

Chapter 373 - Back to Class

Kai sank into the chair in the corner of the fourth back row, his satchel slung over the desk. Around him, students streamed into the Azure Hall from seven entrances along the upper ring and lower sides. The air thrummed with lively chatter for the first lecture of the second term.

Class sizes should shrink after the hundreds of dropouts and expulsions in Mid-Term Trails, but Mana Theory was the most intensive mandatory course, accounting for the largest lectures.

Better this way.

The more people, the less chance he'd get spotted.

Kai pulled off his saffron floppy hat. Raelion's strict etiquette couldn't condone outswear indoors. Shoulder hunched, he rested his chin in the crook of his elbow on the cold desk. His textbooks piled on one side, his satchel on the other.

Just a few more days. They'll lose interest.

He *almost* regretted not dying his hair blue as Rain suggested. Months bent over books had paled his skin and darkened his blonde locks. The patchy scruff on his jaw was years away from a proper beard, and more elaborate make-up or prosthetics seemed too much of a hassle.

Despite the colorful outfits Rain made him wear, he had managed to remain undetected. Six days of skulking and near misses. Might his roommate actually have an eye for disguises?

Nah! More like I survived in spite of them.

The veil woven over his features gave a reassuring cool tickle. He trusted magical shrouds more than physical props.

It went up again.

Ding

General Skills:

- **Shadow Magic (lv75>79)**

Indeed, avoiding stalkers offered a great incentive to push his skills. The level gain fell short of life-and-death battles, but steady growth still added up. At this pace, he might advance the skill to Yellow within the month.

The specialization had drastically improved the speed, strength, and flexibility of his cloaking. He was far from mastering the conceptual aspects of Shadow, but now he saw the path. Appear unremarkable. Slip through attention. Meld in the background. He liked to visualize the attention sliding off him like water off a waxed canvas.

Practice makes perf—

"A fair day, Matthew." A lively voice interrupted.

Kai straightened his slouch, legs tensed to spring when he recognized the girls behind him.

How did they—

His fingers ran over his face, no flaws in his cloak.

Did I make it too weak?

Deception veils tread a balance. Channeling more mana was antithetical to subtlety. It also made them less effective once someone spotted him.

"See! I told you it was him." Lys blew a raspberry at Renaria, spinning back toward him with a prim smile. Her blonde tress bounced on her shoulders. "Forgive me for startling you, Matthew. I hardly saw you during the break. Did you not rest well? Are these seats taken?"

"No, but—"

"Stop tormenting, Matthew." Rena hung her coat on the backrest two from him. "You spooked him on purpose."

"How could you accuse me of such villainy?" Lys raised a dainty hand to her chest with a hurt look. "Why would I do that to dear Matthew?"

"Because Mat—"

"Could you *both* stop saying my name out loud?" Kai hissed, head half-buried in his satchel. A check on his peripherals showed no one looking at him. The merging classes between Fall and Winter held the chatter in a chokehold. "Sit and keep your voice down."

"Ow... sorry." Lys blinked innocently. "You needn't be so tense, Matthew. It's not too uncommon a name. With how often I've heard it lately, no one pays..."

"Is this why you ran off?" Valela slipped through the throng of students to reach them. The smile she offered him cooled into narrowed eyes at her friends. "I expected it from Lys. But you too, Rena?"

The raven-haired girl lowered her gaze. "... see how my teasing could have caused untoward distress. That wasn't my intention." Her head dipped at him. "Do not worry, fellow

student. The elites obsessed with rankings weren't seeded in this course. And the lackeys I recognized sit in the front rows."

"As she said," Lys bobbed her head. "We were merely catching up with a *fellow student* after he vanished for days. I was hurt too, but let's not waste time with my woes." Her hands tapped the chair beside his. She winked. "Here. I've kept a seat for you, Val. The lecture's about to start."

Valela pursed her lips. "I know what you're doing. It's not his fault if you threw away your money," she lightly huffed before lowering herself in the chair on his left, Lys and Rena sitting in order beside her.

How did I get here? I miss Rain...

"So." Kai glanced between, feeling like he was only catching a fraction of their conversation's meaning. One question still trampled others. "What's about money? And what does it have to do with me?"

"Nothing of importance." Rena cracked open a pristine textbook, her dismissive tone in contrast with a faint smirk. "Lys is moody because of her lost bet."

"I'm not moody." Lys folded her arms with a sulk. "And you lost too."

"Merely the ten mesars I pledged to entertain you. Less than a tenth of your wager."

"Ten or a hundred. What's the difference? I'm not upset over a few mesars. I know at least twenty who've lost *much* more than me."

"But few made your boastful claims. What did you say..." Rena hummed. "You'd wear plain grey for a month if the first ranker lasted a day longer."

"Lurian had sworn— Hmm, regardless... That was said in jest." Lys ruefully shook her head. "Grey is truly not my color."

Sighing at the bickering, Valela leaned in toward him. "Many of the socialite circles that organize parties during the break like to set up bets. It's usually just for fun, but a few can get out of hand... One of the most popular wagers this year was about when the first ranker would be publicly unmasked."

Huh... what?

Snippets of conversation formed into a grim picture. Kai slumped deeper in his chair. It took an effort not to scan the mass of students. "Why did no one tell me?"

Valela bit her lip. "Sorry, Flynn and I thought knowing would just stress you more."

"That's... a *fair* point." He tweaked his veil for the fourth time. Not only had some jerks placed intel bounties on him, but open bets? The web of headaches only kept growing. Accounting for the number of people and money involved...

Spirits have mercy.

Kai pinched his wrist, but he was already awake. First, the curious and busybody; then, snooty students, insulted that a nobody had snatched first place; and now, a network of monetary exchanges. Patricians with too much gold and too little regard for others were the bane of his existence.

I pray some god created a special Hell for those like them.

He feigned rummaging through his satchel to hide his face, wishing he could meld into the desk. "How much money are we talking about? And how does a wager where people can influence the result by coming after me make sense?"

"That's the most fun part of them," Lys said with a giggle. "I wish you could've seen the smug fools tearing their hair out to find you, and those gloating over keeping you hidden, only to swear to the Moons and back when their day also passed without a trace of you."

Kai threw her an unamused look. "And you were among them, I imagine? Betting against me?"

"Oh my, no? I did no such thing. Do you think so little of me?" Lys gave a sobful sniff. "I believed in you! I staked my allowance that you'd last till the end."

"She means the end of break. Yesterday," Rena tersely provided.

"That was the last date available when I placed the bet! Not like he can hide forever. Sooner or later, he'll have to show himself."

"I did not bet," Valela muttered with a hint of pride.

"Thank you. I can at least trust one of you," Kai said. "So... if no one won, is the bet off?" A thin satisfaction bloomed at ruining the plans of so many students.

"Hmm, well." Valela winced. "Now that the bets are closed, it will go to those who set the closest wager."

"That's still good." He smiled. Either way, the winners would have no incentive to search for him. The losers might bear petty grudges, but that just gave him more reason to remain undetected longer.

And there is still everyone looking for me as a rival or for other reasons.

"Do you know who it is?" He asked. "The guy who won, I mean."

Valela hummed, a small crease in her brows. “I can’t recall. I rarely frequent those circles.”

“That’s a good question.” Lys sprang straight up in her seat. “I heard someone had placed a bet after me, but I never learned who.” Her head whipped on him. “How did you manage to last this long anyway?”

“Trade secrets.” Kai snorted. “And a lot of time sleeping in my room.”

“None of your roommates sold you out?” Her golden eyes widened. “You must introduce them to me! What are they like? Anyone cute or rich?”

“Uhm... you’ve actually—”

A bell chime saved him from saying more. Voices dropped to a low murmur; hundreds of feet shuffled as the hall rose to greet Mana Theory lecturer.

From the highest tier of seats, Kai had to crane up on tiptoe to see past the sea of heads.

Professor Hulmus hobbled onto the raised dais from a private entrance, waving a bony hand. “Please, be seated.” His soft voice carried like a whisper.

Short, old and frail.

Not adjectives Kai usually favored, but the best-fitting ones.

The man might not even reach his collarbone. His faded blue robe, traced with golden scrollwork, couldn’t hide his thin frame. Wispy white hair and oversized ears framed a deeply creased face, the picture of old age save for the large gray eyes, sharply scanning the rows of students.

The figure stirred a vague sense of familiarity.

He reminds me of someone...

“Good morning, students.” The man had somehow already taken the raised chair behind the lecturer’s desk. “And congratulations on passing the Trials. I trust you enjoyed the break. I see many familiar faces and new ones. I am Professor Thaddeus Te’Nelui Hulmus. This term, I’ll be teaching the foundations of Mana Theory.”

A thick tome appeared, hovering before him—silk bookmarks draped from its yellowed pages. With a gentle rustle, the pages flipped to where he scribbled with a gilded quill.

Is that a soul-bound artifact skill?

“Right.” The tome vanished in a blue shimmer. “We have much to cover. Those joining from Winter Intake, or who fell behind during the first term, remain seated at the end of the lecture. I’ve prepared a list of supplementary materials. For now, try to keep up and take

thorough notes.” He gestured with the quill, tracing lazy circles. Words and diagrams of light glimmered on the wall behind him.

“To understand the seven major and forty-nine minor interactions between mana particles, *first* we must understand the intrinsic qualities of mana. Unattuned essence and elemental alike.”

The scratching of hundreds of quills on paper nearly drowned out Hulmus’s soft droning. He was a competent lecturer, if not a particularly charismatic one.

I should have sat further down. Damned stalkers.

His mind split between the professor’s speaking, the passages in his textbook, and burning through pages of his notebook. Mnemonic Mastery rooted his questions for later. Passing the basic courses had brought him on the same track as the Fall Intake, though at the very bottom.

“Ask me if you don’t understand anything,” Valela whispered. Her auburn hair cascaded on the desk as she tucked a lock behind her ear.

Kai grinned. “I’m fine. But thank you. I’ll let you know if I need.”

Mana Theory blended physics, mathematics, and the study of magical phenomena to understand *essence* itself. Earth’s education built a solid foundation in the first two, though he needed to reframe his notions in an entirely new system.

As he’d long suspected, his grasp of matter and physics had given him a distinct advantage with certain elements. Visualization formed one of the pillars of spellcasting. Understanding how water behaved on a micro level let him apply his will and mana more efficiently, and draw greater power from his spells.

Power through understanding the world in the most literal sense.

I should have paid more attention in class. Space physics still makes no sense to me.

Two hours flew by in the lull of the lesson. Both mandatory and elective courses generally varied between two and five weekly blocks, with proportional weight in final evaluations and credits. Mana Theory sat at the highest end of the scale, with *six*.

After jotting down a page of supplementary readings, Kai bid Valela goodbye and hurried off. His new schedule allowed for no dallying, and his stalkers hadn’t let him scout the routes between classes in advance.

After much debate, he had talked Jolene down to dropping only two courses: *Beast Bonds & Familiars*, and *Fundamentals of Scrying and Fate Reading*. A painful but necessary compromise, which left him with eight electives—nine, with *Foundations of Space Magic* pending approval.

Threading through the packed hallways and endless staircases toward his next lecture, he had to admit Jolene might have had a point.

I can always ditch one more, but I can't pick one up.

He followed five elemental magic courses. Raelion had stood around long enough that he fell two short of the record, but he likely held the top spot for those currently enrolled.

Kai made it into the Viridian Hall with two minutes to spare, taking one of the few remaining spots in the front row. No one spared him a glance, invisible among two hundred other students, a relatively small class.

Merian Ascension & Ethics through the Ages didn't have the most exciting reputation. Professor Ermellie hunched behind the lectern. The doors sealed shut at the chime of the bell. Her dried lips pursed as she surveyed the new students with faint disappointment.

"Eager for strife and change, the ignorant never stop to ponder the wisdom that shaped our society. From the autobiography of Amellius Almeria," she quoted. "In this course, you will learn the histories of our noble ancestors. You will learn from the mistakes and triumphs that made the Republic what it is today. And you will learn when it is moral to act, and when it is *not*."

Kai stiffly nodded, head bent over his notes as her gaze swept over him. Looking to share a hint of solidarity with his closest peer, he met a girl with an uptight sneer. Valela wasn't here. None of his roommates were, either.

Alone for two hours.

If Hulmus had been dull but informative, Ermellie's self-righteous monologues offered a crueller alternative to soporific potions. Even keeping a fraction of his focus to take notes was pure agony.

At least they don't mark attendance aloud.

The array engraved on the entrances registered his aura as he crossed. He wasn't sure how they'd obtained his mana signature, but at least it was convenient.

The next course had only about sixty students. Still no familiar faces, except for Jolene, who studiously avoided showing even the shadow of a smile. "Welcome to Adept Applications of Earth Magic. I'm Professor Thornwyn. If you're in this class, you must've already demonstrated a high level of proficiency in the fundamentals."

The lecture gave them an overview of all the topics they'd cover in the following months, more theory than he would've liked, but it did anticipate the more intriguing conceptual aspects of Earth. They finished with some shaping exercises to perfect for the next lesson.

Catching Jolene's glance as the students began filing out, he queued outside the privacy bubble enveloping her desk and waited for his turn.

"Are you still set on your schedule?" she greeted, wasting no time on pleasantries, hands laced on the desk.

"I am."

"You should drop Words of Power."

"I *did* consider it. Isn't chanting a fundamental field of magic?" One he'd somehow always avoided.

"I *did* consider it. Isn't chanting a fundamental field of magic?" One he'd never managed to learn about.

"Yes. One that proficient students have studied since they could walk, and that requires at minimum two skills for effective use. Can you help me recall the slots you planned to free for them?"

"I'm... still thinking on that."

"Of course. Ponder well and check my references in the libraries. Chanting is used for siege spells and backline formations. With your known passion for swinging pointy sticks, you won't find much use for it. You're already invested in elemental magic. Focus on your strengths. The fields of magic are endless. The best you'll gain from chanting is as a learning aid to experience spells you can't yet cast. That's a thin benefit for the years of investment it requires. There are far more efficient solutions."

Jolene sighed, reading his face. "Not that I'd expect you to change your mind. Just try not to waste time on misplaced pride when you discover I'm right. Now go before you make me regret becoming your advisor. I'll wait for the essay on your electives by the end of the week."

"Yes, Professor." Kai bowed his head to hide a grin and hurried out.

He ate the sandwich he'd prepared in his ring on the go, too paranoid to risk going to the cafeterias or restaurants. After an uninspiring block on the physical properties of water in the advanced course, he headed out of the Cerulean Tower with a spring in his step.

Finally out.

After hours in stuffy halls, he smiled at the beaming sun. Over half the day had gone without a single misstep. At this rate, remaining undetected appeared than he'd expected.

A breeze carried the fresh scent of grass and budding leaves. Spring was blooming. Kai crossed the meadows, following the trail of students toward his most awaited course—*Foundations of Combat Magic*.

The Rust Arena rose over the open grassland, a semi-circle of stands enclosed by a patch of woodland.

“Form up, students! The last to get in line earns ten demerits!” Professor Valdibald shouted, a man past his prime, but despite his receding hairline, his back remained straight as an arrow. “Regardless of what paths you pursue, any Raelion graduate must be able to defend themselves from the rabble. Magic is a weapon. And it demands discipline, commitment, and sound judgment!”

His gaze swept the arrayed students, mouth scrunched in scorn. “Since I know words won’t penetrate your thick skulls, we shall begin with a practical demonstration. I need some volunteers,” he said, ignoring the raised hands. “Matthew Reece Vernoon, step forward.”

Shit.