.

There wasn't much space to move with six of them aboard. Mari frantically rowed alongside Flynn while Kea paddled with a broken bucket. Their uncoordinated effort pushed the boat in a wobbly path away from the shore.

We're too slow.

Despite using their full Strength, gaining speed on the water took longer than on land. The assailants were getting closer, advancing information behind the shield-wielding brute. The guy who initially fell into the lake had climbed on shore and aimed a crossbow at them.

Why do I always get persistent bastards?

Hidden by the shieldbearer, a tall man threw a javelin. The shot crossed the distance in a blink, cracking the ice shield Kai was conjuring. Before he could fix the spell, a crossbow bolt slipped past and buried itself in Mari's shoulder. She fell back with a scream, letting the oar far into the lake.

Dammit!

He split his attention to check on her—the arrow hadn't hit any vitals but it compromised their already wiggly motion. They were too exposed and too slow. Another arrow disrupted his ice shield before he could solidify it.

I can't let this continue.

Discarding any qualms, Kai spread his mana wide to cast ice bullets from opposite angles. The projectiles traveled less than half the distance when they curved toward the shieldbearer and harmlessly shattered against his defenses.

What skill is that? They're too coordinated to be random people but haven't used Darkness mana. Are they corrupted guards? Or mercenaries?

The answer didn't change their predicament. Kai flung a wave of icicles, hoping the heavier projectiles would be harder to divert. He was partially right. The spells veered toward the iron tower shield, but three flew too fast and went past, hitting the burly shieldbearer who slumped on one knee with a groan.

The wound slowed their advance, but it didn't stop them. Behind the iron bulwark, the remaining foes fetched a shabby boat from another berth to give chase.

We needed to get away.

Each moment they waited, they ran the risk of someone sinking their boat. If they got stuck on land, they might never escape this town.

Kai summoned blue streams of Water mana without spares. But before he could finish the cast, the boat shot forward, skidding over the lake like a hovercraft.

“Fuck—” He scrambled to grab the frame of the vessel to not get thrown off by the sudden acceleration. People and buildings turned to shadows, then disappeared into the wispy whiteness. He only managed to avoid losing his sword by freezing it to his hand.

By some miracle or spell, the boat spun and dragged its momentum to a slow glide without capsizing. Kai let go of the grooves his finger had dug into the wood, his back drenched in cold sweat. Warm blood wet the palm of his blade hand where he had shattered the ice. Thankfully the cuts were superficial. He melted the shards and sheathed the sword. His gaze didn't have to move far to find the culprit.

Rain sat on the prow, watching the plumes of whirling mist in their tracks as if he were on a sightseeing excursion. “We should have lost them,” he mused. Noticing Kai's scowl, his face turned sheepish and reddened. “Sorry, I should have warned you. We were in a hurry. And I got lost in the casting.”

Yatei grant me patience.

“I understand. Next time, I'd appreciate a heads up.” Kai sighed. There was no point arguing. Pushing them hundreds of meters into the lake was an impressive feat, doing that without destroying their vessel was bewildering.

We must be past the wards.

The runic scripts protecting Limgrell extended to the outer fishing areas. Contrary to the ones on the walls, they couldn't physically stop anyone from crossing into the lake, but the wards tracked the comings and goings of fishermen to ensure no one slipped in, or out.

Kai hadn't been able to find how to trick the enchantments. Though, bribing the guard who kept the records would be far easier than sneaking past a patrolled stone wall.

“Is everyone alright?”

“Mrooow,” Hobbes growled. The furball pranced over their bags and equipment with a distinctly grumpy demeanor.

When did you get on? No, I wasn't trying to leave you behind. It all happened so fast— Hey! Don't use that tone with me.

Hobbes stared back, exuding a smug challenge from his violet eyes. Once he had asserted his dominance, he blinked into a nook of the boat and curled up to nap.

Glad you're here too.

“I'm... I'm good.” Flynn put down the oar, his face a sickly green. “We're safe. That's what... matters.” He covered his mouth with hand, gulping. “We...” His gaze fell on Mari lying

slumped against their bags and he knelt beside her. “Spirits, you’re bleeding. I know it hurts. Try not to move.”

“I’m... I’m okay.” Mari smiled weakly, her lips pale. A black dart poked out of her shoulder. “It missed... the bone.”

“Let me check.” Kea flung herself over, followed by Caeli. “Stay still. It doesn’t look poisoned, but we must check it isn’t barbed.”

Their abrupt motion rocked the boat. Kai sat back to balance their weight and offered a healing potion that was promptly snatched. There were already enough hands, so he stayed out of their way, watching Mari’s veins with Mana Observer.

She only screamed when Kea pulled out the bolt. Luckily the arrow hadn’t shattered the bone. They took turns cleaning, sewing and bandaging the wound. She would have to use a sling for the next week, but it shouldn’t leave lasting consequences.

“I’m fine. Really.” Mari raised her healthy arm to push back the fussing trio. “It doesn’t even hurt much after that potion.”

“Take this too.” Kai offered her a pearlescent green vial. “It’s for blood loss. You’ll still need food and rest, but it’ll help till then.”

“I... Thank you.” A pulse of mana passed through the liquid before she downed it in one breath. Mari sat up, glaring at the hands trying to help her. “I can do it on my own. I’m not going to drop dead if you look away. It’s not the first time I’ve seen a little blood. I knew the dangers.”

“Uh, did anyone really...?” Kea murmured with a rueful look. “No one should have known where we were going. Even if *Aldred* betrayed us, he didn’t know *why* we were taking a boat. Maybe we should—.”

“We’re too close to give up.” Caeli pursed her lips. “We finally have a lead. And we’ve escaped the ambush. Who can even find us here?”

“Fish beasts, hungry fairies and mist wraiths?” Mari offered in a dead serious tone. “I won’t be much help away from the ground.”

The Lake of Myst was a mana zone that grew denser the further in you sailed. The enchantments on the keel of the rowboat would make the creatures dwelling in the water ignore them, but that left plenty of other threats—without counting the cultists.

We’ll be safe if we keep close to shore.

“Hmm...” Flynn interrupted Kea and Caeli’s argument, gesturing around them. “Anyone got an idea of where we are *exactly*?”

Oh, shit...

Kai spread his senses, the flat waters of the lake extended in every direction beyond the edge of his skills. The fog swallowed them with swirls of dense mana that blurred his view.

A look around the boat confirmed it. Even Rain lightly shook his head—they were lost in the middle of a high-mana zone.

“Well...” Flynn chuckled weakly. “If we don’t know where we are. Neither can those assholes. So there is that...”

“Bloody Moons!” Caeli stood up to peer at the mist, tilting the boat. Her eyes shifted across on the placid lake with sudden concern. “We must stay away from the center of the lake. There could be yellow beasts. Or worse—”

“Start by lowering your voice,” Kea pulled her down. “The boat arrays won’t help if you keep shouting. We should still be far from the center.”

Mari looked over the rim of the boat and sat with her back against the center. “I can’t say how far we moved. But we’ve been drifting. We should start rowing, it’ll take a while to reach shore with one oar.”

“And which direction do we pick?” Caeli pulled back from the water for what the boat allowed. “Everything looks the same to me.”

“Let me check the map...” Flynn tried to play peacemaker, rummaging through a bag.

“How will that help if we can’t see where we—”

Kai tuned them out. He had expected their plan wouldn’t go smoothly, but not that it would crumble before even getting on the boat.

Mortals scheme and gods laugh. At least we should be on the right track.

From the records Valela recovered, there was a cult known to use cryptic jagged runes that matched the ones he copied. The only issue was that the Church of the Seven Moons had eradicated the *Stygian Circle* eight hundred years ago; every detail of their deeds and practices was erased from history.

Damnatio memoriae was common practice for heretical organizations. Deities drew power from belief, and if no one knew they even existed, they would weaken and fade. It also made getting any information about them irritatingly difficult. He could have scoured every library in a hundred miles and found no clue without Valela.

Whether it was the same cult or some copycat, the links were too strong to ignore. The *Stygian Circle* was known for its use of Darkness and powerful concealments, they only made exceptions for two other elements: Shadow and Water.

Perhaps it wasn't a case that they ran into them at sea on the *Intrepid*. Among the files Valela showed him, many of the recent accidents in the Republic happened along the coastline or near large bodies of water.

Beyond dusty records, Kai had another clue he trusted. Since he stepped into the boat, Hallowed Intuition had started humming a reluctant agreement—he was on the right track to find the missing people.

The only issue was where to go.

It would take a day to cross the Lake of Myst if they sailed in a straight line across dangerous areas. The presence of swarms of yellow beasts was why Kai hadn't initially considered the cultists would hide here. Only madmen would settle in infested water where you couldn't see over a few palms from your nose.

It was stupid to assume they had common sense. How do I pick the right direction?

Kea and Caeli were still arguing over the waxed paper filled with scribbles of the lake. They had to pay several fishermen to piece together that map from memory. Thinking back, it probably wasn't a chance they found no paper maps.

They could only confirm the accuracy of the fishing area close to shore. There were more than a hundred islets scattered around the lake. Kai could toss a pebble across the length of most, though some were large enough to host small woods.

"Hmm, guys," Flynn woke him from his musings, squinting at the fog. "I think I see an island."

"Are you sure..." Kai stretched Mana Observer, blinking. He channeled Body Augmentation into his sight to check his senses weren't tricking him.

There was indeed an island, perhaps two dozen meters across. The mana in the mist made everything look the same till he specifically focused on that area. It was similar to when the cloud fairies obscured his senses, though he couldn't perceive any hostile intention.

Is it some strange natural occurrence? As if this place wasn't annoying enough...

He had to admit an impenetrable fog wasn't the worst thing that could happen if they needed to sneak around a den of crazy cultists.

Rain didn't look surprised. Noticing the attention on him, he leaned in to whisper. "I just noticed too. And we were already drifting in that direction."

"Let's go." Kea took possession of the oar. "We can find our location when we get on land."

With a common goal in mind, they swiftly sailed the boat. The shadow of an island came into view through the fog. A willow tree grew on the mossy shore, its long silver branches dipping into the lake, and more greenery beyond.