

Chapter 422 - Diverging Trails

Kai exhaled a breath. Tangled whispers pushed on his throbbing mind. Four trails split from the rocky clearing; minus the one they came from, they all hissed with more danger than an academy test should have.

Is it just the Veiled Woods' interference?

The engraved metal band on his wrist should extract him within seconds if necessary. Was the translocation magic faulty? Would he not get the chance to trigger it in time? Or did the warnings account for his reluctance to forfeit the Trials?

As usual, many guesses and no answer.

Maybe if he took Calamity Premonition, he'd get a clearer read. He was almost tempted. Hallowed Intuition nudged him to take the safe path, to run until he left the woods. Still, the thread of familiarity hummed within the most jagged and garbled path to the north.

And naturally, they're on the most dangerous trail.

It was a flickering flame buffeted by a rising storm.

Going by exclusion, he also had guesses on who his mysterious friend might be—

The stab of skill strain pierced his head. Kai drew back Split Mind, grounding himself in the present. The damp log they sat on. Strips of charred meat sizzled on the stone above the glowing embers. The bit he'd tasted had the mild flavor of poultry, and he'd rather not think deeper on the origins of unknown monster meat.

Noticing Valela's worried frown, hands folded in her lap, he hid the ache with a smile. "Sorry, I just wanted to double-check. It's all still there."

"I see... And are you sure they're in dan—?"

"I am." Kai raised a hand to scratch his nose and gestured for quiet.

Across the campfire pit, Rowan was arguing with a tall brunette, her aura brimming with annoyance but not aggression. She seemed oddly well acquainted with the group, probably from shared classes.

Well, obviously. Her life doesn't revolve around our Mixed Combat team. She must have her own circle of friends. Hmm... maybe I should have asked her more questions...

Jotting down a memo, Kai set aside the matter of his budding social skills.

The rest of her team milled about on the flattened grass. They gave them a wide berth out of courtesy or caution. Some rested, some chatted, some chewed on dry rations. A stout teen had been polishing the guard of his saber for the last minute.

Kai wanted to scoff. Added to how the guy looked anywhere but their direction, he was obviously eavesdropping, if not guarding them.

Amateurs.

It was sensible behavior in the Trials. Perhaps months of playing ninja through the academy's hallways had made him too sensitive to this stuff.

And I'm stalling again. Stop delaying.

Sitting astride the log, Kai angled himself to hide their faces and fiddled with the wards on Rain's pearl. The privacy bubble took shape around them, just to muffle their words into gibberish. "We can talk now. They seem nice, but it's still a competition." And he really didn't want an audience for their conversation.

"I agree." Valela bent to pick up her canteen, letting her hair screen her face and doing a much better job at subtlety. "Eavesdropping skills are surprisingly common. But are you sure it won't offend them..." Her eyes unfocused. "Where did you get this ward? I hadn't noticed, but... I've never seen... uhm, sorry. Not the time. We were talking about your skill. What did it tell you in detail? I knew it was peculiar, but I've never heard of this kind of scrying at Yellow. Did you not push it too far? You're the one who told me we need to pace ourselves."

Kai chuckled as her curious gleam washed back her tiredness, then had to suppress a wince when his head throbbed again. "It should be fine as long as I use it passively. I told you most of what I know. It's mostly fleeting impressions..." His attempt to explain the warnings died down upon realizing how saying 'I hear whispers in my head' might not help his case. "Sorry, it's a finicky skill."

"It makes sense... For a skill of such power. The Guide must balance it with drawbacks," Valela mused. If she thought him mad, she hid it surprisingly well. "You're sure someone you know is in danger?"

"I... Yes." His eyes drifted to the misty treeline. "They might already be."

She chewed her lip. "Okay, then we should go. We can rest a little and..." Her brows drew tight with suspicion at his silence. "What is it?"

"Just..." Kai swallowed, forcing himself to meet her gaze. "I think we should split here."

Her stunned silence seemed to swallow the rest of the camp, quickly tinged with betrayal, so he hurriedly continued.

"Listen first, please. As you said, we already have enough Shards to pass. You can probably find more on the way out. Going down this path is a stupid risk for you. Your Trials' results will affect you through the second year. I can't ask you to follow me on a hunch."

"I see..." Valela stared at him, stubbornly raising her chin. "What if I still want to follow? Do you think I'll be a burden?"

"Val— It's not that. You know how much you helped. Any team would kill to have a mage with a Light affinity join. Even Rowan's will beg to have you. It's not about power. Just... the trail ahead is too dangerous."

"And the last three were not?"

"Yes... But this is worse." Kai resisted reaching for her hand. From her sullen scowl, she would not appreciate it. "It's fuzzy, but something's off with the woods."

She folded her arms, cheeks puffed up. "How does that make it better for you to go alone? What if you can't find the person you sensed? Are you sure they won't be fine without you?"

"No, but I'd always regret not taking the chance." He softened his tone. "You know my skills are uniquely suited to staying alive. If things get too dangerous, I can always cut and run."

Valela pursed her lips. "So I'm too slow?"

"I— no— You know what I mean, Val. I need to go. But you have your own goals. Think of your plan for the archipelago. You can't risk failing the Trials on my whim. I'll be fine. Can't you trust me on this?"

She looked away. "Now you're the one being unfair."

"Perhaps. But let me be selfish." He grinned weakly at her scowl. "You got us through the wraiths, the wasps, that creepy willow. You've helped more than enough." His gaze wandered to the crowded clearing. "Get some rest, then join Rowan. You know it's the sensible choice. If I'm wrong and find nothing, I'll see you in a couple days."

"And if it's *not* nothing?"

Kai looked at the northern path, the whispers seeming to grow more foreboding. "Then I *need* to be there."

Her gaze lingered on him. "Even if you yourself said, it's a stupid risk? What does that make you?"

"A reckless fool?" Kai smiled, relieved to feel her concede. "Thank you, Val. I need to do this."

"Don't thank me yet. Promise you'll come back hale and unharmed. And that you won't take stupid— Well, *more* stupid risks."

"Alright, fair." Kai swallowed back a chuckle at her scrunched-up glare. "I promise I'll be careful. I just need to find who I need, grab them, and run."

She let out a long sigh. "I guess that's the best I'm going to get. Alright, I'll hold you to that. Do you really not know who you're looking for? Could it be Lys or Rena?"

"It doesn't feel like them." He scratched the back of his neck. The two patrician girls were growing on him, but they weren't yet close enough for this. "I can't really say for sure."

Once they agreed, it was just a matter of logistics and discreetly splitting their stash of Shards. His head throbbed with probing Rowan's team for danger. They seemed solid. And as predicted, they were only too eager to take Valela on, once they learned of her affinities.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Rowan flanked him as the others crowed Valela like eager puppies. "You could also come with us."

"I know." Kai glanced at the spearman. "Keep an eye on her, would you? *And* keep your teammates off her."

Rowan threw him an amused look and motioned to the brunette she'd been arguing with earlier. "Don't worry, Nemilla will chew out anyone who gets too chummy. And I'll make sure she also plays nice."

"Thank you then. I owe you one."

"And I owe you several. We can call it even."

"Uh, is that how it works?"

"Yup," Rowan grinned, leaning on her spear. "It's called haggling. Something us poor folk gotta do."

Kai snorted. "I'm not some rich patrician."

"Right..." She threw him a skeptical look.

"I'm really not!" He huffed as she stalked off with a laugh.

I preferred when she played the stoic, quiet type.

Pushing down the urge to rush, Kai forced himself to eat and take a short nap. It was still the third day. Things were unlikely to get easier once he was alone. When he reopened his eyes, his migraine had subsided to a dull ache, and Rowan's team stood ready to depart. They'd all agreed this clearing was getting too crowded for them.

This is it.

After he'd properly introduced himself, they'd taken surprisingly little convincing to choose the safer trail he'd indicated. Though they kept whispering and glancing his way.

"The student dancing while the tower burned..."

"Is he really an Astares bastard..."

"Why didn't you tell me you knew him, Rowy. He's cute. Though I pictured him taller..."

You punks!

Kai ignored the murmurs and stoically gazed ahead.

"Be safe," Valela mouthed, lingering at the back of the group.

"You too." He waved her off until their figures vanished in the misty woods, fighting off the urge to run after them.

It's for the best.

The rocky clearing bustled with students. It might be his paranoia, but a few seemed to edge closer now that he stood alone—at least, as it appeared. His back prickled with their covert looks.

Kai tightened his grip on his sword.

Just you and me, buddy.

The bond rang with a comforting warmth.

Beyond the clearing, mist swayed between the silver-barked trees. Whispers swelled with an ominous chorus. Somewhere in those haunted woods, someone was waiting amid the brewing danger.

Before his watchers could act, Kai strolled back to the abandoned campfire. Crouching to stoke the embers, he fed it a dry branch, looked around for more twigs, then made to go gather more.

Before anyone could move, he was already dashing through the northern treeline, swallowed by the mist.

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Another task far beneath his station. Alas, Hobbes was too magnanimous for his own good. The group of bumbling humans had quickly settled into another meadow. After a few... minor

setbacks, he'd learned the trick to defeat the twisting mists. It had been obvious in retrospect. He just had to paw aside his mundane senses and focus on his Superior Magic.

Stalking on the wet weeds, Hobbes rubbed his lush coat against the leg of his first target. All this wretched humidity made his fur puffy.

"Mew." He looked up, finally getting her attention with a startle. How such helpless and unaware creatures survived till now remained a mystery. Best to get this over with quickly. Humans worried too much.

"Oh! It's you." The female human bent to pick him up. "What are you doing here? Did Mat... "

Hobbes ignored the inane meowing, accepting the proper tribute of ear scratches and fawning owed to his magnificence.

His Bonded seemed to care a lot about this human. She provided too few fish treats for Hobbes' taste. But at least her hands were always clean and delicate upon his fur.

His back arched and melted as she rubbed the itchy spot on his back, and he lost himself to his purring. Yes, he could see the appeal of her qualities.

*A worthy masseuse.*

The thoughts came unbidden.

Words. Such strange things they were. Rather primitive. Still, they had their uses, he supposed. Humans mostly used them to natter about inanities. The interesting parts only came out when they thought themselves alone.

Lots of peculiar concepts had been rolling into his head since they'd strengthened their bond.

The female human finished her mumbling and hugged his royal fur. For his Bonded's sake, he decided to allow her the privilege. He rather enjoyed pawing her head fur. Inferior to his own, naturally, but for a human, the wavy strands were quite soft.

"You'll keep him safe, right?"

"Mrow." Hobbes swished his tail at the obvious question. His Bonded wouldn't survive a day without him. Truly, he should bless the day when Hobbes had chosen him in that foul place.

The dark memories killed his appetite for pampering.

Luckily, after touching his magnificent fur, the female human seemed noticeably calmer.

"Meow."

Valela showed her teeth as he climbed on her shoulder perch. "Yes, I know. He's tough. He'll come back."

What, tough? *Please*. His Bonded had the preservation instincts of a pigeon. Silly creatures. Prone to poor decisions. Entirely too fond of dangerous places.

Still, he was *his* Bonded. And he gave excellent belly rubs. And he shared a cozy den for naps. *And* he provided a steady supply of fish when the yearning struck him—the whining aside. As if a cat was only supposed to get hungry when the sun was in the sky?

Absolutely preposterous.

So naturally, Hobbes was the only one allowed to punish him. Anyone else who dared touch him would feel his paw.

The bond purred in his mind, a warm presence.

*Mrooww...*

It was moving again. The idiot was probably chasing another oversized plant. No rest for the wicked.

Valela gently set him down. “You’ll look after him, won’t you?”

*Alas...*

“Meow.” The other fumbling humans had come to offer homage. Resigned, Hobbes accepted the mandatory head pats and lousy treats. The seat of greatness was a heavy burden.

As a rustle caught the fools’ attention, Hobbes slipped away, enjoying their silly exclamations.

His tail flicked lazily. His majestic figure blinked through the wet and shifty woods. He ignored anything but the sense of his Superior Magic and the thrum of his bond.

Quietly catching up to him, he checked that nothing too annoying had prowled in his surroundings. Not out of worry, of course. Merely to alleviate boredom.

A few sillier humans stalked somewhere behind him. Good. No imminent danger.

One chore done, another right up.

Hobbes blinked ahead, trying to parse his bond’s confusing impressions. Sometimes he forgot who was the servant and who the master. Still, the sooner they found the humans his Bonded worried about, the sooner they could leave these wretched woods and take a proper nap.

Who else could be trusted to do it?

Mew...

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Isadora brushed aside another curtain of willow branches and stepped onto the trail, lips pursed in irritation, mud stuck to her clothes. Gods, these woods were becoming intolerable. "That impossible fool," she scoffed at the fog.

Her team shuffled behind her. "Did you say something, Lady Forlow?"

"No. Hurry up. We must find him first."

Her brother had vanished during the chaos at the clearing. After he'd promised to follow their plan. Truly, she should have known. Kastor had always possessed a talent for complicating simple plans. His reckless streak had only worsened since he started consorting with that dubious group.

That's why I placed a locator on him.

Her own foresight again eased her annoyance, if only slightly. Even with the wayfinder needle she'd prepared, the Veiled Woods twisted distance and direction beyond expectations.

Her hand closed on her glassfire wand handle, smooth and warm. Alone, everything became more difficult. They'd entered the Trials with a purpose. Their House expected results. A few nudges to ensure the right people landed in the right places when the dust settled.

It would have all been much easier if her brother had stuck to her plan. He knew what was expected of them. And despite appearances, she knew Kastor wasn't stupid, just about as subtle as a kicked hornet's nest when the world refused his whims. And his temper had only grown more erratic lately, even as his skills soared with surprising alacrity.

She sighed.

A gust stirred the weeping purple canopies.

Her team trudged behind her, weapons ready. They were all students from minor or fallen families, all eager to latch onto House Forlow to improve their standing. Perhaps one or two might even succeed, though she doubted it.

As her father loved to say, the world ran on favors and connections. That was simply how the rules were. She hadn't built the board, but she intended to win. The only way to choose her future and not marry some decrepit geezer picked by her family was to be recognized as heir.

Still...

Her thoughts returned to Kastor. Some of the snippets she'd overheard over the last few months kept bugging her. Sometimes overzealous idiots took ambition a bit too seriously, forgetting the unwritten rules. No... it wasn't her concern.

She had to focus on her goals, regroup, and find her idiot brother before he got himself expelled. Or worse.

Somewhere deeper in the Veiled Woods, a branch snapped.

She raised her wand. "Kastor?"

No answer came. Only the mist.