

Chapter 426 - A Blackwoods' Honor

Isadora stood between the milky trunks, frigidly taking in the scene. Six more students shuffled in the misty trail behind her, all but one bearing the crest of Martial Studies.

A few meters amid the scorched purple brush, Alden used the lull to down another potion. His breaths came in ragged gasps. Blood trickled down his leg, soaking his tattered trousers. The fabric clung hot and sticky to his skin.

His flying daggers and shields arrayed behind him to save mana.

Hobbes seemed to have vanished too, hopefully back to a safe place.

"Sister..." Kastor took half a step. Guilt flickered across his features before his expression scrunched up. "How did you get— You shouldn't be here."

Isadora huffed, shoulders squared, chin raised high. "You snuck away while I slept. Did you believe I wouldn't find you, brother?" Her clipped tone contrasted with the uncertainty creeping into her face as she surveyed the battlefield.

The collapsed swordsman lay on the ground, fingers weakly twitching. Black veins spread from his neck. Reddish froth bubbled at his lips. Nearby, Alden stood in his blood-soaked uniform.

Her brow furrowed at the hairline crack on his bracelet. "Kastor... what did you do..."

The redhead boy schooled his expression into indifference. "What was necessary."

"No..." Her voice sounded soft. "It's them who made you do it, isn't it? I told you to stop meeting with those—"

"Do you think me *that* stupid?" Kastor slapped her hand away; anger cracked through his flimsy mask. "I can make my own decision! I've done what none of you had the courage to. Father likes to talk down to me, but even he just settles for scraps. Well, I won't settle for mediocrity!"

Her expression hardened. "This wasn't the plan."

"That," Kastor said, his smirk dripping with condescension, "is where you're mistaken, sister. It *was*. Just not the one you knew about. All your petty tricks and sabotage would never get us anywhere." He spread his arms wide. "You should be happy I took the initiative. Don't worry, I can put in a good word for you." His gaze turned to Alden. "Now step aside."

Isadora didn't move. "No." The dying swordsman gave a weak, garbled gasp. None of the others appeared much concerned for their companion's condition. "Why is he still here? Isn't his bracelet working? Brother... What did you do exactly... Our House can't shield you if you provoke the academy itself. Or *them*." She motioned to Alden's hobbled form.

Kastor snorted, fingers brushing a barbed amulet on his neck. "Oh, spare me the lectures. I've got my own protection from this. You should worry about yourself..."

On the brush beside the trail, Alden leaned on Blackthorn. Pain seared his leg at the slightest shift, but he'd happily let the Forlow siblings hash out their grievances if it gave him a reprieve. Every ounce of his concentration went to curtailing his injuries, his vision clouded from blood loss. His fingers reached for another draught but halted. Even with his Poison affinity and constitution, his body wasn't immune to potion overdose.

His familiar coiled uneasily beneath his collar, letting out a worried hiss.

I'll be alright, Nib. Don't worry.

The reassurance he sent through the bond rang hollow. He did not believe it himself. He'd barely held on against the five attackers. The newcomers' arrival had done nothing to assuage the foreboding, sinking feeling in his guts. Rather, it grew, thrashing against his composure, threatening to drown him.

The students Isadora had brought lingered in the shadows of the trail. They watched the Forlows' confrontation with almost placid indifference. As though the swordsman hadn't just stopped twitching a few paces away. As though Alden's blood-soaked figure were an ordinary part of the scenery.

One student with unfrazzled nerves, he could explain. But all six? They were too calm for first-years. A realization slowly sank its claws in Alden's stomach.

Were they all already so used to bloodshed or had they simply been expect—

"Enough!" Kastor's snarl broke the impasse. Jagged lines flitted beneath his skin like shadows. "Step aside, sister. I'm not your little servant to command. I'll deal with you later."

Isadora planted herself before him, fiery hair matching the blaze in her eyes. "No, you're my brother, and I'm getting you out of here—"

"I wasn't asking."

"What—" Isadora had no time to react when two of her companions grabbed and shoved her back. A yelp escaped her as she hit hard on the charred trail. Her arms scraped raw on the roots, her head slamming on a trunk. She gasped in pain and disbelief. Still dazed, she weakly tried to stand.

"Who..." Her eyes darted between the faces of her team. None offered her a hand or even glanced her way with more than scorn. Her arms gave out, and she fell back down, looking too stunned to move.

"You always liked to leave the chores on me. Who do you think recruited our team?" Kastor studiously avoided her gaze. "Just stay there. This won't take long."

Alden would have spared her a look of pity if his own circumstances hadn't just gone from desperate to hopeless. He'd barely survived one-on-five opponents. Now six had come to finish him off.

Despair clawed at his feverish mind. He crushed it beneath years of discipline. He wouldn't let himself panic, not while Nibbles was relying on him. No matter how dire the predicament, the little serpent would never betray or abandon him. Perhaps the only one.

A hundred hopes, dreams and regrets flitted through his thoughts. He cast them away, aware lingering a single moment might shatter his resolve.

A detached calm settled over him. Perhaps it was the blood loss, making his pain and sense of danger seem oddly distant.

Let them come.

Whatever his chances, he would fight till his last.

Alden straightened his battered body and met the circling students' gazes one by one. If they expected to see fear, doubt, or despair, they would leave disappointed.

This is it then.

His knuckles clenched around his staff. His flying daggers and hexagon formation arranged, hovering at his back. He strived to embody the stoic battlemage from the stories he devoured as a child, rather than a frightened sixteen-year-old barely able to stand. He still couldn't fathom how they expected to escape his House's retaliation.

House Forlow could scarcely hold onto its territory as a middling power.

Who was their backer? What kind of organization would infiltrate the Trials and believe they could get away with provoking the Great Houses? What were the black markings beneath their skin? None of this made sense, but his questions didn't matter now. If they had pushed this far, words would not dissuade them.

"So?" His dry tone carried through the eerie woods. "What are you waiting for? I'm only one Blackwoods."

Several of his attackers shied away from his gaze.

Kastor glanced left and right with a scowl. "Don't be foolish. He's clearly bluffing. Just look at him! He can barely stay on his feet."

Alden smiled thinly. "Then why don't you lead the charge?"

"What— I..." Kastor wetted his lips before lifting his chin higher. "I'm a mage. Not a frontline fighter."

Alden's lips turned sneering.

Despite the redhead's exhortation, the circling students hesitated. The swordsman's corpse lying between them spoke more eloquently than anything he or Kastor might say. Passed on in pain and indifference, his vacuous stare seemed to hold them in condemnation.

Alden let the silence stretch uncomfortably until Kastor tried to open his mouth to speak. "The first one who comes at me dies," he said evenly. "I swear it upon the name of House Blackwoods. Let the Seven Moons bear witness."

Light seemed to pulse above the perpetual haze boding over the woods. Several students instinctively took half a step back.

Kastor rounded on them, his teeth grinding. "Have you all turned to craven cowards? Elmon was just careless. He has nothing! You already know about his snake. It can't..."

Alden offered no rebuttal to the rant. As his tutors taught: oftentimes the less one said, the more persuasive their arguments would ring.

Though he wasn't sure what he was buying time for... His situation wasn't improving. His potions had wrung his energy down to the marrow. They could give no more without rest and nourishment. Every passing second demanded effort just to keep his knees from buckling and his hands from shaking.

Only Nibbles' presence beneath his shirt lent him the will to hold firm.

What am I hoping for then?

That a professor would magically swoop in to save him? That his bracelet would repair itself and extract him? For divine intervention?

Perhaps he merely wanted to breathe a little longer. But even that couldn't last forever.

Face red with anger, Kastor continued snarling. "Just attack together. Are you that scared of empty threats? Think about what our master will do when he learns of your failure!"

That somehow broke the hesitation. Uneasy glances passed between them. They shuffled into formation, wands and gleaming steel at the ready.

Alden watched them quietly. "So... which of you wants to come and die first?"

A spearman visibly swallowed; a green-haired girl fidgeted with her wand. Chants hummed low in the air. Each student eyed the others, not wanting to stick out, but advance they did.

Surrounded from the trail, Alden shifted Blackthorn into both hands and drew a slow, measured breath. If nothing else, he hoped to make good on his promise

It will be alright, Nib.

Nibbles' flicking tongue tickled his neck, exuding cold resolve.

The five Martial students reluctantly formed the vanguard. At the front, a burly teen with a shield and spear took the first step.

A silver blur stirred the mist.

The spearman's strides faltered. A look of puzzlement crossed his face, forever frozen as his body came apart at the waist. The two halves slid in opposite directions, spilling steaming entrails over the grass and dirt. White bones gleamed from his squelching, mangled flesh. Black markings briefly surfaced beneath his skin before their desperate twitches faded too.

Silence.

His attackers stilled, rooted in place. Even Kastor seemed lost for words.

Alden's own breath caught. Had one of the Moons actually listened to his prayers?

Tilting his head upward, he suddenly spotted a slumped furry shape. Hobbes sprawled atop a birch branch. His head rested lazily on the bark. His limbs hung down, pearly claws retracting into his paws. He looked exhausted. And... unbearably *smug*.

Horrificed cries erupted below.

"Rotten gods! How did it—"

"That wasn't in the briefing!"

"Kill him!" Kastor yelled, panic edging his voice. "Stop dithering! Whatever trick he used, he won't be able to use that treasure again so quickly!"

Though that reasoning leaked worse than a sieve, fear had already overtaken them. The nine pairs of eyes locked onto him. Mana thrummed through the fog.

Alden could just brace himself against Blackthorn when the charge resumed. Jets of oily Fire, jagged Stone shards, murky Water whips, and Wind surged behind the blades of the remaining vanguard.

The hexagonal shields snapped into formation; his daggers whistled out to intercept the spells. He burned his Metal reserves, knowing there would be no *after* to worry about. A sharp throb split his head as he strained his skills.

Still, it wasn't enough.

There are too many.

Mana vainly rushed to reinforce his arms when a ripple crossed the ambient essence.

A whirling sphere of Water burst through the trees. Trunks cracked, raining wooden chips before smashing into the charging students. Two bodies crashed through the brush, leaving just two more when the birched woods ominously creaked.

Gnarled roots tore from the ground, spraying dirt and entangling legs and ankles. Several bolts of Fire hissed through the fog, exploding into brilliant flames among the formation before they could reorganize.

Students still reeled from the barrage when a silver flash blinked behind the pudgy Stone Shaper. The boy suddenly coughed, looking down at the blade protruding out through his chest.

His eyes widened with confusion. "What..."

The cloaked figure at his back retracted the sword. Their form already blurred and vanished before the pudgy mage could collapse.

"And people say I'm the reckless one..." A familiar voice echoed through the mist, equal parts exasperation and relief. "Even I don't usually pick a fight with ten people at once."

Suddenly, Matthew stood beside him. An elegant milky blade arched up to deflect the saber of the last Martial student. Four icicles shot forth from opposite angles, shattering as a dark glow covered the assailant. Yet, the momentary distraction let a black throwing knife bury itself in the man's back.

Robert emerged from the mist parallel to the trail. Flames danced around his charred wand as his eyes coldly swept the clearing. His gaze settled on Alden. Open relief washed through his face before his lips pressed into a grim line. He dashed toward him, his figure seeming to cover more distance than it should.

"Are you alright?" They asked in near unison.

"I'm... alive," Alden muttered, sounding far calmer than he felt. "You... What are you two doing here?"

Matthew shoved the wounded saber wielder back. "We came to get you, what else?" Despite his nonchalant tone, his gaze never left the encircling students. "None of us wanted to risk rolling for a new roommate, you know? I've heard some horror stories," he stage-whispered before pointing vaguely in Kastor's direction.

"It's *you*!" Kastor spat, glaring at Mat with pure venom. Black flames crackled over his wand, throwing the writhing markings on his neck into sharp relief. Then, a wide smile curved his lips. "It appears Luck is finally on my side. Thank you for delivering yourself. It'd have been a chore to track you down." He waved his wand arm at his companions. "What are you waiting for? Kill them all! There's only three."

Mat smiled. "Two more than necessary."

His figure blurred and *shifted* as Kastor's oily, dark flames roared to devour the spot where he'd stood. Within a heartbeat, he was behind one of the four original mages. A sword flashed silver in a crimson spray. Before the Water mage had even begun to fall, he was moving again. Twisting between the converging Wind and Ice spells, he reappeared on a boulder seven meters away. Water coiled around him like living ribbons.

Alden could barely track the exchanges. After the last effort, his body seemed to have reached its limits. Shapes swam at the edges of his vision. He clung to his staff as best he could. Biting down on his lip to remain conscious, he tasted the metallic tang of blood.

Matthew flitted across the battlefield, reappearing from the mist like a vengeful spirit. Frost spread beneath the boots of three mages while he darted to the melee fighters, who'd gotten to their feet. His blade seemed to flow through the slashes. A crescent stream of Water swept their legs, while roots burst forth to wrap their ankles.

Another arc of crimson droplets painted the woods, then he was moving again.

Alden stared with churning thoughts. Even against the Pale Stalker, Mat must've still been holding back. No one could improve this much so quickly...

Rob was at his side, pulling one of Alden's arms over his shoulder. His charred wand churned with mana. He sent brilliant bolts of Fire, disrupting any knot of students who attempted to regroup. Between spells, his eyes kept flicking back to Alden.

"Are you sure you're fine? Those injuries look nasty. You should go." Rob's left hand ran over the vials at his belt. "I should have..."

"Potions won't help. And my bracelet won't work." Alden looked at the battle. "I'll... live. You should go help him."

Across the trail, Stone spikes erupted beneath Mat, but his roommate had vanished again.

Rob threw another bolt at the Earth mage. "I should get you to safety."

"Help him."

His tarnished yellow eyes glanced back, heavy with thoughts. He nodded, "I won't stray far." After a slight hesitation, he dashed forward. A line of brilliant flames swept over the trail, forcing the attackers to conjure barriers.

His shoulder against a tree, Alden dipped into his vital mana reserves, sending one last dagger flying forward. Steel found the flesh of the last spearman. The paralytic venom slowed his attacker long enough for Matthew to cut through his guard.

Without looking back, Mat pointed his hand. A revolving sphere of Water hurled toward the biggest clump of students. The spell crashed among their formation in a spray, opening a small crater.

“How’s he teleporting?”

“How is he—”

“Watch the knives!”

A female mage shrieked, waving her arms. A flood of oily black flames surged from her wand, raining over the woods, further spread by the buffeting gusts.

Matthew leaped behind a birch, vanishing in the smoke before reappearing behind her. He ducked beneath two stone spikes as a shield of frost protected his side. His sword traced another bloody arc before he was dashing again. Spells only found empty air.

The clearing rapidly unraveled into panic.

“Stay away from me!”

“We have to retreat...”

“He’s a monster!”

“No!” Kastor snarled his teeth as only five of them remained. “Finish the task!”

Rob advanced methodically. His fire denied every avenue of escape, while throwing knives struck from impossible angles.

Another student fell screaming into the flames.

Matthew shifted through the fog, cutting the number to three.

Then there were two.

At last, Kastor seemed to notice their falling numbers. “It’s always *you*!” His wand swung wide, away from Matthew, away from Rob, aimed straight toward Alden. He sneered. “I won’t fail my task.”

Alden watched the dark crimson Fire surge toward him with strange detachment. He attempted to raise Blackthorn and summon his shields, but his battered body refused to comply. Both his mana and energies had run dry.

Matthew stood across the shattered woods, engaged with the final melee fighter.

Rob was already sprinting towards him. His Fire bolts vanished into the roaring oily black of Kastor’s flames, still too far.

Alden weakly reached for Nibbles as the heat began searing his skin. A lance of vivid crimson Fire intercepted Kastor's darkened flames. The collision sent a scorching wave through birches and hurled Alden from his feet.

He scarcely felt himself hit the ground. A gasping cough rattled his lips as smoke burned his lungs. Blinking away the haze from his sight, he checked himself by habit. A few more scrapes and bruises, yet nothing immediately fatal.

That spell didn't look like Rob's. Who...

Leaning on a trunk a few paces away stood Isadora. Blood trickled from a cut on her head, yet her gaze remained unflinching. Flames danced around from her fireglass wand, sweeping aside the last dark embers.

Kastor stared at his sister. "What did you do?"

"You..." She watched her brother in disbelief. "You actually tried to kill him."

"I—"

Rob reached him first, tackling him to the ground. A sharp kick ripped the wand from Kastor's grasp. Not giving him a chance to react, he stomped on the hand with his heel. He ignored the redhead's scream, resting a jagged blade to Kastor's throat with a murderous glare. "Now. You're going to answer a few questions."

Kastor froze like a caught rabbit, then gave a sneering chuckle. "Whatever... It's useless. You have no idea who you're dealing with." Blood stained his teeth as he smiled. "You're already dead. Even if you kill me, more reinforcements are on the way. We're more than you can imagine or stop. You'll never leave these woods alive."