

Chapter 425 - Dark Tidings and Silver Blurs

Fog swirled through the rustling woods.

The five students loosely encircling Alden froze, hands grasping their wands and weapons. Even the Forlow boy's sneer turned quizzical at the sound. Nibbles held still beneath his collar.

"Did something just meow?" A pudgy student voiced.

"It must be the trees."

"I heard it too. It sounded just like—" Another whipped back. "There! I saw it. A cat!"

"Where?" A stout teen with a greatsword whirled around.

"There is nothing there..." The only girl scowled.

The group argued in hushed tones, startled at every rustle from the brush. Alden watched silently, grateful for any moment to steady his body and refill his mana. The herbal tang of his brews burned down his throat.

Though that meow had sounded awfully familiar...

The yearn for a friendly presence clashed with the fear of dragging them into his dangerous predicament.

"Quiet!" Forlow snapped, cutting the squabble. "How would a cat survive here? It's just the woods playing tricks—"

"Meow."

The call rang as if to prove him wrong; each head turned to an unmistakable figure.

A silver cat lounged atop a mossy boulder by the trail, sprawled on his back, one hind leg raised to meticulously groom his rear. Unhurriedly lifting his yellow eyes, Hobbes slowly blinked at the stunned students.

How...

With their eyes off him, Alden retrieved his Blackthorn. The staff reached to his sternum, settling into his palm with comforting familiarity. His fingers traced the smooth darkwood haft and the countless fine runes etched along it. Wrought silver encased a crystal focus, spiraling down in root-like bands with a muted gleam.

He'd seen many patricians carrying more ornate walking sticks. Inwardly, he kicked himself, realizing he could have used Blackthorn for that earlier.

Alden took half a step forward toward Hobbes, wrestling with the urge to shield the cat. The bitter truth was that, with his leg throbbing and his mind clouded by exhaustion, he could barely protect himself. Every moment that the hostilities were delayed, the potions he'd ingested restored a sliver more of strength.

His friend's familiar never looked keen on direct confrontations—perhaps when he was fully grown. But he'd proven himself remarkably slippery. Whatever happened, he should be able to escape safely.

"Mew." Said cat tilted his head, large eyes peering up at the students.

"It's really a cat."

"What's it doing here?"

"Aww..." The girl cooed. "Here, kitty kitty. Let me pet you."

Silent gusts stirred the fog.

From one blink to the next, Hobbes was gone.

Startled gasps rippled through the group, hands snapping to their weapons. Another meow echoed behind them. They jolted and spun; Hobbes had already vanished to tease them from a new direction.

He's... buying time.

The realization settled on Alden with quiet certainty as he tracked the shifting calls. Was Matthew nearby too? He dared not hope. Despite Hobbes' uncanny talent for appearing wherever he pleased, guiding a person through the Veiled Woods seemed... improbable.

"Enough of this!" Forlow ground his teeth, stomping hard. "It's just another creature from these cursed woods."

Without warning, his wand whipped toward the mist. A jet of flames streaked with oily black engulfed the tuft of weeds, where Hobbes last appeared. The Fire devoured the reeds and shrubs, leaving only charred ashes.

"There," he scoffed. "Problem solved."

Alden's stomach lurched before Nibbles suggested he lift his gaze.

Hobbes dangled from a thin branch above the group, leisurely licking one paw, not a hair on his coat singed. Satisfied with the grooming, he appeared to regard the crackling flames with open disdain.

"Now then." Forlow turned back to Alden with a self-satisfied smile. "I assume we can skip the introductions. Hand over your Moonlight Shards if you don't want to get harmed."

Alden squared them up, careful not to glance above them. "Sorry... who are you exactly?"

"*Who*... you perfectly well know who I am!"

Alden looked him over with polite blankness; several of their gazes warily lingered on his staff. "I really don't. What is your business with me?"

"I've already told you!" Forlow snapped, leveling his wand with a threatening air. His expression smoothed into a fake smile as he extended his free hand. "Hand over your Shards, and we can settle this peacefully."

Behind him, his companions smiled a little too widely, quietly tightening the encirclement.

Alden almost scoffed back. His senses itched with something profoundly wrong about them. "If you share your actual goal, we may yet reach an agreement. Whatever you've been promised, you may gain sevenfold from a Blackwoods."

He was loath to invoke his House's name, but he couldn't let his pride place Hobbes in harm's way. Yet, the group showed no hint of greed or temptation, sharpening his foreboding.

They simply stared until the lone girl muttered, "He's not biting, Kastor."

"I see that!" Kastor glared at her, dropping the smile. "Doesn't matter. His Trials won't last much longer. He can't ride his family's coattails out of this."

Spells coiled through Blackthorn, the runes along its darkwood shaft palely lighting. He forced his fogged mind into motion, weaving the spell patterns with a flexibility that chants couldn't match.

Five daggers flew from the sheathes strapped beneath his clothes. Metal essence thrummed through the blades as they whistled through the fog, splitting to different targets.

His attackers scattered. The girl ducked beneath a lunging dagger. The stout swordsman batted another aside, bumping the pudgy mage, who raised a Stone shield from the ground. With a slight flex, the remaining blades curved around the barrier, carving bloody lines across three students before a stream of murky Water shoved them back.

Cries of surprise more than pain echoed through the birches. None of the cuts looked deep to his Mana Sense. The paralytic coating on the blades should already be numbing the wounds. As the blades wheeled back, Alden flared his Poison Magic to speed the spread of the toxin in their bloodstreams.

The knives settled into twisting orbits, forcing the encirclement on the defensive as Metal essence flowed to refill the custom runework etched into each dagger.

The students' bravado faltered together with their steps.

"What— I can't feel my leg!"

"They're poisoned!"

"Stop fretting and follow the plan," Kastor scowled. Under the luminescence of the shadowed woods, inky lines seemed to slither within his forearm before vanishing under his sleeve.

Perhaps a trick of the light?

The surge of mana and hurried chanting commanded Alden's attention back to the battlefield. Stone and Water barriers thwarted his returning blades as the swordsman swatted the flying daggers. Crimson flames streaked with black erupted from Kastor's wand. The Fire roared forth, intent on swallowing him

Alden planted Blackthorn into the ground. Seven metallic hexagons flew from his storage amulet. Mana surged through the staff, igniting the intricate runes engraved. The hexagons snapped into a dome just as the flames struck.

The initial blast nearly tore the sections apart. A cherry red glow spread from the central hexagon. Dark Fire split around the barrier, washing over him to consume the brush behind with searing heat.

Alden exhaled sharply—no time to recover. He switched his focus to his hovering daggers. The blades whistled at the attacking students from blind angles,

The Water mage cried out as poisoned steel sliced his thigh; the pudgy teen hastily reinforced the stone barrier. Aside from Kastor, all four now bore bleeding cuts.

Alden reached for the thin threads linking him to the toxin, only to clash against a strange resistance. Something interfered with his Poison Magic. The numbness should have already spread through most of their bodies. Instead, they barely stumbled. Worse, the effects seemed to be receding.

Had they taken an antidote before the battle? No... his latest specialization should have still hindered that unless they knew the exact composition of his paralytic—one he'd personally brewed and modified.

How—

The students rushed him before he could puzzle it out.

Alden calmly arranged the knives back into their hexagon formation.

The girl proved another Fire Breather. Twin firebolts burst through the lingering smoke. He twisted himself aside just as a lance of Stone shot toward his chest. The hexagons reformed to deflect it, the impact sending both off course and draining a chunk of his reserves.

The firebolts exploded against a birch, blasting him with heat and a spray of splinters. The detritus grazed his cheek when the stout swordsman was already closing in, greatsword aimed for his heart. A coating of mana protected the blade from Metal manipulation; the student charged over the scorched trail, using the others' spells as cover.

His daggers were out of position, harrying the backline, while his protection spell consumed too much mana against melee blows.

Alden clenched his jaw. Mana flooded over his burning injuries, forcing his battered body to obey. He planted Blackthorn, one end braced against the earth as he caught the descending strike. Several hexagons flew past, slamming into the swordsman's elbows and wrists to weaken the strike.

The greatsword crashed against the staff, the clang rattling his bones.

Yet, he held, deflecting the blade, tearing his robes instead of his flesh.

The student's smug grin flattered as Alden twisted his hips and swung his staff. Aided by Metal mana, Blackthorn smashed the flat of the greatsword back into its wielder's face.

The boy recovered just in time for a returning dagger, forcing him to throw himself backward.

Stone lances, dark crackling Fire, and whips of murky Water covered his retreat. The barrage came without rhythm or respite, hammering the hexagon formation. Despite their wasteful weaving, they were five, and he was one. Whatever they lacked in coordination, they made up for in raw power.

Alden yielded ground step by step. His floating daggers swept through the caster to sow chaos, his mind straining to coordinate them. Flames devoured the brush at his feet, licking at his calves. His attackers were stronger than the team that previously backstabbed him, too strong for a handful of no-name students.

A bolt of dark Fire blasted the hexagonal barrier, the impact cracking the formation. The swordsman lunged to capitalize, Stone spike and Water blades converging from the side.

Bloody gods.

Alden threw himself between the silver trunks, using the trees as cover. The momentary distraction disrupted his orbiting daggers. The flanking spells suddenly wobbled. A Stone spike skimmed past his shoulder, narrowly missing him.

His reserves were rapidly depleting. Pain lanced from his injuries with every movement. A single misstep, and his precarious defense would crumble. It was an inevitability in his current condition.

Their attacks left no doubt that they meant to kill him.

Perhaps, he should have used a deadlier poison, but killing students had consequences even for him. And... he'd never taken a life.

His daggers had been forged to wound, relying on poison to finish the fight. Only... The toxins weren't working.

As he retreated along the trail, Stone shards tore beneath his feet. He jolted to dodge, the hexagons too far to intercept. Already bleeding, his injured leg slid on the weeds. Too slow to adjust, he braced for pain. Yet, the shards strangely curved, missing him again and tearing the brush behind him.

They truly have an awful aim.

Alden silently thanked the Moons, too exhausted to question his improbable Luck. He reached into his storage just as the swordsman battered his barrier. Two virulent green vials appeared between his fingers.

Throwing them, he manipulated the metal in the caps to adjust their flight. The vials spun through the air. The stout student cleaved one apart with his greatsword; the other shattered in front of the casters.

Both broken glasses hissed with dense emerald smoke, billowing through the mist.

"Get back!" Kastor yelled.

Coughs and curses erupted from the engulfed swordsman, buying Alden precious seconds to breathe. Yet even as he reached for Poison mana to guide the spread into their lungs, he encountered the same maddening resistance.

Again...

When the toxic haze thinned, only the swordsman—who'd inhaled the largest dose—had fallen to one knee, wheezing with froth at the mouth. The rest looked barely inconvenienced. Through the tinted mist, inky markings flashed beneath exposed arms, necks and faces.

This time, Alden was certain it wasn't an illusion.

"Did you think we wouldn't prepare for your tricks?" Kastor sneered. "The other team was too hasty. But I'm nothing like those fools."

Barely staying on his feet himself, Alden was just grateful for the reprieve, the poison within the swordsman already losing cohesion.

"Hey, where's my wand?" the girl suddenly blurted. "I can't find my potions either."

“...What?”

“Where is my wand?” The girl suddenly exclaimed.

“What...?”

“Wait...” the Earth Shaper patted down his own pockets.

“What are you babbling about now? How could you—” Kastor snapped before reaching for his own belt and coming up empty. His expression froze, his face flushing a tinge closer to his hair. “What did you do!”

Alden met him with the detached patrician stare his tutors had drilled into him. That only seemed to infuriate the redhead further. Truly, he had no idea what they were saying. Though... a silver blur in the periphery of his vision gave him a clue...

The distraction was welcome, but it was only a stopgap for his situation.

He couldn't outrun them, and he couldn't see a path to victory. Unless he countered their resistance, dispersing a slower-acting toxin through the fog was unlikely to accomplish anything.

Ceasing his threats, Kastor swept a wary look across the surrounding birches; his companions quickly followed suit. “Is it that damned...”

I can't let him find him.

Alden swallowed a healing tonic in one bitter gulp. Fresh blood soaked his old bandages, mingling with newer wounds. He blinked away the haze clouding his vision. He could still fight. If he used his aces well, he might even drag one or two of them down with him.

Was that worth it? Was preserving his pride worth putting himself and Nibbles at risk? Or Hobbes?

Grandmother will understand.

Biting his lip, Alden glanced at the bracelet on his left wrist—the band issued to every Trials' participant. Channeling his mana inside, the runes glowed with a low hum.

Seconds crawled on as he poured in more of his dwindling reserves and waited for the tug of translocation.

The bracelet flickered, igniting his hope. Heat spread across the shining runes until the metal seared his skin. A hairline crack crept through the etchings as he hastily cut his mana, the enchantments falling inert.

No...

His breath caught.

Creaking trees and acrid smoke pressed in on his senses. A hint of genuine alarm breached his composure. After the Mid-Terms, he'd naturally considered the possibility, but still clung to hope.

This makes the situation... considerably inconvenient.

"Did you really think we went through the trouble of tracking you down, just to let you run away?" Kastor jeered, his hand brushing the amulet hanging from his neck as he eyed the cracked bracelet with clear mirth. "There's nothing to save you here. No more tricks, no Space Magic either."

"What do you even hope to gain?" Alden winced, touching the burn on his wrist and hiding the tremor in his fingers. Even if they somehow succeeded in killing him, they would pay in blood. Few things united a Great House faster than avenging a stain upon its honor. "What are they offering you?"

"Nothing that you can match." Kastor's smile widened.

Thinking him distracted or just vengeful, the swordsman lunged at him. His movements blurred as his greatsword swept to cleave his chest.

Alden shifted his footing, raising Blackthorn to parry and using the larger body to shield himself from the casters.

Before the attack even landed, Nibbles struck. The tiny black serpent shot from beneath his collar faster than sight, sinking his needle-like fangs into the student's neck and returning into his shirt within the same heartbeat.

"What..." The student dabbed the bite mark. His fingers wet with blood, his words dissolving into a strangled gasp.

The greatsword slipped from numb fingers. Then his knees buckled.

He stumbled once before collapsing and clawing at the black veins spreading from his neck. Inky markings writhed beneath his skin in response, like strange jagged runes. Whatever protection they offered fell short against the spreading venom.

A Serpent of the Lily only needed to strike once.

Alden lurched behind a birch as a lance of dark Fire scorched the trunk, showering him with splinters. Jagged Stone burst from the earth where he'd stood a heartbeat before. A crescent of Water clipped his shoulder before he could shift the hexagonal wards into place.

Move.

He forced his battered body to react. His vision swam. A floating dagger intercepted another Stone lance as black flames engulfed the birch, charring the silver bark.

The swordsman stopped thrashing.

Panic flashed across the encircling students.

“What...”

“She told us we’d be immune...”

“Is he dead?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Kastor’s expression darkened. “We just need to finish the job!”

The remaining attackers angled toward Alden, no longer quite so eager. Unfortunately, he doubted they would come close enough for another strike, and Nibbles could only produce so much venom, and it took a lot to take down someone who’d reached yellow.

Suddenly, the woods rang with the rustle of trampling steps.

“Kastor!” A sharp voice cut across the woods.

A young woman strode from the fog. Half a dozen students fanned out behind her. Her eyes swept over the scene and scorched ground, then they settled on her brother. “Kastor! What are you doing?”