

Chapter 430 - Epilogue

Shelves with silver inlays shimmered in the nightly gloom. On the panels across, maps of the academy grounds stood in stark illumination. The charts spread across the outskirts of the Morvaneth Forest, dotted with yellow, green, and blue markers, with a particular concentration around the Trials, still ongoing for the upperclassmen.

The traitors are limited to the first and second years. Or those were the only ones who showed their hands...

Cassian pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off the throb building behind his eyes. The soul-bound cube scryer shimmered beside the stacked reports on his desk. Thousands of tiny runes drifted beneath the crystal, swimming in his vision. Even his blue physique was faltering after several sleepless days. Sleep, however, wasn't a kindness he would extend to his enemies.

Stripping the tampering from key formations, while coordinating four Trials, the Wardens' purging operations, and political ramifications had tested the limits of his mind.

The rot embedded deep within the academy. It must've lain dormant for years—perhaps decades—before the current stage. For each weed he pulled, he unearthed more connected roots. It brought him to reconsider many insignificant details across the years, stretching back to his rise to the deanship.

His relative youth and prolonged absence from the Republic had made him quite the controversial choice. Before he had silenced most of his critics, many had questioned his appointment. At the time, he had been too occupied rebuilding ties and securing his position to dwell on speculation.

Looking back, he would indeed have looked like the ideal candidate: high on his Blue advancement, yet lacking the connections or experience to leverage his position. An easy pawn to isolate and control.

Cassian's fingers paused, the silver ring turning idly beneath his thumb, covering the Elvish runes. To believe it would mean the rot ran through much of the Republic, even deeper than he'd theorized when there were a dozen more plausible explanations.

Still... if that's the case...

Knowing how dearly they must now regret that miscalculation brought the faintest smile to his lips.

Reports and visitors cycled through his study as the night sky cleared with early dawn. His mind mercilessly sifted through ward logs, investigation files, and preliminary findings.

Beyond the tall windows, students crossed the towers in small, orderly groups, their movements subdued by the curfew after the Moon Trials. From this height, the academy

projected an image of perfect order. A deceptive sight. Much like the professor, who suddenly cleared their throat across from him.

"My apologies." Cassian lifted his gaze. "You may continue."

Professor Thornwyn regarded him steadily; her voice was clipped and precise. "I have the final count from the Veiled Woods. Thirty-three confirmed dead. Twenty-one missing. A hundred and twenty-six injured requiring extended treatment. Seven cases of mana-channel degradation. The healers believe two may fully recover..."

Despite sharing the sleepless nights, her appearance remained impeccable. Her auburn hair was pinned behind her head. Smoky blue robes fell without a crease. Her spectacles rested on the bridge of her nose; faint runes on the gold rims glimmered whenever her eyes passed over the reports in her hands.

Only the sharpness in her green eyes betrayed the weight of the figures she recited. "The bulk of the casualties began shortly after the third night. That's when the leyline distortions spread across the western quadrant. Paths shifted beyond their set parameters, and several monitoring arrays and bracelets stopped transmitting altogether."

Medical summaries, scrying logs, and witness statements piled atop the dark mahogany desk. So many pages, and they only covered the official report from the Veiled Woods.

A glimmering cube hovered above them, projecting a map of the Trial grounds. The forest appeared deceptively small from the outside. Red and blue markers denoted where students had started and emerged. Within those boundaries stood a web of dotted lines, fading, overlapping, and diverging wherever the wood's nature defied cartography. Even so, certain landmarks and routes should have remained constant.

Jolene polished her lenses with an embroidered cloth. "And yet, the primary spatial anchors remained intact. As did the boundary wards. It is... *strange*."

"Quite." Cassian leafed through her file. A pity that diligence and competence weren't more contagious. Excising the rot had forced him to reexamine his circle of trust.

Most of Raelion's professors possessed discretion; some possessed a modicum of competence, and fewer still were free from political influences. Professor Thornwyn had all three. Lately, she'd also picked up the habit of voicing dissenting opinions. An odd, but welcome departure from her customary reserve.

When it stood clear he wouldn't speak further, she inclined her head toward the hovering projection cube. "If I may, Dean Astares?"

"Of course."

Linking her mind to the crystal matrix, the map flickered and expanded. Pale threads shifted like veins beneath translucent skin.

"We've verified four main disturbances." She gestured to several conspicuously blank areas. "I've reconstructed the sequence six times. The pattern is too consistent for a natural fluctuation..."

The measured ticking of his brass clock filled in the expectant silence.

"Several rumors have already spread among the students," Jolene continued with a deliberate tone. "The longer we remain silent, the harder they'll become to contain."

"Students always gossip. We cannot disclose what we do not know."

The corner of her mouth tightened. "We can acknowledge that the Trials were likely compromised."

"That would invite every middling House to demand an independent investigation."

"They will demand one regardless."

"Much as they do every year when their children fall short." Cassian dismissed the projection with a slight motion of his hand. "There is a stark difference between suspicion and confirmation. Casualties still fell within expected margins. We handled this as well as we could have hoped. We must consider our next actions carefully."

"I'm aware. But—" She cut off her rising tone, pressing her lips. Behind her composure, she flashed a stormy look. Then she sighed. "Was this truly necessary?"

Cassian matched her unflinching stare, keenly reading the fluctuations in her aura. "You already know the answer, professor." His voice came even. "We do not have to like it. But it must be done. Don't forget about the students still in these halls. Our duty is to prepare them for the world outside. Coddling them is not a kindness."

"I understand. I have not..." She dipped her head, her expression carved from stone. "Though I noticed the *Wardens* moving. How much longer must we remain patient?"

His presence bore through the study.

"Until observation ceases to be useful and none remains," he said icily. Waging on his reading, he expanded a little. "Acting before we understand the extent of the infection would risk driving it deeper. People of interest have been placed under observation. Trusted personnel have been assigned to find the roots of the infestation."

"I see..." She stood back, pensive. "Has the Azure Council been informed?"

"They've received a preliminary report."

She almost gave a snort before resuming her immaculate bearing. "I remain at your disposal, Dean Astares. For anything needed."

Cassian quirked up one eyebrow, releasing the tension. "I'll keep that in mind. If there is nothing else..."

A thick folder appeared in her hands. "There are still a few papers that need your attention."

Of course...

"Please, proceed." Though nothing showed on her face, he sensed her mirth. Was he imagining it? Since he'd known her, her manners never broke decorum.

I haven't slept for too long.

He leaned in his chair, sifting through the student rankings and reports. Those who acquired more Moonlight Shards than projected, those who lost everything and fell short, and those who vanished with no inquiry from their House. Despite the interference, unexpected adversity exemplified the essence of the Trials.

Among the names marked for further inquiry, a few stood out: Rain Ryuu, Alden Blackwoods, Isadora Forlow, and Matthew Reece-Veernon.

"He's the student you're mentoring?" He lifted a sheet. A provincial student with inconsistent records, unusual growth, and a talent for appearing in troublesome situations. "You must be pleased. His repeated success proves more than luck."

As she glanced over, her lips pursed into a hint of exasperation and disapproval. "He performed adequately. His condition when emerging left much to be desired. He's still too brash."

"Anything I should look for?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss his personal details."

"Is that so... Then, I believe that was the last report."

"Hmm, it was..." She gathered the files. "I will have the faculty submit their revised assessments by tomorrow. Oh... actually. There is *one* more thing."

How—

A sealed, cream-colored envelope appeared in her palm. "I've received a response on the matter you asked me about. The reply came through just this morning."

The wax sigil showed a green cauldron encircled by seven black leaves.

Cassian accepted the letter, but did not break the seal, analyzing the intricate mana weaving. "The correspondence was confirmed as legitimate?"

"Without a doubt."

"You have already sent our agreement and the contract?"

Professor Thornwyn looked at him over the rim of her spectacles. "Naturally. I sent the documentation as instructed—"

Three measured knocks came from the door, their senses sweeping over the single presence outside.

"It seems I stayed too long," she said. A fleeting smile touched the corner of her lips. "I'll leave you to attend to your duties."

Cassian set aside the letter. "Enter."

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A shift of air brushed him as Kai stepped into the study. The secretary's scowl at his back meant he'd already broken some etiquette rule he was too tired to bother with. He thought he sensed a cloaked presence slip past when the thick door soundlessly closed behind him.

The subtle pressure permeating the room felt heavier today. It washed over his thoughts, as though the very room bent to accommodate the man behind the broad mahogany desk.

"Matthew Veernon." Dean Astares gestured toward a chair. His pale lilac eyes washed over his thoughts.

Standing straighter, Kai dipped his head before politely approaching; the seat still felt warm. With an effort, he loosened his shoulders and stopped himself from speaking first. Despite the past concessions, observing *some* etiquette couldn't hurt.

*Let's just get this over with.*

The dean studied him calmly, his hand resting on an envelope. "Well, let me start by congratulating you. Ninth place in the Moon Trials. There will be fitting rewards." His gaze lingered on him. "Though I suspect that's only the beginning of your gains."

"It was... a rather eventful few days. Not as good as the Mid-Terms, though."

"So I've heard. Students always fill the ranking, but not everyone manages to consistently score so highly. I'd like to hear from you. Nothing can replace a personal account."

"I'm happy to oblige." Kai stiffly said. What else could he say?

There was no sign of the enamel bird's infernal tweeting, though he still picked his words with care. Much like last time, he dryly recounted the events, offering no more than required. Neither did he lie, aware the man likely knew more than he showed.

A bunch of suspicious students had tried to stab him. Again.

The bracelets supposedly given to ensure their safety had malfunctioned. Again.

And *again*, he found himself growing more annoyed, the more he spoke. All the questions he'd carried since the Trials came bubbling through. As usual, the academy offered empty words and no results.

"Thank you for the candor." The dean sifted through a folder even as they spoke. "I assure you, the cultists will be punished. We're already investigating the irregularities."

"Like last time?" Kai blurted with more snark than he intended. His fingers tightened around the armrests, but he did not apologize.

"I understand your frustrations, Mister Veernon." The dean continued working. "But some things require patience."

"So... everything will continue as if nothing happened?" The bitterness slipped into his tone. "What's the point of rules if they don't get applied?"

The dean finally looked up. "Do not mistake patience for lenience, Mister Veernon. Each action carries consequence. Even for me. Acting prematurely could prove counterproductive. Though I may not be the one to pay those consequences, I'm not as free to act as you imagine."

"Why not?" Kai looked him over with skepticism.

"You do not believe me, I see. Well, I would not have understood either at your age. Hmm... alright. Perhaps a practical demonstration is in order. Let's move to a better place."

Kai frowned. "Pardon—"

Astares rested a hand on his shoulder. There was no surge of mana, familiar tug or tingle. Space folded with seamless precision. One heartbeat they stood in the study atop a tower, the next they landed on spongy ground, the open sky above them.

Towering oaks soared along the hillside, stretching below the outcropping where they'd appeared. Their canopies swayed gently in the early summer breeze, casting shifting patches of sunlight across the lush grass. The scent of growing things filled the air, abuzz with droning insects and birds.

*What...*

His breath caught, eyes wide. He hadn't perceived the casting. "Where... where are we?" No trace of Raelion's towers pierced the sea of green below.

"We're just beyond the academy's outer boundaries." The dean chuckled at him, pointing at the horizon. "There. You should be able to see our ward line if you squint a little."

*Huh...*

Shielding his eyes with a hand, Kai caught a faint shimmer in the distance, subtle enough to mistake as a trick of the light if the dean hadn't pointed it out.

*Not far...*

"As for why we're here," Dean Astares continued genially. "You wished to know why I have not acted. And I found myself in need of fresh air. Now, watch carefully. With all of your senses."

Before Kai could speak, the subtle presence of power suddenly thrummed. Words caught in his throat. Even the ambient mana seemed to relinquish its hold and bow aside.

With a casual gesture, Dean Astares raised a hand. His index traced a line across the trees below. Iridescent threads bloomed and twisted along his finger, weaving into a blinding seam.

The line stretched across his vision, almost spilling the forest into two translucent panes. Then the upper half slid aside by the slightest degree.

Silence reigned for a moment. Before Kai could even process what had happened, the landscape lurched. A boulder split on the distant hillside, then every colossal oak before them began slowly sliding apart along the line. There was no splintering until the first tilted over, then it turned into an avalanche of dust and cracking wood.

The grass around them remained unchanged.

*What...*

Kai released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding with a gasp and staggered back.

Dean Astares surveyed the devastated hillside with mild curiosity. "I might have overdone it slightly. I hope that was instructive."

"What..."

Astares' gaze remained on the horizon. "The point is perspective. This is the power a Blue grade can casually wield. With a proper build, a Fourth Circle mage can achieve similar destruction." He turned toward him. "Do you understand now?"

Kai blinked. "You're talking about who's behind the whole affair..."

The faintest smile touched his lips. "Indeed, I am. You have seen what a handful of infiltrators accomplished inside the Veiled Woods. Now imagine what would happen if whoever orchestrated those events thought we had discovered them. Or worse, feels cornered."

Kai frowned. "They might just run."

"They might." The Dean's expression hardened. "Or they might decide there is no longer any reason for restraint. Or burn down the forest as a distraction. Hope is not a strategy." His voice remained calm. "Raelion hosts almost twenty thousand people within its walls, among students, professors, and various personnel. If we back them into a corner, or just make them believe they can't achieve their goals anymore, there is no telling what they might do. That's why, before acting, you must be certain you've caught them all, or be ready to pay the consequences. There are few things more dangerous than a high-level mage with nothing to lose."

Silence stretched.

"So..." Kai finally said. "We pretend everything is normal?"

"We play the game." The Dean inclined his head. "We play it until we know who sits across the board, what their goals are, and how far they're willing to push."

"I see." Kai didn't like the answer. He hated it. But looking down at the broken forest, he could accept it.

The Dean regarded him thoughtfully. "From the frequency with which you find yourself in the crossfire, I assume you know more than you show."

"I..."

"Truth for truth. You recognized the black markings on those students, didn't you?"

*Uhm... If he wanted to kill me, he probably wouldn't do it just as I was summoned to his office.*

"I saw something similar before coming to Raelion." Kai coughed up a brief recounting of the Lake of Myst.

"The Stygian Cult, I see... It's probably better if you don't repeat that to anyone. I saw you in the Trials. I believe you have been holding back about something else too."

His stomach tightened. "...sir?"

"You barely blanched at the translocation here. I've seen your skills. You're still holding back. I take a special interest in the Academy's Space Magic curriculum and every student's performance."

Kai rubbed the back of his neck. "I... prefer not to stand out."

"A sensible instinct. Though you're dreadful at it." The Dean let out an exasperated chuckle. "You are free to continue the charade with your classmates, but anyone who knows how to spot talent has already notified you. Luckily, no one seems to have noticed you walking around the campus with an Astral Lynx yet. I'd recommend keeping it that way."

Before Kai could respond, the world shifted once more. One blink, and the familiar study returned around them as though they had never left.

The Dean returned to his seat.

Kai stared for another moment before finding his voice. "...What happens now?"

Dean Astares folded his hands atop the desk. "Now?" The faintest smile crossed his features. "You enjoy your summer break. I look forward to seeing what you'll accomplish next year."

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Cassian remained seated as the soft click of the door signaled Matthew Veernon's departure from his office. The boy possessed remarkable talent for his age. Each answer he gave bordered on the edge of truth and lie. Still, everyone was entitled to their secrets.

Refreshed by the break, his gaze drifted back to the cream-colored envelope.

The glossy wax of the seal gleamed in the light filtering from the window. Cracking the seal, he unfolded a neatly penned letter. Another mystery, but not an unwelcome one. One of the most accomplished human alchemists on the continent, able to find employment in any academy in the continental heartlands, was coming to his academy.

He skimmed the paragraphs of her demands: basic equipment, a private greenhouse, monthly ingredient requirements, modest research funds for her status, *and* teaching the second-year Alchemy courses. The signature stood out at the bottom—Theodora Etiman was coming to join his faculty.

The second year...

For a moment, Cassian considered if she could be involved with Matthew Veernon. He shook his head. Every absurdity had a limit.

The coming academic year was shaping up to be... eventful.

End of Book 6
