

Chapter 374 - Unmasked

Murmurs rippled through the ranks of students, anticipation and excitement. The infamous first-year stood amongst them, a name that had birthed countless rumors since the Mid-Term Trials—Matthew Reece Veernon.

Even Professor Valdibal's steely glares failed to quieten the blooming chatter. Hundreds of heads bent to look for the first ranker as Kai went still like an ingot of lead dropped in a pond.

Pumping blood smothered the voices. His fists clenched, nails digging into his palms.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Every curse he knew from Earth and Elydes swarmed his head. He swore at Professor Valdibal, at his nosy peers, at the academy itself for putting him in that situation. All of his painstaking sneaking and disguises *ruined* by a blabbermouth professor; nearly two weeks of effort *wasted*.

He knew he couldn't hide forever, but he'd imagined the unmasking would come from his own misstep. Not *this*.

Swelling irritation clashed with pressing emergency. Ranting and raging would have to wait. His perception of time slowed as his thoughts sped, but seconds inevitably ticked by. Several eyes lingered on his strange reaction, puzzled further by his veiled features.

It's okay. It was bound to happen. This is just... sooner than expected.

Kai eased his taut muscles and let out a heavy breath. Rocking back on his heels, he peered around, his Shadow veil loosened to the barest suggestion. Gazes began slipping away from him.

"Silence! I won't take this unseemly behavior here!" Professor Valdibal bellowed. A red tinge bled upward from the popping veins on his neck to his bald scalp. His aura swelled to blanket the crowd, choking the chatter. "I'll assign one demerit to everyone for each second until you hush in proper order!" His incensed gaze raked across the wobbly rows, fingers drawn up to count.

At the threat of a permanent stain, students quickly quieted. More than one kicked or elbowed their slower companions. The settling mood in the Doursteel Grounds only ignited Kai's urgency.

What do I do?

He dried his palms on his pants. Could the instructor not know about his efforts to remain anonymous? Just crossing a tower, they would have caught wind of the rumors. And if Valdibal still called him out as a petty slight, disobeying his direct command would offer the excuse to do worse. Perhaps not expulsion, but lots of demerits and punishments.

Another sigh escaped his lips. Fingers flexed and unflexed in jittery anticipation.

"As long as you stand on my combat grounds, I expect you to behave with decorum and discipline. Breaking ranks, unable to control your own emotions, will get you killed on a battlefield." Valdibal barked. "Now, I've called Matthew..."

Once you set a course, delaying it would only worsen the anxiety.

"I'm here, Professor." Kai strode forward.

Heads whipped toward him, tiptoeing and craning their necks to see. Somehow, the silence endured like a spell. Wind rattled a loose plank in the half-moon of stands around the field.

"Excuse me," Kai hissed, pushing through the rows of gawking students.

Even with his focus straight ahead, the scrutiny from hundreds of gazes wore on him. A few intrepid mana scans brushed his presence. Once the first broke the taboo, it opened the gates to a flood of probes. His skin turned numb with tingles.

Shadow mana wove inside of him. No point making it easy. He'd never tried cloaking his channels, but it felt instinctually right. Too soon, he crossed the sixth and last line of students. The grassy fields opened flat toward the distant woodland.

Kai stopped at a respectful distance from the professor, posture rigidly formal, expression as impassive as the butler's. Resolve clamped down on his nerves, not letting his mind spiral or his body fidget. He'd survived the Sanctuary, cultists and a pale stalker. What were a couple hundred kids and some balding middle-aged mage? Let them judge and murmur. He would *not* squirm.

"Here is the famous commoner." Valdibal looked him over with thinly veiled condescension, chin tilted up. The man must have cut an impressive figure in his youth. Now, his face sagged and his gut tested the buttons on his robe. "Not quite as the rumors say. Are your ears merely for decoration, Veernon? I expect my students to answer promptly when I call."

"My apologies, professor." He dipped his head, arms and body angled to the degree specified in the Academy's Codex.

"Do you think yourself special after doing well in a middling exam?"

"No, professor." Kai held his bow the required amount and met the man's creased face. Some battles could only be lost. He kept his silence.

Valdibal sniffed and snapped his attention at the murmuring crowd. His index nailed a pudgy boy in the second line. "Barsten, five demerits. I mean the words I say. We've wasted enough time. You should have all been provided with a pair of fitting wear for sparring."

Huh?

Looking back, Kai caught the meaning. Several students donned a different uniform: slim long sleeves, tapered trousers, and a padded vest, black with burgundy bands. The woven enchantments shimmered with unfamiliar patterns.

Minor impact absorption, resistant to tears and temperature spikes, and a few others... Was it the package that arrived this morning?

"From the next lesson on, I expect you to stand in ranks and proper attire at the first chime of the bell. Tardiness and sloppiness won't be tolerated. That also goes for you too, Veernon," Valdibal threw him a flinty look and began pacing, hands clasped behind his back. "Whether you aim for a research career, to explore the high-mana zones, or command a mage battalion. Danger finds us all. The paths you pursue may only vary in its form and frequency. Unexpected threats are the guarantee of a long life. The question is whether you'll be prepared to meet them.

"Bandits, beasts and assassins won't hold their blades if you are a scholarly mage on the way to your summer estate. Vulnerability emboldens greedy hearts. Your thousand-word chants to scorch armies and sunder cities will do you no good with a slit throat." Halting his march, he sternly gazed through the students, voice booming.

"It's my privilege and duty to ensure every Raelion graduate handles siege spells as competently as cantrips and basic weaponry. In a pinch, even clubbing a foe with your staff has saved more mages than you'd dare imagine. When death rushes you, no blow is beneath your dignity. You'll leave this class knowing how and when to apply each, or not at all."

He underscored the speech with another sweeping scowl, scoffing at his disappointing troops. As he was about to pivot back to Kai, he halted and sighed at a raised hand in the first row. "Yes, Mister Forlow?"

A teen in sparring attire languidly stepped forward. "Kastor Varinne Forlow, sir. I have a question." His voice carried a clipped, nasal drawl, mouth drawn in a sneer. "I understand the importance of preparedness. I do, professor. But isn't this course meant to hone our spellcasting? Isn't that why we employ retainers and lesser mages? To buy *us* time to deal with threats. I don't mean to misunderstand, but we can't actually be expected to brawl like commoners, can we?" He glanced back at his companions for support, eliciting a few awkward laughs.

Valdibal looked on, starkly unamused. "This course will cover all relevant aspects of combat. Magical and not. Raelion isn't investing priceless time and resources in your education to see you die to a mana anomaly, beast wave or assassination. Any external defense won't always be available or sufficient."

Kastor opened his mouth to answer, but Valdibal continued undeterred. "Things can and *will* go wrong for as many reasons as the starry night sky. Even the Moons' fate readers can't predict every eventuality. And when danger looms, your skills are the last reliable line of defense. Combat Magic is a mandatory course for the first two years of Mana Studies. I do

not require you to become war mages, but you will competently meet the minimum standard, or fail to graduate.”

The last biting word had just died down when Kastor jumped into the silence. “I completely agree, professor. The Republic can’t let the unworthy water down our magical prowess. And my House does fully support the military effort—”

“Mister Forlow. Perhaps you wish to test yourself?” Valdibal asked, a vein pulsed on his temple. From the squat buildings along the stands, a dozen burly attendants in gray garb had filed out and arranged tables of disparate equipment beside the field. “A practical demonstration is worth more than countless words. Veernon needs a partner.”

Kastor beamed like a kid at Christmas. “It’d be my pleasure, sir. A practical example is the best way to dispel foolish rumors. It’s a disgrace to have a lowblood...”

Kai tuned out the discount bully’s speech. With Valdibal’s pep talk done, the stares returned to bearing down on him. The crowd simmered with whispers. Excited, curious, hostile, brimming with schadenfreude.

A nice break while it lasted.

“...just lucky.”

“What House is sponsoring him?”

“Is that really *him*?”

“Leech.”

“Unfair, he got so lucky.”

“Do you think he does private tutoring?”

“I thought he’d be taller.”

You motherfu—

Kai clenched his teeth, scanning the crowd of two hundred faces for the culprit. When he gave up the distraction, Forlow was already sauntering toward him, face scrunched with flushed irritation.

Uhm... Did I miss something?

An attendant with a flattened face waited beside the professor, holding two heavily enchanted pauldrons. Both seemed shaped to fit on their right shoulders. The mana alloy gleamed with chains of intricate runes.

A piece of armor?

Forlow grabbed one with practiced familiarity, sneering at his confusion.

With a neutral expression, Kai took the second. Aside from tiny scratches on the polish and wear on the inner padding, the pauldron looked meticulously maintained. Beneath the engravings, the metal thrummed with layered enchantments, too dense to decipher.

"Thank you, Instructor Marion." Valdibal nodded and turned to address the crowd. "For those new to this course, you'll have the chance to become familiar with all kinds of protections. These wards are made to latch and enhance the academy's sparring vest. Specifically, against magical attacks. They'll still work on your normal uniform, though you may receive some bruises." His gaze shifted from Kai to the spectating students. "Unless you wish to forfeit, Mister Veernon?"

Kai smiled thinly. "No, professor." If he ran from a duel on his first public appearance, he'd be branded a coward for the rest of his academic life. That would be a damn headache.

It's not really a choice.

The pauldron settled snugly onto his shoulder. His fingers fumbled with the leather latches, made more clumsy by the collective attention. He should have figured out how they fastened before wearing it, but now was too late.

As heat threatened to flush his face, the attendant stepped forward and secured the armor for him with a few tight pulls, rough and efficient.

Kai shot him a grateful look. "Thank you."

A pearlescent mana veil coated him like a second skin. Again, only his peers' stares kept him from gawking and testing it. Rolling his shoulder, he barely registered the weight, leaving his movements unhindered.

A mesh of arrays rippled beneath the grassy field. The ground pulsed as the leylines shifted into a twenty-by-twenty-meter square. The attendant held a tray with two dull, steel rods with hexagonal bodies.

"Grab your wand." Valdibal motioned. "For this spar, you'll only cast spells with them. Veernon, since you failed to attend class in proper attire, any damage to your uniform will be your responsibility. You'll spar with the Mage Dueling Protocols. You should be familiar with them."

"I'm not, really," Kai said, ignoring the muffled laughter. He was several degrees too annoyed to care.

"Veernon, I expect you to fix your deficiencies for the next lesson," Vadibal said. "Forlow, if you'd like to explain."

“Of course, professor.” Kastor’s smile morphed into a scoff toward him. “No artifacts, enchanted gear or profession skills allowed. First to score five minor hits, or one vital at the head or chest, wins. Leaving the arena also counts as a loss.” His expression twisted. “Aside from intentional maiming and killing, there are no prohibited strikes.”

Kai looked at Valdibal. “No other rules?”

“No other rules. I’ll arbitrate. Take positions ten meters apart. Be ready to cast at my command.”

Kastor bumped his shoulder, stomping into the ring. “Leech.”

Kai stifled a sigh and moved to his place. “What’s your problem?” He imitated the wand flick and bow as Valdibal bellowed a *salute*.

“My *problem*?” The teen hissed. “*You* are my problem. My uncle told me what happened. Because the scrying arrays malfunctioned, the points from the trials had to be split evenly. You leeches off Alden Blackwoods. And instead of owning up and resigning your rank with dignity, you then hid like a rat.” He twirled the dull wand between his hands. “I should have made it to the top hundred without you! You won’t get lucky again.”

Ah...

Kai stared blankly, his brain struggling to grasp the nonsense. Even in the guy’s reconstruction of the events, it still wouldn’t explain how *he* had scored higher than Alden. The countdown commanded his attention.

Logic makes no difference when they’ve already made up their mind.

He lowered his stance, knees ready to flex and dodge, the angular shape of the wand cold in his grip.

“Start!”

The foreign casting aid felt more like a hindrance than a help; still, his spells shot with immaculate timing. Eight ice darts, splitting and converging from three sides. They hadn’t specified what power counted as a hit, so he went for precision and speed over strength.

Eight consecutive *clinks*.

The darts sprayed into a thin mist against the wards, barely creasing the fabric of the sparring uniform. One to each leg and arm. Three to the chest. One to the head.

Huh? Did I misunderstand something?

“Five to nil. Veernon wins,” Valdibal announced dryly.

Guess not... Thought that was more like twenty-four to nil.

"Wait..." Forlow stared down at himself. A tiny red dot bloomed on his forehead. "I—I wasn't ready." Crimson sparks crackled around his wand. He bared his gnashed teeth, an arm pointed in rage. "He cheated! That low blood distracted me with mental games, and he cast before the start."

Kai shrugged, levelly. "No rules against readying my mana."

"His mana didn't touch the wand before the start." Professor Valdibal only showed a general droll disapproval. "No fouls committed."

A few mutters of injustice stirred the spectators, though they weren't particularly numerous or enthusiastic, quickly drowned out by the general chatter.

"It wasn't a fair duel!" Forlow spat. "I demand a rematch!"

"You do *what*, Forlow?" Valdibal whipped toward him, face thundering. "Why don't you repeat that?"

"I... I request a rematch, professor. I didn't get the chance to show my skills."

"Veernon, do you accept?" The man spoke without breaking his withering stare.

"Sure. I mean... Yes, professor." Again, what choice did he really have? He couldn't back down if he wanted to maintain the thinnest speck of reputation.

"Get into position. And be *ready* this time."

"Thank you, sir." Kastor bowed before turning to glower at him. "You won't get me again with your dirty tricks, Veernon."

"You know I barely said a word."

"Sly manipulations! Is that how you cheated Alden Blackwoods of his points? It won't work on me. I'm ready now."

Okay...

Kai parroted the formal salute and raised his guard.

Despite the stupid expression, Forlow had reached mid Yellow and his profession appeared in later stages of Orange. Not someone he could afford to underestimate. Aside from the gap in combat experience, their statuses must be comparable.

"Start!"

A cage of crimson Fire flared around Kastor. Waves of scorching heat rolled across the field, though Raelion's wards left the grass untouched.

"Aefir teelasir nar'kor!" A ball of raging flames shot toward him.

Kai stared, then stepped to the side. The burning sphere howled past him and shattered in a glimmer against the boundary wards.

"Aesair—" The chant cut off when the ground beneath Forlow's boot turned to mud. The figure shrouded in flames lost his footing and faceplanted in the field, destabilizing the channeling barrier. Violent sparks cracked from the disrupted chanting in his wand.

Five mudballs sailed through the air, plunging toward the fallen shape wreathed in dying flames.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Squelch.

The heat dried all but the last shot.

The last flames died down.

"Five to nil. Veernon wins."

The field turned silent, even the incessant murmuring quelled.

"Someone accompany Mister Forlow to the infirmary. He seemed to have suffered a chanting backlash." Valdibal snapped his fingers at the gawking students.

Five heartbeats later, a petite girl and a pale boy staggered out of the crowd to succour their fallen friend.

"He... cheated." Forlow gurgled as they helped him up. The wards had protected him from the impacts, but not entirely from the mud. His styled hair was reduced to a disheveled mop with burnt tips. "He... he didn't cast through his wand!"

"I did channel my mana through it. The rules didn't state I had to fling my spells from it too."

"Off-focus casting is a slightly unorthodox approach, but within the rules," Valdibal said.

Kai resisted the temptation to blow a raspberry at Kastor as they carried him away. Channeling mana under a mage's feet at that distance was far trickier than he made it look, still the hassle was worth the result.

"I hope you've all paid careful attention." Professor Valdibal regarded the messy ranks with severe disapproval. "As you can see, power and skill matter little if you can't apply them properly. In a real fight, forget frontal assault and fair dueling. Your opponent won't wait for you to finish casting. They will strike where you are weakest at the time you least expect."

Wait... Did he use me as a teaching prop?

Kai pursed his lips, moving to leave the ring. First impressions mattered. If he had to pick how to get unmasked, this wasn't a terrible option.

"Veernon, stay right there. We've just begun. There are three more top ten rankers in this class."

What?