

Chapter 423 - Converging Paths

Rob crouched beneath the ivory birches lining the trail. Mist curled through the spindly vines and purple-veined foliage.

A set of shallow grooves pressed into the damp earth. Further ahead, flattened weeds and scraped roots marked a student's footprints, recent if the vegetation hadn't reclaimed it yet. Tracks never lasted long in mana-dense regions with fertile compositions.

The Veiled Woods twisted paths and perception, but the actual spatial warping felt weak. From the intermittent trail he'd caught, he should reach his target soon. The uneven gait suggested they were tired, injured, or both.

At least that makes something easier.

People always underestimated the value of abilities not backed by skills. He'd learned better. That they wouldn't show on his status was an added benefit.

The blood compass spun with twitchy flicks in his pocket. Sixth Sense tugged him with growing certainty, even as the foreboding that had haunted him since entering the Veiled Woods deepened.

I'm close.

He broke into a silent jog, one hand resting lightly on his casting rod.

Fresh grazes on roots. A snapped fern. Fog swallowed the trail after twenty paces. A breeze stirred the milky birches, seeming to whisper secrets of the freedom that should be his—

Rob shook his head. He had no time for idle fantasies. His instincts twitched. Something felt... off. For once, the blood needle aligned with the tracks, leading him to his target.

Something else then.

So... behind him.

His stride didn't falter. He rolled his shoulders. Mana pumped into his hearing; every creak, thump, and rustle sharpened. His magic warped the space, carrying distant sounds. Another hunter shadowed him with practiced ease, their presence cloaked, footsteps so light they'd escaped his notice.

Curses.

His fingers rose to the Shroudstone Pin, still masking his figure. Unlikely any student had pierced it at this distance.

A coincidence, then? Or are we aiming for the same person?

These woods made anything possible.

Jaw taut, Rob checked the daggers and potion vials on his belt. His eyes swept the brush. Could he shake them off? If he misjudged, or they also had a way to track him, he might end up leading them straight to the target. The risk was too high. He'd been taught to operate with the worst-case scenario in mind.

Events were moving too quickly. He couldn't afford mistakes. Better to deal with the threat while he still held the advantage.

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Kastor swatted a low branch, his boots trampling the slick weeds. The locator marker etched on his forearm pulsed with recognition. They were approaching one of their targets, at last. Glancing over his shoulder, four pairs of eyes looked at him with vacant expressions before a freckled girl understood the cue.

"I can... check." She winced, driving her nails into her palm. Inky markings surfaced beneath her skin before fading away. Her pupils swallowed the white of her eyes. She gasped through the pain, followed by a blissful smile. "He's close..." she half-whispered, pointing at the mists. "We should reach him before the next clearing."

About time something in these wretched woods proceeded according to plan.

Her companions held her up as her legs buckled.

"Good job. Don't lose it." Kastor flashed a smile that shifted to a sneer as he turned to move. As his master said, not everyone was worthy of power bestowed. Some were only fit to be pawns.

The four students trailed behind him, wisely keeping silent. He had little patience for idle chatter. His sister's incessant lecturing had already used up most of it.

*Stick to the plan, Kastor. Smile at the rabble, Kastor. Don't step on any toes, Kastor.*

He snorted. Poor thing, always so worried about what was proper, so desperate to please. As if that would earn her their father's approval. No one ever achieved greatness without stepping outside the rules.

After all her condescending quips, acting as if she were above him, he'd show her how wrong she was. His skills were already outpacing hers thanks to his master's gifts. She'd have to admit he was right. Then he might graciously toss her a few crumbs, the way she always had with him.

He was still savoring the image when the runes on his arm pulsed, spreading a burning itch. He grit his teeth, enduring the flare.

*We're getting close.*

Not everyone could withstand their patron's blessings. Kastor knew he was special since he'd first tasted that power. The time for change was upon them. All those stale Great Houses, grown fat and arrogant on inherited glory, would make space for new blood.

His patron had shown him the vision. In time, he'd repay every fool who'd laughed at him sevenfold. His lips curled into a sneer as another flare made his eyes tear. He endured, not missing a step.

It was fine. He just had to be patient.

*One step at a time. Don't get ahead of yourself.*

For now, they had to strike a few names from the board, secure their ranking and future plans. Afterward, if one more promising student fell to peril... well. There were always more commoners, weren't there?

They might even reward him.

Yes.

The Veiled Woods were notoriously treacherous. Whatever the dean had been thinking, the Academy's surveillance was bound to be patchy—especially with some helpful nudges.

The girl bearing the tracking marks gasped behind him. "He stopped moving."

Kastor smiled. "Better for us." He adjusted the icy medallion under his shirt—another gift to set him apart. "Let us conclude with this little inconvenience and move on."

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Light suffused through the mist, clinging to the trees that shadowed the trail. Kai pushed at an easy jog, breath steady. Wisps of mana laced his muscles, boosting his speed and reflexes.

Shadow mana cloaked him from the prowling predators. Without Valela's Light and Fira Magic, he'd rather avoid unnecessary fights. The mental attacks had grown far too common as he ventured deeper in the woods, quickly compounding his exhaustion.

Almost there... They're close.

Pale trunks and purple brush blurred past. His hand rested on his sword, keeping the scabbard from slapping his side. Dense essence pervaded the fog. Though at least the increased danger also brought extra rewards.

In four hours, he'd picked up five Shards, only three requiring a fight.

I almost feel Lucky.

His chuckle faded into a grim line. The whispers had shifted: no longer looming clouds, scattered like the horrors of the Woods. The storm was closing in.

Hallowed Intuition had stopped urging him to run, settling into a tense hum, almost resigned. The familiar thread had narrowed to a single point.

Just gotta grab them, then we leave... They'll be fine. I would have felt it if something happened.

Kai quickened his pace, senses wide and alert. The bond brought warm reassurance as he crossed fog-wreathed birches, murmuring with ghostly creaks.

Hobbes' grumpy fussing drew back his focus. His familiar had given up showing him how to navigate the Veiled Woods, but the spikes of frustration suggested it was trickier than he'd pretended.

Please, don't be too late.

The trail dipped down a ridge, where the mist pooled in cottony plumes. As he slowed to descend, each rustle made his fingers twitch around his sword.

Whispers thrummed in time with his heartbeat. Was whoever he was following coming closer? He strained to decipher them when another pulse rolled through the skill. Sharper, and more urgent.

Danger.

Kai dropped his center of gravity and threw himself aside.

A black dagger whistled past his cheek from behind him, close enough to sting his skin. The dodge sent his boots skidding on the wet brush. He vainly grasped for a hold as his body went careening down the ridge.

His back crashed against a tree trunk, stealing the air from his lungs.

Vision still blurry, he flared his mana to recover. Shadow mana coalesced to cloak his movements as he searched for the attacker.

Two bolts of Fire came from the mist, glowing with the incandescence of compressed mana. Their curving flight somehow brought them in from opposite angles. Before Kai could make

sense of it, they struck his hastily conjured ice barrier. The detonation shattered the shield, swallowing him in a cloud of hissing steam.

How did they—

As Kai was coughing, attempting to adjust, his attacker pressed the advantage. A ribbon of Fire rolled low across the ground, igniting the purple brush and cutting at his ankles.

Dammit. I hate competent opponents.

Still half-crouched beside the birch, Kai twisted and kicked off the trunk, throwing himself into another awkward dodge. Not taking chances, he channeled mana through his spellblade, amplifying his magic.

Streams of water condensed from the damp air. Water rushed toward the encroaching Fire, choking the flames.

Steam and smoke billowed through the birches.

Something flickered to his right.

A glint of steel—another dagger.

Augmenting himself with Elemental Swordsman, Kai knocked it aside. The ringing hadn't faded before another bolt of condensed Fire came from the mist.

He was about to strike when the whispers stirred. Water mana rushed forth as the bolt bent unnaturally. The flowing shield burst into a shower of scalding droplets.

What the—

A second bolt followed with a strange snaking trajectory—a familiar inkling tickled his mind. Kai darted behind a birch and kept running. Flames roared at his back. But he'd gotten enough time. Steam crystallized into countless ice needles that fanned to pepper the undergrowth.

Clink. Clink. Clink—

A patch of shadows rippled to his left. A figure peeled from the brush, their cover exposed. Fire swirled around an obsidian wand. Their concealment tried to blend with their surroundings as they dashed between the birches.

Already got you, buddy.

Another flash of steel.

Kai deflected a throwing knife as Nature mana poured into the ground, forcing the woods to listen. Gnarled roots burst from the ground to ensnare his attacker.

His opponent looked trapped when the roots suddenly stuttered, and their figure accelerated, letting them escape the encirclement.

It's as if...

The sensations finally clicked into place—spatial distortions.

A lance of fire shot from their wand. A flowing curtain rose to swallow the spell, his senses locked onto the attacker's morphing cloak.

Almost... there!

Mana Observer got a tenuous hold.

Kai swung and *shifted*, reappearing from the mist behind his opponent. The mage reacted with impressive composure. Sword met dagger. A burst of Fire attempted to buy space as the shrouded figure leaped backward, space stretching around them to carry them further.

Enough.

Space Magic was hard to cast, but remarkably easy to disrupt for an adept.

An iridescent flare unraveled the spatial warping as Kai charged through the flames. Water mana flooded the runes of his spellblade. Fog once again thinned into streams sweeping over the underbrush. Wrestling for control with the amplification of his blade, he released his other spells and lunged with a swing.

His rising strike pushed his attacker off balance and finally tore their shroud.

They skidded to a stop a meter apart, both panting. Kai kept his sword leveled. His opponent held up a burning wand. Neither moved. For a heartbeat, they simply stared at one another through the billowing steam.

What the...

Kai fought the urge to rub his face. Messy hazel hair and burnished yellow eyes stared back at him, their usual mirth replaced by an unfamiliar seriousness.

"Rob?"

The teen's mana channels matched his roommate's. Even his intuition confirmed it, though he didn't feel like the person he'd been looking for.

"Hi, Mat... I should've known." The flames around Rob's wand guttered out as he slowly raised his hands. "Would you mind pointing that sword away from your dear roommate's face?"

Rather than relaxing, Kai tightened his guard. “Depends... Will you try to kill me again?”

“Now, now.” Rob rolled his eyes. “Don’t be dramatic. I never tried to kill you. At most, I would have incapacitated you.”

“Hmm, is that why you threw a poisoned dagger at my head?” The poison was a guess, but Rob didn’t deny it.

“Well... It was aimed at your back before you dodged. And it would have only paralyzed you and left you with a bad hangover.”

“What about the exploding bolts?” Kai glanced over the scorched vegetation.

“After you dodged, I had to improvise.” Rob shrugged. “You dealt with them fine, Mat. As long as you breathe, the academy healers could fix any injury you received once you triggered your bracelet.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? You still haven’t explained why you ambushed me in the first place.”

“Oh, look at it from my perspective, Mat.” He lifted his palms with a helpless smile. “When you find someone stalking you in these woods, they’re not usually looking for a hug. Especially if they’re magically cloaked. What else was I supposed to think?”

That sounded... reasonable. Though Kai got the inkling Rob had guessed his identity before the end. “You could’ve tried talking after the ambush failed. You were cloaked too. ”

“Yeah, well... It’s a smart strategy. What can’t detect you, can’t attack you. Then I didn’t want to lose the initiative. It all happened so fast...” He tapped the tip of the gleaming blade pointed at his throat. “About the sword...”

Kai swatted his hand aside. “Answer a few questions first, and I’ll consider it. What was that cloak that you used? And it was stronger than any skill I’ve seen a first year use.”

Ron held his gaze, then huffed. “You guessed it already, Mat. Yes, it’s an artifact, happy?”

“Yes, and where did you find said artifact? That’s not something commoners like us can afford. If you can hold the cloak indefinitely, it must be at the peak of what Yellow can do.”

Rob pressed his lips, not answering.

“Alright then. What about the spatial warping?” Kai carefully studied his face. “That was way more advanced than anything you used in class. Why did you even ask me to tutor you? Were you lying to test me?”

“Hey, let’s not jump to conclusions. I really appreciated your tips! We all have our specializations, Mat. And I wasn’t the only one holding back.” He gave him a knowing smirk.

"There is being good at translocating inanimate objects, then there is translocating yourself with no wind up. Now, *that* was impressive."

Kai narrowed his eyes. "Don't change the subject. And no tricks with your mana! I'm watching. Neither that artifact nor those skills are something a broke student can just pick up."

Rob snorted a laugh and dropped the smile. "Really, Mat? You're asking me? How is it that you're always there when things go wrong, huh? How do you explain your skills? Or your spatial ring? They aren't something a guy from the middle of nowhere should possess." His shoulders squared by a fraction. "Who is backing you? Who are you working for?"

"No one. And that's none of your business."

"Yeah, right." His eyes rose up again. "So now that we've established we both have secrets, can we go our separate ways? How can you ask me to answer your questions when you ignore mine?"

Kai looked at the pale steel blade between them. He adjusted his grip and smirked. "Cause I'm the one with a sword."

Rob held his gaze, face impassive. "You won't stab me, Mat."

"Do you wanna test that?" His smile widened. "Don't worry, I won't aim at anything vital. Just hold still. I wouldn't want to miss and *incapacitate* you too roughly."

"You..." Rob clenched his jaw. He tried to retreat, but the sword pressed to his chest. "Wait... Wait! Gods, no need to do anything rash."

"Start speaking then." If it was just the skills, Kai might not have pressed him. Many students hid the full extent of their capabilities. No, it was Rob's battle experience and nonchalant act that raised his guard. He had him fooled for *months*. "So...?" Kai arched an eyebrow. "What are you really doing here? Even with the Trials, most students wouldn't ambush a stranger like that. Unless you were expecting trouble..."

Silence settled over the woods. Rob's mouth flattened to a line. "You are always perceptive about the oddest things."

"Uh... thanks? But stop stalling. I really don't want to poke you, but you *did* attack me first. I won't repeat myself again."

"It's...it's not that simple, Mat." Rob retreated until his back came up against a trunk, working his jaw. His expression hardened as he lifted his chin in defiance. "You may hold a sword, but you won't like finding out what a Fire Breather can do when backed into a corner. Stab me if you want. I won't jeopardize my duty."

Your duty?

Kai stared back for several seconds before sighing. His blade remained level, but he stopped pressing. "We're at an impasse then. Even if I don't stab you, I can easily bury you in a tangle of roots to your neck. You won't be able to warp away from that. Do you still have nothing to say?"

Rob met his gaze, expression unreadable. "First tell me who you're working for. Why were you following me?"

Not this again...

"I'm not working for anybody." Kai let out a weary breath. "And I wasn't following *you*. Spirits, I almost wished I was part of some shady conspiracy. It sounds like I'm the only one missing out. Unfortunately, it's just me. I swear my secrets have nothing to do with the academy, or any of the Houses."

"Mhmm... fine. You seem too clueless to be lying."

"I'm— Wait... what? You believe me now?" His eyes narrowed. "I'm not clueless. Do you have a lie detection skill?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not telling you that. Making people think you do works almost as well as having one. As for me, I'm just tasked to assist someone. That's all I can say."

"That is pretty vague."

Rob shrugged, but didn't elaborate.

"Hmm, you did say you were sponsored by... House Corven." Kai mulled aloud. From what he remembered, they were a middling family of little note. "So what? Did they call in a favor? Is that why you're looking for Alden?"

The faintest flicker crossed Rob's yellow eyes before he smoothed it over.

Kai would've missed it if he hadn't been watching him so closely. "I see."

It had felt like too much of a coincidence. With Rowan and Valela safe, that left few people he shared a close enough bond with. Rain, well... Kai couldn't picture him being in danger. And he'd likely found Flynn by now. That left only one student that might trigger Hallowed Intuition.

"What do you want from him?" Kai pointed his sword. "Stay away from Alden. I won't let you harm him." Was this the danger he'd sensed? But none of the whispers had calmed.

"Harm him?" Rob scoffed, intently watching him. His posture tensed. "It's you, isn't it? If you weren't following me, then you were after Alden. That's why you've been so intent on getting close to him these last few months."

Kai returned the scoff. "Don't you try to twist it. I'm only looking for him because I sensed he was in danger. Besides, if I meant him harm, why wouldn't I have stabbed you by now? This whole conversation would be pointless."

"That..." Rob hesitated, brows furrowed. "Maybe... But if you're right, we're wasting time. I'm here to protect him. Put away that sword and let me do my job."

"Prove it first. How do I know you won't try to stab me or him once I let you go?"

"You— Why—" Rob bit back his words with a heavy breath. "Oh, fine. There isn't time. The proof is in my pocket. Just stop poking me a moment, 'kay?" He slowly reached into his coat and withdrew a polished black-metal emblem.

"Yeah..." Kai studied it blankly. "Nice trinket...?"

Rob groaned aloud. "It's a *Blackwoods* signet. House Corven is one of their off-the-book retainers. I work for them." He fed a trickle of mana into the emblem. The violet inland of a snake coiled around a flower flared to life. "Is that good enough as proof? Moons... I was sure it was an act. But you really are just a country bumpkin!" He shook his head, gesturing impatiently at the trail. "Now, can you stop wasting time and *move*?"

Kai opened his mouth to retort when his bond thrummed. Hobbes had found Alden, and he wasn't alone.