

Chapter 427 - Hidden Hunters

Bodies lay strewn across the broken woods. Blood soaked the torn ground and permeated the woods with an acrid iron tang.

Kai pulled the spellblade from his downed opponent. The mind thread searching for more threats came up empty. Even the whispers had momentarily abated, leaving only the sound of the creaking trees.

A few students groaned weakly, still breathing, yet none attempted to activate their bracelets to teleport them to safety.

Even if the academy arrested them, that seemed preferable to death.

Unless they can't...

A strange heaviness was hanging over the area, interfering with and increasing the cost of Space Magic. The repeated Spatial Shifts left his mana channels feeling raw.

Another foreboding seized his attention.

Across the bleeding bodies, jagged black markings surfaced beneath their skin before fading like watered ink. There hadn't been time to think about them while fighting, but now that he had a moment...

His stomach went cold. Though almost a year had passed, the memories surfaced with brutal clarity. The damp tunnels beneath the Lake of Myst. Lifeless mutilated bodies. Inky runes carved through their flesh. The fading light in Niel's eyes...

His knuckles whitened around his spellblade. His eyes itched. He hadn't examined them closely, but the similarities were apparent.

Was the Stygian Cult involved? Could they have infiltrated the academy? How were they connected to these students— Not now.

With an effort, Kai wrenched himself from his spiraling memories. The absence of imminent danger didn't mean they were safe, not until they left these woods.

First, what matters.

Across the torn trail, Alden lay crumpled against a birch. His hands still gripped a darkwood staff, crisscrossed with enchanted metal. Fresh blood soaked his tattered robe and trousers, amid older patches and stained bandages. His mana veins pulsed feebly, especially around his right leg and left shoulder.

Kai let out a slow breath.

We made it in time.

Despite his battered state, his roommate appeared stable for the moment.

Farther among the trees, Isadora leaned on a scorched trunk. Blood smeared her temple. One arm clutched tightly across her ribs; the other gripped a glass wand that seemed to contain swirling flames.

Kai bit his cheek. In his haste to dispatch all the threats, he hadn't considered Kastor might not attack him. It was a limitation of Hallowed Intuition: unless he consciously directed it, the skill prioritized his own safety in the face of danger. Her intervention was the only reason Alden still breathed. So he opted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

At least for now. Speaking of...

"...reinforcements are on their way." Kastor sneered despite Rob's knife resting against his throat with a murderous look. "More powerful than you can imagine or stop. You'll never leave these woods alive..."

"Just shut up." Rob slammed his face into the scorched earth, a knee planted firmly in his back. One hand wrenched back the redhead's wrist, while the other held the black dagger. "What kind of reinforcements? What numbers? How would they find us? Who ordered this?"

Kastor spat a glob of blood and chuckled. "You'll... find out soon enough."

Rob twisted his arm higher. The ground muffled his screams. A thin line of blood welled beneath the dagger. "You won't see that if you don't talk."

Face pale and trembling, Kastor still held his tongue. "Wait... you'll pay for this..." The threats dissolved into pained gasps as Rob bashed his face into the ground again.

Kai passed them as he moved to check on Alden. "We don't have time for this. He's probably sworn a soul oath."

"Hmm... you're right." Rob cast a cold glance down at Kastor. The redhead's bloody smirk fled as he continued. "And he'd slow us down too much as a hostage. He's no use to us."

"Wha—"

"Wait!" Isadora's scream stopped Rob's dagger. Taking a halting step, she froze as every head turned her way.

Rob's eyes narrowed on her. "Choose your words carefully."

Kastor looked at her with naked desperation. The tendons on his neck stood taut as he strained away from the blade, scarcely daring to breathe.

She swallowed. "...please. I don't ask that you let him go. Just... his plan has clearly failed. He's my twin brother. You can ensure he's no threat to you without killing him. I swear he'll pay once the Trials are over. You know the academy won't let this slide. And I will consider this a blood debt."

As silence tensely stretched, her pleading gaze settled on Kai, who sighed. "Well... she's the reason Alden's still breathing." While he'd enjoy beating Kastor bloody, he didn't need to execute him before his sister.

Perhaps if Alden had died...

Jaw clenched, Rob looked between the Forlow siblings. His expression didn't soften. Finally, he muttered a curse. "Fine... For Alden's sake." The pressure of the dagger eased a fraction. "I'll consider us even."

Isadora sagged in relief. "Thank—."

Before Kastor could make a sound, Rob drove the pommel of the dagger into the side of his temple. As the redhead reeled in a daze, he stabbed his shoulder and slammed his head into the ground again.

With a rattling gasp, Kastor's eyes rolled back. His body slackened.

Rob yanked the dagger free, releasing the unconscious teen, disgust etched across his face. Glancing at Kastor's sister, he pursed his lips with a little guilt.

"You asked to make sure he's no threat without killing. No one at our grade would die from this little." Looking away from Isadora, he stepped over the body to approach Kai and Alden. "Well, probably not," he murmured as he crouched beside them. "How is he?"

"He'll recover." Having helped Alden lie down, Kai peeled the blood-soaked bandages from his feverish skin. Vibrant green motes rushed to stabilize his mana veins. It was his first time trying to apply Nature Healing to someone else, but he tried to make up for quality with quantity.

Releasing his skills, he cast a sidelong glance at Rob.

"What?"

"Uh, nothing." He shook his head. "I'm just surprised you didn't kill him."

Rob snorted. "I don't need to kill him in front of his sister. Besides, once House Blackwoods learns of this, he'll wish I'd finished the job." He reached over with a fresh set of bandages. "Here, leave it to me."

Seeing his practiced motions, Kai shifted to let him work.

On the ground, Alden blinked several times to bring them into focus. With a pained wince, he attempted to push himself upright. "I'm... alive."

"Barely." Rob pushed him down. "Stay put, or you'll bleed out. I'm almost done."

"I... what happened..." Alden groaned, his voice hoarse. "I've already drunk enough potions... I'm fine. The wounds will close soon... help me up..."

After a brief back-and-forth, Rob relented. The bleeding had indeed slowed to a trickle.

"How..." Sitting up, Alden took in the bodies strewn across the battlefield, Isadora crouching beside her brother. "Huh... Thank you for the aid."

Kai held out an arm to steady him. "Don't mention it. What's one heroic rescue between roommates? Clean the bathroom a couple times, and we'll call it even. Well... maybe later. You do look terrible."

Despite the blood and caked grime, Alden regarded him with a flat scowl. "I shall treasure your concern."

Kai grinned. "You already look better."

Rob shot him an unamused look. "He needs rest. If we can break whatever is interfering with the bracelets, he should leave the Trials immediately."

"Even if I could, I would not quit now." Alden raised his left wrist. A hairline crack split the engraved metal band. "Mine is broken anyway. Using it would be too risky."

Rob's gaze dropped to his own bracelet. "We can find a way..."

"I'm not taking yours either. You know it'd be useless. They're keyed to each individual student."

"But—"

"If you want to argue, do it while we leave," Kai cut in, scanning the creaking woods. "I don't like this place. And Kastor might not have been bluffing about those reinforcements."

Rob's expression turned grim. "He wasn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Enough that I'm not willing to stay here. I'll carry Alden."

"Huh? You are not going to—"

"We'll be too slow if you walk." Rob crouched down. "You can climb on my back. Or I can carry you like a princess. Your pick."

Drawing himself up, Alden managed to give an affronted sniff. "Your back will do fine. Until I'm rested enough." Nibbles poked out from his collar, brushing his cheek. "Uhm... thank you."

"No problem." Rob smiled, his usual carefree self returning.

Then they scowl at me.

Kai shook his head. "We're leaving," he raised his voice for Isadora's sake.

"I see. I'll find my way out on my own. But I can't leave him unconscious out here in the woods." She pushed herself upright, looking between them and Kastor. Then she reached to unclasp the barbed amulet from around her brother's neck. "I think this is what was blocking the bracelet..."

Before any of them could intervene, crimson flames blossomed around the pendant. The Fire burned brighter and brighter, enough to pierce the gloom of the woods. Molten metal sagged in her palm before dripping to the forest floor in glowing crimson beads. Flicking the cooling slag aside, she reached to inject her mana into Kastor's bracelet.

A moment later, space rippled around him, and he vanished.

"It appears I was correct. If you don't mind, I'll take care of the others as well. I'm sure the academy has questions for them." Her essence wove over the bodies, making two more vanish. She bowed slightly. "Thank you... for the mercy. I won't forget it." Stealing worried glances at Rob, she hurried off into the mist.

Within seconds, Kai and the rest were also ready to move.

Rob watched where Kastor vanished as if regretting not killing him.

"Hey, it's not much of a threat anyway."

"...Yeah." Rob snorted. "Alright, let's—"

"Hold up! I almost forgot the most important thing!" Ignoring their looks, Kai dashed toward the fallen students. What was a battle without loot? "Huh, what? Why are you looking at me like that? We're still in a competition. I'll split the Moonlight Shards with you. They have quite a lot." He cut the latch of another satchel. "Probably stolen from others."

From Rob's back, Alden arched his eyebrow the slightest degree. "Is that why you're also taking their wands, weapons, amulets, rings, and potions?"

"Well... they *did* try to kill us. That forfeits any right to complain."

"Hmm, fair." Rob nodded. "I'll allow you to carry my share."

Alden seemed about to groan, but simply hung his head.

Thanks to his mana senses, Kai took just a minute to gather the spoils. His satchel clinked with the weight of newly acquired Shards. “Okay, we can—”

The whispers suddenly swelled in his mind. Mist thickened between milky trunks, creaking with ghostly voices. White plumes curled around the fallen bodies, tainted with inky streaks. The black markings seemed to seep from the torn clothes. They meshed into the fog, writhing toward one another at the center of the trail—

A compressed sphere of Water erupted from his spellblade. The skill blasted through the gathering mass before it could take shape, scattering the black vapor and shredding up the ground. A second cast of Water Cannon enlarged the crater in a spray of dirt.

No, absolutely not.

“I think that’s our cue.” Kai stood up, ignoring his roommates’ looks as he cast the skill a third, fourth, and fifth time. Better to be thorough.

They took no encouragement to start jogging.

That was stronger than I thought.

Compared to freeform spells, channeling profession skills through his spellblade was both more powerful and straining. Due to his desire to hide Eljah’s sword, he’d never even considered if it was possible before the Trials.

Another thing to practice once we leave these damned woods.

Contrary to his fears, he easily picked out the direction where the mana thinned. Unfortunately, that also made their route painfully obvious.

Rob seemed to be thinking the same. “Any ideas to steer clear of those reinforcements?”

“Hope to get lucky?”

“Very reliable.”

“I know.”

If he hadn’t directly engaged with Spatial Shift in the last fight, using the mist to his advantage, it would have been much closer. His channels still ached from the strain, and his mind throbbed in protest.

After exerting his magic through the interference, Hobbes was also too exhausted to provide much help.

Here’s to hoping...

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The Veiled Woods shimmered beneath a curtain of mist.

Inside the Academy's observation hall, dozens of crystal cubes floated through the air, each reflecting a different stretch of the Veiled Woods. Unlike the Mid-Terms' tunnel system, the forest was far too vast to observe in its entirety. Professors, attendants, and fourth-years moved briskly between the scrying stations, the uneasy mood clear from their postures.

"The casualties..."

"They remain within acceptable projections."

Tugging his skills, Cassian Astares returned his attention to his office. A cube hummed on his desk. His mind habitually delved into the lattice of enchantments, catching a flicker among thousands of arrays.

His lips curved almost imperceptibly. "Found you."

As expected, rats couldn't resist their own gluttony. It was almost disappointing.

They assumed the Veiled Woods' distortions would make the perfect cover for their actions, never considering the same magic could conceal other hunters. Of course, had their backers been a little stronger, they might have been right.

Another image drifted into view. A blue-robed professor stood near the perimeter wards, outwardly monitoring the Trials. It was a convincing enough illusion. It certainly explained how he'd moved about so freely. And likely how he'd grown so foolishly arrogant.

Cassian took the prepared dossier. Professor Halden: master of Light Magic, twenty-two years of spotless service, three commendations, and over forty published papers. Just one detail was missing. Had he been feeding information to their enemy the whole time, or had he been turned later?

Ultimately, it made little difference.

Cassian looked away before the man might notice his attention.

"You've confirmed the route?"

A shadow detached itself from the wall library, the figure of the warden entirely clad in black. "Yes, Dean Astares. The remaining infiltrators have committed themselves. All the suspected targets within the Trials have been marked. We're monitoring the main halls for any suspicious communication once they realize our actions."

"Regarding the collaborators?"

"Though... all student collaborators we captured died when we attempted interrogation. The marks killed them before we could extract any useful information. The researchers have yet to make much progress."

"Unfortunate, but expected." Cassian nodded. "I'll handle this myself. The academy has tolerated this infestation long enough."

For months they had pieced together fragments, missing artifacts, altered records, diverted funds through a dozen intermediaries, until now.

*So often, people mistake patience for inaction.*

Alas, to clear an infestation, you had to pull from the roots, or the weeds would keep choking the garden. This was the only solution. Facing genuine danger was the essence of the Trials. His responsibility was to ensure said danger was measured to his students' abilities.

"Signal the Wardens to begin the cleanup. We've tolerated the filth long enough."

"Yes, Dean Astares." With a single bow and no sound, the shadow vanished.

Cassian leafed through the file again. The papers also failed to mention Professor Halden had reached half-step to Blue. He still remembered the euphoric invincibility from crossing that threshold.

*I will shatter that illusion.*

It was time to rid his academy of this weed.

With a twist of will, he translocated himself.

He returned before anyone ever noticed his absence.

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Mist drifted between the silver-barked trees as Flynn crossed his arms above his head. "I admit I expected the Veiled Woods to be... worse."

Rain walked a few paces ahead, trident resting across one shoulder. "I quite like it!"

Flynn glanced around the quiet trail. Aside from a particularly unpleasant meadow of itching flowers, the last two days of the Trials had been almost relaxing. "Guess I got lucky with my encounters."

Rain threw back a half smile. "Did you now?" As the trail rounded around a thicket of purple reed, he suddenly slowed.

Not needing explanations, Flynn matched his pace. "Hostiles?"

"I'm not sure." His pale brows furrowed as he gazed ahead.

A minute later, eight students emerged from the opposite direction.

Their march halted as they spread across the trail. Their gazes shifted from Rain's trident to Flynn's shortsword, lingering almost imperceptibly on their faces.

Seeing no one move, Flynn offered an easy smile. "Hey, looks like we picked the same path."

Blank stares met him.

Tough crowd.

Rain tilted his head, sweeping the group and waving them onward.

The silence was getting awkward when a black-haired student stepped forward. "Hmm, s-sorry. W-we're not looking for trouble. Just passing through."

"Good. Neither are we." Flynn kept his affable tone and moved aside with an open hand. "There's enough nonsense in these woods already without creating more."

Rain glanced at him.

Flynn merely shrugged.

They already had enough Moonlight Shards that robbing some fellow students would serve little but to guilt his conscience. Everyone here looked exhausted, and one never knew what kind of profession skills they might have.

Rain silently leaned forward.

"Uhm... t-thank you." After the briefest hesitation, the black-haired student took the lead.

The group had almost passed them, letting Flynn get back onto the path, when his instincts screamed. Mana surged behind him. He spun in time to see a sword descending toward his neck, the shy boy smiling gleefully. No warning. No hesitation.

Before the blade came within a handspan of his neck, steel swerved aside on a curtain of Water. A crushing force hurled the attacker backward, barely able to keep his feet.

The trees groaned.

Streams flowed like rivers around them, swatting aside darts and spells, before coiling around Rain. The air itself seemed to grow heavy. Students staggered, more than half collapsing to a knee under the weight of Gravity.

Rain's amber eyes held no trace of his usual nonchalance, narrowed in cold fury. "You attacked him." His voice remained pleasant.

"I-I..." The student's confidence evaporated. The group instinctively stumbled backward, desperately trying to raise a barrier.

The trident blurred forward, trees splintered, and people screamed. By the time the mist settled again, the trail had fallen silent. And for once, Flynn was glad he hadn't eaten anything for several hours. "You could have left a couple for me. Or even just one."

Rain spun back from amid the wreckage, a crease of worry before noticing his grin. "Was that too rash?" He flicked his dripping trident onto the churned earth, his breathing perfectly steady.

"Hmm..." Flynn eyed the unconscious students scattered across the trail. "They're not dead, so just rash enough! Well... we might as well take their Shards."

"I'll grab them. They did seem to have a few." Rain spun back. His gaze lingered on one of the unconscious bodies, where jagged black markings surfaced beneath torn sleeves before fading into the skin.

That's odd...

Without another word, they strolled down the trail, their satchels a little heavier.

Flynn stifled a yawn. "Who do you think they were?"

Rain shrugged. "Idiots."