

Chapter 424 - The Perfect Spy

Movement in the trees, blurred figures through the fog, acrid scents cutting through the wet woods, pounding of footsteps—growing unease.

Kai was still piecing together the impressions pouring through the bond when a whisper drew him back. “Don’t you try.” He pressed his sword to Rob’s collarbone, where his mana had begun to weave.

“Ouch!” His roommate glared, back against a tree. “Did you have to cut my favorite shirt? How did you even know...” His brows formed a furrow. “Either way... We’re wasting time. If you don’t want to help, kindly step aside. I’ve already shown you proof of my identity. What else do you want?”

“Maybe not sneakily casting spells?” Kai met his scowl evenly, mind already racing. He had no way to verify Rob’s story, but the shiny black signet looked too finely crafted for a random prop. People who dared impersonate a Great House also had the tendency to go missing.

So his story is probably true. Makes sense Alden would have some protection, given his status as a potential heir. His crazy aunt also seemed to care about him. Many other Houses must do the same. Spirits... how many spies have I—

Flashing impressions blurred his vision through the bond again. Even using Split Mind, he couldn’t review every student interaction he had at Raelion—not even just with Rob.

Hold on, bud. I’m coming.

Hobbes sent a wave of dismissive reassurance, betrayed by the low hum of concern.

Just try to keep him and yourself safe, ‘kay? Yeah, soon...

Looking at Rob’s calculating gaze, Kai chewed the inside of his cheek. How much had he let slip across *months* of cohabitation? It took an effort to quieten his bubbling thoughts. Now wasn’t the time. Though rushing ahead blindly could be just as dangerous.

When danger pressed, the right actions mattered more than fast ones.

First priority: don’t get stabbed in the back.

“Well, even if you work for the Blackwoods, that tells me nothing of your goals. They must also have a dozen internal factions.”

“Do you actually think— That’s not how— Urgh!” Rob scrubbed his hands through his hair, *seemingly* frustrated. Then blew out a breath. “You have no idea what that signet means, do you? Gods... it takes too long to explain. I can swear on the Moons that my duty is to protect Alden.”

"Hmm, and you have no other goals?" Kai's skepticism crashed onto Rob's stony front. Seconds ticked by. Whispers mounted. "Okay... keep your mysterious act. Just swear you won't try to attack me again the moment I lower my guard, okay?"

Rob rolled his eyes. "Sure. I promise... on the Moons."

It wasn't the most eloquent oath, but it was the spirit of it that mattered.

Kai smoothly resheathed his spellblade.

"Wait..." Rob stared at him. "Just two words and now you believe me?"

"Why not? If you break your vow, I'll have an excellent excuse to stab you. You owe me answers. But I can wait until Alden is safe for them. You implied you had a way to track him, right?" He motioned to the trail, plumes of fog rolling over the scorched birches and swamped ground. "Go on."

Rob studied him silently for another heartbeat before seeming to come to a decision. Uncorking a vial from his bandolier with his teeth, he downed the contents and picked up a throwing dagger near the trail, already striding off. "Alright. We can work together until Alden is safe." He checked something in his pocket, a hand cupped for cover, putting it back too quickly. "Don't slow me down. You speak as if you know Alden is in danger."

Kai jogged after him, the torn brush soon replaced by creaking white birches. "I have my ways. What was that in your pocket?"

"My ways," Rob snapped back.

I walked right into that one, didn't I?

Kai dodged below a branch to flank him. "We aren't even yet, Spyboy. But I'll trade you a question for a question if you go first." Despite his bluster, the current urgency was likely his only chance to make his roommate tell him anything.

"Hmm, deal." Rob fished out a silver compass with a spinning dial. Tiny concentric runes gleamed along its rim. "It's a Blood Needle keyed to Alden. It'll always point to him within a hundred miles, but it's been less than reliable in these woods. And before you get strange ideas, I didn't make it. Now you. How do you know Alden's in danger?"

"Hobbes."

"Hobbes... what? You're talking about your familiar? The lazy fluffy cat?"

"The one and only," Kai smirked. His familiar's presence seemed to move strangely as they ran. "He spotted some students approaching Alden. Not with good intentions. I can't say more. It's like fleeting impressions." He might learn more if he opened the bond, but he couldn't risk distracting Hobbes now.

Rob dashed over the gnarled roots. “And how did your cat find Alden?”

“That’s another question. It’s my turn.” Kai looked over keenly. “Have you been spying on Rain and me?”

“Less than you’d think.” Looking ahead, Rob gave no reaction. “My duty is Alden’s safety. As long as you don’t put him at risk, I don’t care what you get up to. It’s nothing personal. I suspected you were putting up an act, but I clearly overthought it. You two enjoy drawing attention too much to be a plant from a rival House.”

That’s not how— ugh. Stupid rumors...

“That wasn’t a no.”

Rob ignored his looks. Stopping at a fork in the trail, he consulted his compass before rounding left. “You have no idea the scale the Great Houses operate at. Most of the Merian future brass passes through Raelion; two-thirds of the students here report to someone. Whether they know it or not. Every House worth their blood has informants.”

“Like you?”

“Not like me.” Rob scowled as the trail branched again. “Very few receive a signet. But that’s enough for my answer. If you weren’t after me, how did you track Alden? Even accounting for your familiar, that’s not enough to navigate these woods.”

“That... It was mainly Luck.”

“*Luck*? Can’t even make up a convincing excuse?” Rob scoffed. “That’s not something you can actively use. Your Luck would have to be monstrous to work in these woods.”

Kai shrugged, matching his unflappable expression. “I’ve also got a Luck skill to help. It’s not very precise. I’ve been wandering since the Trials started.”

“What kind of skill—

“I’ve answered. Now, you. You tell me more about your spy stuff. And don’t skimp on details.”

Rob breathed out, almost a growl. The more riled up he got, the more likely he was to let something slip. “Stop calling me that. I’m not a spy.”

“Of course not, you just covertly gather and report intel. Pray tell, what would you call yourself?”

He ground his jaw. “I can’t really tell you.”

Kai coughed in his fist. “*Spy*.” Admittedly, he might be feeling a little irked from being fooled for months.

"You— Curses!" Rob abruptly halted, boots skidding on the slick grass, nearly tripping them both.

Kai's protests turned to a groan once he looked past him.

The trail split again. *Four* ways.

Skeletal birches creaked with haunting murmurs, luring them to listen; the rustle of canopies sounded almost like mocking laughter. The thrum of the bond and whispers meshed in his head. So close. He could get to Hobbes if he cut through the woods. It'd take minutes at most to reach him. He would be careful—

Uh, nice try. A bit on the nose.

A flare of mana cleared his mind from the insidious trees. Neither the Veiled Woods nor its creatures cared for their urgency, eagerly jumping at their weakness.

Rob watched the spinning compass, his fingers giving it fidgety taps. "This— no. This way!"

Setting off again, the mist swallowed their tracks when they came upon another fork.

Maybe I should've led...

Flashes of silver, raised voices, and prey cornered trickled through the bond.

Kai swallowed a bitter comment as the Blood Needle joltingly lined another path. Using Hallowed Intuition to navigate would take about the same time, but would leave him strained.

"Hey, it's still your turn to answer."

"Really, *now*?"

"Talking won't slow us any more than the trail already does. And it'll help us ignore the creepy trees and their mental suggestions." Kai gestured to the fog whirling over the bleached trunks, the haunting murmurs at the edge of his consciousness. "We'll be of no help to Alden if we stab each other before finding him."

"That..." Rob gave him a long, suffering groan. "Fine. What else do you want to know?"

"Well, I'm guessing you're bound by a soul oath. If you can't speak about yourself, why don't you tell me about everyone else?" Kai smirked. It was a rare chance to fill a gap in his knowledge that books wouldn't cover. "Have I met any other spies? What are the dos and don'ts? How do I avoid scheming Houses?"

Rob chuckled, then fully laughed. "Sorry, sorry... but you really are clueless... I was wondering... Every time a new rumor broke out... did everyone just assume it was part of some grand design and got too scared to test you?" He guffawed. "Gods... and all the while you had no idea what you were doing."

Kai watched him flatly. "It's not that funny."

"Nah, it is that funny." Rob finally got his breathing under control. "If it were anyone else, I'd say keep your head down and mind your business, but that ship has sailed for you. You'd better learn before people realize you aren't the mastermind they think."

Playing the bigger man, Kai ignored the laughs. "I was looking for a way to avoid the politicking."

"We can add that, and underplaying your Space skills to the list of things you're awful at," Rob chortled. "Regardless of what the academy says, you can't avoid politics at Raelion any more than you can avoid breathing. You don't realize your luck sorting Alden's room. The Blackwoods' shadow has been keeping many people from getting pushy."

With an amused smile, Rob continued with his merry jabs and advice as the trail branched.

"What about the spies?" Kai spoke up. The flow of impression had abruptly ceased. But if Hobbes closed off the bond, that was telling.

We're getting closer. Just hold on. This is as fast as we can move here.

Rob threw him a look. "Most informants are just people who happen to hear things by chance. You can't avoid them. If you assume every student you meet is one, you'll be right more often than wrong. After them, Houses have people that can be tasked as needed. Think retainers and opportunists looking to curry favor. Knowing the relations between Houses helps to spot them. As for actual *spies*," he snorted at the word. "Those are trained and enrolled with specific duties. If they're competent, you won't spot them."

"So you admit to being a spy..."

"I never said I belonged to that group."

"So... is there a fourth category of *extra* special spies?"

"Who can say?" His lips curved smugly. "But you never suspected me of a thing."

Kai harrumphed. "Well, I wasn't even looking. Huh, is that why you always leave stuff around? Is the mess part of the cover?"

"That... I've been cleaning up more!" Rob turned to the fog, his face flushing.

"Yeah. I'm scared to see your room."

Note 13: Teenage special spies are still teenagers.

"Whatever." Rob scanned the foggy trail, ignoring him, the compass spinning at the umpteenth fork. "I don't think it needs saying, but don't repeat any of this. Or we're gonna have problems."

"As long as you do the same. I wouldn't want to have to beat you up again."

"You never *beat* me. I simply cut my losses. And I'm being serious. Don't speak of this to *anyone*."

"Yes, boss. I'll—" Kai frowned. "You mean like... not even Alden? Does he not know?"

The flash of guilt looked apparent on Rob's face. "In the past, he has been stubbornly avoidant of his bodyguards. I was told I'd be more effective this way... It wasn't my decision." He wrenched his gaze away from the compass to nail him. "You *cannot* tell him. I've kept my distance, so not knowing wouldn't hurt him." His demand came off laced with pleas.

Does he really care? Or is it an act? Damn spies...

"I won't lie if he asks. But I won't bring it up," Kai said as the whispers closed in around them. The trails endlessly forked into the mist, though they were getting closer. "He'll probably figure it out on his own, though. Especially after today."

"If he does, he does." Rob shot a Fire bolt at a shadow prowling near the trail, never slowing, his hand clenched around the compass. Their staggered march fell into a quiet foreboding. "Bloody Moons, I hate these woods."

"Hey, he'll be fine."

"How can you know?" Rob scowled back.

"Hobbes is with him," Kai said, wishing he could peer through the bond. The certainty of danger settled in his chest.

"Huh, your cat? Not that I don't enjoy petting him too. But what will he do against an armed group? Flop down to have his belly rubbed?"

"Hmm, you'd be surprised. He can be quite the menace."

~~~

Alden rested his back against the silver bark of a birch. His breath came in ragged gasps as he forced it to steady. Sweat beaded his brow, stinging his eyes. Dark veins still crept beneath the bandage on his arm and thigh, dark and itching with crusted blood.

The curse had stopped spreading, but fighting it off had taken its toll. His legs felt leaden, each step heavier as he dragged them over the uneven terrain. The last walking stick he'd

fashioned had splintered in the jaws of a beast. He couldn't remember when he had last rested, let alone slept.

His mouth tasted of bitter herbs. Potions kept him alert, but every dose left him a little weaker. His stubbornness to only carry what he'd personally brewed seemed silly now.

Nibbles coiled around his hale shoulder, cool scales brushing his skin. The little serpent flicked his tongue uneasily, hissing softly.

"I'm happy you're here too," Alden forced a weak smile.

The engraved bracelet on his wrist tempted him with salvation. Pride, duty, and exhaustion warred within him. It's been decades since a Blackwoods failed a first-year Trial. Though only sixteen since one died in it. Did that mean something?

A silver blur caught at the edge of his vision before he could decide. He spun, finding nothing but whirling mist.

The woods or his mind playing tricks again. He had his pick and couldn't trust either. If he could just rest a while. Or find some student not intent on stabbing him with cursed blades—neither prospect seemed likely at the moment.

The Veiled Woods had grown strangely quiet. Even the creaking rustle sounded distant, muffled by the pounding behind his eyes.

A twig snapped.

Nibbles squirmed, tongue flicking beside his neck.

Alden stilled, listening.

Voices and footsteps drifted through the fog. Five of them, if he judged the cadence correctly. Drawing closer. His eyes darted over the purple reeds lining the brush trail, fingers grasping for his wand. A floating dagger readied within his sleeve. Then, his weary mind caught up.

If they'd tracked him this far, there was little point hiding.

*This is it. No more running.*

His shoulder felt lighter, his throbbing wounds seemed to ease, as the figures emerged from the mist. Five students. No faces he immediately recognized—same as his last ambushers. He didn't need the pulse from his danger skill to know they meant him harm.

They slowed upon spotting him, fanning out to encircle him with practiced agreement. The boy at the rear seemed in command, his flaming red hair standing out even in the washed-out haze.

*Forlow... something, was it?*

With an effort, Alden pushed himself upright. Nibbles coiled beneath his collar, perfectly still and undetectable, their bond thrumming with cold hostility.

The Forlow boy sauntered forward, a sneer twisting his lips. "Greetings, looks like you could use a hand—"

"Mew."