

Chapter 236 - Madness

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Wind swept his face with a spray of salty water. Kai sat on the prow of the *Ylena*, gripping the railing as if his life depended on it. His guts twisted each time he glanced at the endless blue expanse. Only the thin coastline on the horizon prevented him from panicking.

There is no danger.

Hallowed Intuition remained silent, the strongest beasts Mana Observer could detect were innocuous red coral sharks. He still couldn't help feeling exposed and vulnerable. The open sea meant certain death. Years of habit and horrific sights had ingrained that knowledge deeper than reason.

Get a hold of yourself. I'm not going to fear the freaking ocean.

Eldritch tentacles weren't going to drag him to the dark depths to devour his flesh, mind and soul. The *Shallow Sea* was one the safest stretches of water on Elydes. But it seemed with each passing day, his mind found more and more foolish reasons to complicate his life.

I could swim alongside the ship till my brain gets over this stupidity...

He had been fine when he arrived at the submerged site. Blessed Swimmer strengthened his danger sense and bestowed an innate tranquility while he was underwater. It was subtle, but without any actual threat, he could indulge in the sensation.

Will the crew complain if I jump in?

People continued to stare even after Flynn had fixed his hair and bought him a new wardrobe. Kai had to admit the blue outfit with silver buttons looked good on him. His old clothes were three sizes too small, thankfully Flynn had also kept his Alchemy and Enchanting equipment.

I'll need to upgrade them when Reishi sails back to the archipelago. Now... to dive or not to dive?

Before Kai could decide whether to tell the sailors to not jump after him, Flynn leaned on the railing beside him. "We'll make landfall in Old Port and reach Sylspring by morning." He smiled at the shimmering waves, glancing at him. "It must have been a while since you boarded a ship."

"Yeah." The underlying worry was obvious. Kai pried his fingers off the rails, but he couldn't hide where his nails had chipped the black paint of the ship. He simply needed time to adapt. "I'm just enjoying the sun."

“Mmmh...” Flynn didn’t let anything slip from his face, and when he spoke up, the question wasn’t what Kai expected. “Are you sure Hobbes is fine? I still think we should have carried him on board.”

Yatei have mercy, that cat let you touch his silky fur once, and he already owns you.

“Hobbes got on the ship before us. He’s enjoying snooping around.” The silver furball was sampling the supplies of salted fish in the ship’s cargo hold. His Majesty still preferred it fresh, but he wasn’t beyond indulging in the food of peasants for a change.

It was rare for Hobbes to take the initiative to share his experiences through the partner skill. The cat had held a grudge for over a month the last time Kai shut down the bond, though His Majesty didn’t have any qualms about ignoring him.

I must be the mature one.

Leading by example, Kai sent an acknowledgment mixed with praise for the valiant discovery and regal taste. Warm contentment spread through the link before Hobbes hurriedly cut the connection with a wave of panic.

Uh... is he looking for my approval, or does he just need somebody to stroke his ego?

“What if a sailor or another passenger sees him?” Flynn lowered his tone. “You can tell at a glance he isn’t an ordinary pet, they might try to catch him, or worse.”

Oh, boy. He really has you tied to his little paw...

“Have you ever tried to catch a Space cat?” Kai stared at the foaming waves that crashed on the prow of the ship, demanding his body to relax. “I have. It’d be easier to grab a fly with chopsticks.”

That’s enough for now.

Flynn furrowed his brow. “What are chopsticks? You know, it doesn’t matter. What if someone on board who has a trapping skill? Or Hobbes gets tired? Or takes a *nap*?”

“I’ve seen a pack of grown Lightning Hawks fail to brush his fur. There is no danger. You know Hobbes is an awakened beast, right...?”

“Yes, but he’s so tiny and soft.” Flynn waved with his hands to illustrate the inoffensive size.

Kai sighed at the smitten fool. “Strength isn’t his talent, but he advanced to Yellow just before we left the Sanctuary. And I’m not sure if he has reached full maturity.”

“Hobbes is a yellow be— beast?” His friend stammered. The realization that he had snuggled with a murder kitten sank in, his expression paling. “How? I didn’t perceive anything. Hunch would have warned me if he were a threat.”

“Spatial travel isn’t his only specialty. There wouldn’t be much point in sneaking around if he couldn’t make himself look inconspicuous.” Kai patted his shoulder, making sure Flynn didn’t topple over the railing. “Don’t worry, Hobbes considers himself above the rough means of violence. You should have seen the fit he threw last time blood got on his coat.”

“How—”

“Meow.” Hobbes paraded between them, tail straight like a fluffy banner. Despite their bond being closed, Kai got the distinct impression the furball knew they were talking about him.

Speak of the devil and he shall be summoned.

Looking for cuddles after the snack, the traitorous cat wove around his leg before heading for Flynn. His friend stood straight like a block of wood, chewing his lip, though he didn’t flinch back. Cautiously, he bent to rub a hand through the lustrous silver fur. “You’re not going to claw my eyes out, right?”

“Meeeeoow?” Hobbes flopped onto the wooden boards of the ship’s deck, pawing the air. Two adorable violet eyes stared up with innocent confusion and a hint of sadness.

The fool immediately fell for the act, crouching to give him belly rubs. “Sorry for such a silly question. I know, I know, Kai’s the violent one. Of course, you wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Hey! I only answered your question.

“When I said Hobbes doesn’t like fighting, I didn’t mean he was completely harmless.”

“Don’t try to besmirch the name of this blameless kitten.” Flynn scowled, holding the devious feline in his arms. “How did you even manage to befriend him with your rough and scary demeanor?”

How did I ever think having a familiar was a good idea? I should have picked a taming skill instead of a partner bond...

“That kitten was more than eager to beg and act adorable when he was hungry.”

“Is that the truth Hobbes? Did you sell yourself to this guy to fill your belly?” Flynn scratched the purring cat and raised a disapproving gaze at Kai. “How could you take advantage of this naive little baby?”

“That’s *not* what happened.”

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“Where is it?”

I had more left.

Kai rummaged through the hollow hole he called his home. Despite the clutter of moldy pelts, engraved bones and other failed pieces of enchantments, the cave measured no more than two meters across. It didn't take long to confirm he hadn't misplaced his homemade jerky and bubble fruits.

Dammit.

Four months of constant fear and exhaustion. Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that he misremembered something, only that it had taken this long. Even when the murmurs abated long enough to close his eyes, he only managed short breaks of fitful sleep. The danger was ever present, whispering in the back of his mind.

He didn't dare tune out the only skill keeping him alive. A bloody tapestry of runes covered every wall of the cave to cloak him from the outside. His shell of rock prevented insects and beasts from burrowing inside—for the most part—but there were plenty of behemoths capable of breaking through.

"It's fine. I'm not losing it." Kai paced the cramped space in two strides, hands raking through his hair. "I just forgot how much I ate. It happens to everybody."

It just never happened to me before. I must still have something...

He grinned at the silver band on his finger. For a moment he dared hope, but no, the only edible things stored were the strange mana fruits he picked. Those were just as likely to kill him as to satiate his hunger.

There was no other solution: he needed to head out and gather more food. Simple. Just dodge birds of prey and wyrmlings circling in the sky, the stone snakes camouflaged on the rocky ground and whatever other calamity the Sanctuary decided to throw at him.

Fuck. Why didn't I ration better?

"Calm down. It's no big deal." Kai slowly stretched where the wyrm claw had grazed him on his shoulder. It still hurt, but it shouldn't impair him as long as he wasn't forced into a fight.

When did anything ever go to plan on this forgotten island?

He let out a humorless chuckle. "Not that it makes any difference. If it isn't today, it will be tomorrow. I still need to leave eventually. Unless..."

No, no, no.

"I can't ask that damned fairy for help." He only had two requests remaining. His first one had been easy - the way to escape the Sanctuary with the highest chance of success. It didn't require Zervathi to spend his power, only his knowledge.

Unfortunately, the answer hadn't been as straightforward.

Go to this site, grab that artifact, learn how to tamper with millennia-old runes but don't get blown to pieces. And in the end, he might still need another request to make that work. No, he would make do with what he had. The longer he delayed, the weaker he would grow and the higher the chance of getting himself killed.

Now or never.

Kai took out a jar and rubbed his body in mud berries and dirt. If he ran into a perceptive beast that pierced his Shadow spells, it wouldn't hurt to have an additional layer of camouflage. As ready as he was going to be, he slowly cut the rock along the line he had fused many times before.

* * *

Not again. I counted, there were six left!

Kai massaged his eyes, he wanted to cry and punch something, but his healing remedies were running dangerously low to waste them. The enchanted chest was empty, his supplies gone. Searching between the roots of the tree brought the same result.

More than the food, it was the feeling of slowly losing his mind that scared him. He had counted the tubers and jerky before going to sleep, no more than two hours ago.

What other explanation is there?

It had been a month since his supplies began disappearing. Sometimes a week passed with nothing happening, other times twice on the same day. There wasn't any detectable pattern.

"Sure, it would make sense if it was my mind breaking."

But why only the food then?

Kai had suspected some peculiar critter capable of molding the stone unnoticed, but even moving to a new shelter hadn't helped. Living trees weren't as easy to manipulate. He could still trace the broken and twisted mana veins where he had shaped the wood to his desires. He was certain nothing had tempered his house. And if there was a beast capable of that, why would it settle for his leftovers when it could just as easily devour him?

What else could it be?

"I'm not crazy."

~I see you're struggling, child.~ An aged-up and wise tone echoed the narrow shelter, coming from everywhere at once. **~If you require my help, all you have to do is ask.~**

“Stop the charade. I'm not in the mood for a chat.”

~I see my Sanctuary hasn't broken your spirit.~ Zervathi snorted with his squeaky fairy voice. **~You remain uncouth as ever. When you get eaten, remember it was you who refused my generous advice.~**

“Nosy as ever.” Kai glared at the roots of his ceiling till he was certain he was alone.

Initially, he suspected the god wanted him dead to preserve his divine power. But more than once Zervathi popped up to offer him free advice—and delved into long rants about his brilliance and the injustice he had suffered.

He's probably lonely, or got some screw loose during his imprisonment.

“Just what I need. Wait, didn't I...” Kai rummaged through his spatial closet for his notebook. He leafed through the pages to the last entry.

Day 161 - early morning - Tree Shelter III
4 pieces of snake jerky [peak-orange] and 2 purple tubers [mid-yellow] (probably edible).

“Yes!” Kai fist-bumped the air. “I'm not crazy!”

Or I'm hallucinating, but if I had reached that state I would have already died.

He had to believe that he hadn't gone nuts yet, or this would all be pointless. There had to be another explanation. Someone or *something* was stealing his food. It infiltrated his shelter and left without a trace. It was like it could walk through walls...

Just you wait.

* * *

Did I botch the temperature or the sieving?

The recipe still needed some work. As Kai predicted, the star-shaped creeper could be used to brew a healing balm, what he hadn't foreseen was the burning itch. He yearned for the sweet relief of scratching his lower back.

I can't give up now.

He had been laying still for three hours, waiting for the thieving rat to appear. He had almost caught it a week ago. The critter disappeared in a flash, leaving behind a single silver hair.

There was only one element that allowed such instantaneous movement. If that pest thought he could steal from him and get away, he had no idea who he was dealing with.

C'mon, little pest. You're the main course tonight.

The enchanted chest he used to protect his supplies lay beside his head, ready to spring the trap. Kai was debating whether to rub his back against the leafy branch he used for a bed when a soft tap sent a wave of excitement through him. He didn't dare extend Mana Observer in case the rat was sensitive to it.

Space might be the most elusive element, but it wasn't without weaknesses. The cunning beast scurried over his things, daring enough to sniff his face. It took all his self-control to breathe regularly and not react. He had to be patient, he would get a single chance before it blinked away. If he acted hastily, all his preparations would be for naught.

Satisfied with its inspection, the critter approached the chest. Its thieving paws tapped on the wooden lid, unleashing the torrent of spatial mana he had sealed in the runes. The essence flowing through other living beings could also disrupt a teleportation. Kai flooded the area with more mana and snapped his hands close around the soft fur of the—

"Meeeeeow!" The critter squeaked in panic.

What?

A crystal light fell out of his ring, illuminating the scrawny silver kitten struggling in his grasp. Large teal eyes stared up at him with terror. He had never seen such a tiny orange beast.

Hmm... his size must help with blinking around...

The thieving kitten dramatically meowed as if it were already being eaten. Iridescent mana pressed against his own trying to blink to safety.

"A cat, seriously?" Kai scowled at his shelter, the snooping god wasn't looking. He wasn't about to kill a kitten, even if it was a devious thief that played with his sanity. "Fine. Just stop whining."

The beast blinked to the other side of the room before it touched the ground. The critter intently studied him, its irises morphing into bright green.

"What? You got your life. Now, leave me alone." Kai shoed the kitten away, but the shameless animal remained. It had the gall to stare at his food chest with unmitigated desire.

"Meow."

"No, that's mine. Where did you even put my food?" He could see the bones poking through his tiny frame as if it were starving. "Okay. Just this time. But you must promise not to come back again."