

Chapter 380 - Mixed Combat and Battle Strategy

"Hey..." Kai relaxed his defensive posture, looking between their grinning faces. "Why didn't you tell me you'd be here?"

"I thought you knew." Flynn opened his arms to gesture at the students streaming on the sandy floor of the domed arena. "*Mixed Combat and Battle Strategy* is a mandatory course for Martial Studies. With our rankings in the Trials, there was a good chance we'd end up in the same group."

"I didn't want to ruin the surprise." Rain leaned on Flynn's shoulder with a playful smile. "Also, Flynn told me not to say."

"Huh? That's unfounded slander! I remember no such conversation!" He scoffed, turning to deny him support. "How could I ever imagine that Matthew wouldn't talk with people and make this simple deduction? Really, one might wonder how *I* could have even learned he had picked this elective. Not like I could check his schedule on the kitchen table of our shared dorm."

"Yeah, who'd do that?" Rain said, stepping onto his foot. "And does it even matter when this is all a coincidence? Isn't it great that we all get to take a course together?"

Kai regarded them both with a flat stare. After eight hours of classes, his brain was too wrung out to engage in a lost battle. Something different bothered him. "How did you manage to sneak up behind me?"

Since getting abducted into the Trials, he'd started paying careful attention to his surroundings. Hobbes' taunting naturally played no part in his efforts. His eyes narrowed onto the siren—logic never applied to him.

Rain glanced back as if looking for the culprit behind him. "Hey, I just moved quietly. Ask him." His thumb poked Flynn's chest, who innocently blinked.

I'm gonna go mad.

"Well... *if* it were me. Hypothetically speaking. Could be I was feeling left out after watching you sneak around Raelion for weeks. You even asked Alden for tips and not me." He folded his arms with a heavy harrumph. "I'm no mage prodigy, but I can make the affinities I do have count. Just so you know, I also take Shadow Magic as an elective, though we aren't in class together. I checked that."

"We take *Merian Ascension* and *Wild Beasts and Mana Zones* together." Rain threw his arm around Flynn's shoulder and grinned. "I asked to have Water Magic with you, but they insisted on putting me in the adept course."

"Well, that's probably better." Kai broke the stare. Really, he should have paid more attention. Saying he'd been too busy made for a poor excuse when they attended the same

academy. Even before the Trials, they only hung out when Rain called Flynn over to their dorm. “Oh, right. How’s the Lucenti kit? Do you need help looking after it? Researching its species? Or bond skills?”

“Nah, Valela and the librarian saddled me with enough books to last until next winter. The little noodle still eats like a glutton. He’s putting on weight and *fur*. It’s *super* soft. He should open his eyes soon too.” His voice bubbled with excitement, a silly, beaming smile on his lips. “You should come see him. I’m waiting to see his personality before picking the name. The academy has professionals to look after him during class. I wasn’t sure about leaving him. But Hobbes also watches over him.”

Am I... less responsible than... Hobbes?

Kai chewed his cheek as Flynn continued gushing like a giddy parent.

“Why don’t you come pick him up with me after class? Last time, he yipped as soon as I entered the room. You must see it!”

“It was adorable,” Rain vehemently nodded.

“I... yeah. I’ll come. And... sorry, I know I’ve not been much company lately.”

“Uh, what? It’s all good!” Flynn stopped his rambles and snuck in a quick poke to his ribs before pulling back his hand. “I know how single-minded you get when you have a goal. We should meet for sparring and swimming again, now that the break is over.”

“Yeah... that’s a good idea.” Kai nodded, following the chattering pair to the quieter edges of the pavilion. The last students trickled in. Altogether, they’d soon reach four hundred.

“What’s with the face? You really don’t need to feel guilty.” Flynn pulled his attention. “I know you’ve had a lot on your mind.”

“I... No, I’m sorry.” Kai rubbed his face and condensed an icecube to chew. The sun had set outside, but the crystals in the dome lit the arena to near day. “I just had a long day.”

Rain and Flynn shared a look, then stared at him knowingly. The latter spoke up. “How many electives did you take?”

“Uhm... A few.”

“As in... more than any sane person would?”

“I have many affinities. And there were a lot of interesting courses.”

“That means yes.” Rain cupped his mouth to stage-whisper.

“How many exactly?” Flynn asked.

"Why does the number matter? Did you bet on it?"

"Nope. Nice misdirection. But it's not like I bet on *everything*."

Kai looked at him with his eyebrows arched.

"Okay, okay." Flynn raised his palms. "I might enjoy the occasional gamble. But this time I'm innocent. Truly. It's no fun betting on something that obvious. What's the number? Out with it. The bell's not gonna save you."

Dammit.

He sighed, bracing for the judging gazes. "Just nine."

"*Nine?*" Rain blinked. "Is that allowed?"

Flynn stared blankly at him, head lolling as the siren shook his shoulder.

Ohh, c'mon. It's not that many. I even dropped two!

The traitorous bell cut through the students' chatter. All along the inner walls, the doors swung shut.

"Students, assemble in order!" A male voice bellowed across the arena, his figure hidden by the crowd.

Watching as the packed students sluggishly shuffled into order, Kai thought it wiser not to rush. His friends were still recovering from the apparent shock. "Enough of this now. It's fine. I'm fine. I can handle the courses."

Flynn hummed and bobbed his head as if waking from a catatonic state. He gave a squeeze to his shoulder, abandoning the dramatics for a more sincere look. "So you're not feeling overwhelmed on the second day of classes?"

"I'm... I'm getting used to it." Kai looked at the gathering mass. "We should move."

"We will. But, *Mat*. Jokes aside, just don't burn yourself out. I've seen you pull off a lot of crazy shit. But this is an academy. We're under no imminent threat of death. I'm always here if you need a hand with *anything*. Tips on sneaking, spots to hang out, homework, sparkling conversation or urgent fashion advice."

"Me too," Rain echoed. "Teaching you is always fun."

"Huh, thanks? Same to you. And I appreciate it. Though..." Kai looked down at himself. Without his winter coat, scarf and hat, the burgundy robe and slacks covered his clothes almost entirely, spotless aside from a few wrinkles. "What's wrong with the way I dress? It's the academy uniform."

Flynn tilted his head up and down, giving him a once-over. “*Nothing*. You *do* look like every other first-year. At least you fill out your sleeves. Most mana dorks clearly never lifted more than a book in their lives. Though, isn’t that more reason to aim even higher? I could suggest a few tweaks if you wanted to get some girl’s attention.”

Kai turned his face away. “Who said I wanted that?”

“Absolutely nobody! Still, *if* you did, there’d be nothing wrong with it.” He leaned to pick at his shirt collar as another shout for order swept over the crowd. “Details make all the difference. A couple of neat accessories. Some cuff links or rings. Maybe a haircut that doesn’t look made by a blind barber with a dull blade.”

Kai ran a self-conscious hand through his hair. “Is it that bad? I cut it myself last week.”

“No, I think it looks fun,” Rain said.

“Figures.” Flynn gave an exasperated sigh. “I told you to find a skilled barber months ago. Well, talk for later. Class is startin’. We gotta go.” He spun and dragged him toward the crowd. “Follow me. Professor Beltram’s patient with new students, but he only gives two chances.”

Beyond the chaotic mass at the back, most martial students had formed into orderly ranks that would turn Professor Valdibal green with envy. Each stood at an equal distance, shoulders squared and arms at their backs.

Kai trailed his tall friend, joining the forming lines and falling into position.

“Eyes up front,” Flynn whispered. His easygoing demeanor shifted into a steady seriousness. Impassive expression and earnest gaze. “It should be about... now.”

What—

A Green aura bore over the crowd. “Five demerits to each student not yet in line. One for each minute you wasted.” The professor rumbled—not angry, simply matter-of-fact. “You have thirty seconds to fall in or I’ll double it.”

The impending deadline drowned any cries of protest. Amidst muffled curses and stomping boots, the remaining teens, mostly from Mana Studies, scrambled into uneven lines at the back of the arena. Each Raelion freshie knew that demerits always found the intended recipient. Generations of students had speculated on the skills involved, but no one had ever found a workaround.

This time, the enforcement was no mystery.

Instructors in grey strode through the crowd, dispensing curt nods and correcting sloppy postures. Their gazes noted everything. There were men and women alike, young and graying, towering and short. They only shared two commonalities: each had reached

between high Yellow and half-step Green, and possessed a stony visage that made granite seem soft.

“And time. Glad to see you can all follow basic commands.” The voice carried low and calm, yet no one dared speak up. “I see some sloppy lines. I do not demand perfection, but I *do* expect respect and honest effort. You’ll learn. From next class, you’ll form up within thirty seconds of my call. Is that clear?”

“Yessir!” The martial students’ shout rang out in near-perfect unison.

The sudden volume made Kai wince. He caught himself from covering his ears and held position. The instructors seemed satisfied to just have them stand in place, not bothering with the slouching and shuffling in ragged backlines. Still, a good first impression was worth weeks of effort.

If Flynn can act like a disciplined soldier, so can I.

From the corner of his eye, Kai looked for faults in his friend’s serious facade. His squared stance made him seem even taller. No crease in his uniform. He stared straight ahead, absent his usual glint of smug mischief.

Ugh, it’s almost creepy. When did he brush his clothes?

Peeking one spot beyond, Rain rocked on his heels and flashed a smile when he crossed his gaze.

Yeah, still the same.

Another figure drew his attention ahead, the same Kai glimpsed during Winter Intake. Professor Beltram paced between the lines. Despite standing just above average height, his broad build and martial bearing gave him an imposing presence even without unleashing his aura.

“As you heard, that’s the response I expect to a direct question. For anyone new, I’m Professor Malthen Beltram. You may refer to me as both professor or sir. Welcome to Mixed Combat and Battle Strategy. If the name didn’t give it away, this course actively mixes different paths of study. Whether you’re one of my own trainees, a mage apprentice, or the rare artisan, the moment you signed up for this class, you’re all the same to me.

“Expect no special treatment. There’ll be none. You’ll be judged on merit and effort alone. Work hard, and while I can’t promise it’ll be easy, you’ll leave this course better than you arrived. Laze around, and I’ll gladly become your worst nightmare. Is that clear, trainees?”

“Yessir.” Kai joined the chorus with almost perfect tempo. More uncertain echoes of *sir* and *professor* continued for seconds longer.

Professor Beltram watched the students with a wry smile. “Good enough. Now onto our topic. You must’ve *all* researched this course before signing up, but to put us on the same

page, let's cover the essentials." He cleared his throat. "Raelion offers several classes on combat and strategy. Most of them focus on honing and practicing your individual skills. You'll inevitably still do some of that, but with a different approach. My goal is to prepare you for real scenarios you're likely to encounter in the world once you leave our little hen house.

"Outside of the dueling arena, you'll rarely fight one-on-one or in similar predictable combinations. Forget rules and honor. Most of your true fights won't be remotely balanced. If you're lucky, the scales will be in your favor. If not... Well, this is what Luck and this course are for." He paused as if to give space for a laugh that didn't come. "So, as I was saying. Unlike the courses aimed at simply advancing your skills, here I'll teach you how to apply them in the most effective ways to keep you alive.

"You'll learn how to survey and maneuver across an active battlefield or skirmish. How to judge whether you should engage, stall or flee. How to make the most use of your assets, while minimizing your enemy's advantages. Because when your life, and that of your comrades', is on the line, a split-second decision can decide if you'll breathe another day or be embraced by the Moons."

Professor Beltram continued with more specifics and examples, all within Kai's expectations. After all, he *had* extensively researched each class.

That's why picking just nine was hard.

"Alright, looks like I've said enough." Professor Beltram halted his strides and motioned to the instructors, who split into four groups along the arena's perimeter. "Lesson never sink without some honest effort. For the remainder of the class, you'll divide into groups for some basic exercises. Enough for me to get a sense of you and aim the coming classes. Even when my eyes aren't directly on you, you'd better assume I'll know *everything*. Follow orders and show me your grit."

With the faintest smirk, the man turned to speak with his underlings.

Not like the dean, but a decent speech. Damn, my back hurts.

Kai rolled his shoulders, stiff from holding position.

"You were standing too rigid," Flynn said. "You're not trying to imitate a statue. It's supposed to be a resting stance. Look." He demonstrated with his body, exaggerating the difference. "See the difference?"

"Uhm..." Kai tried it out. "Like this?"

"Close enough." Flynn chuckled. "You'll get there. Beltram likes military discipline, but he's actually quite nice when you know him. One of the better professors."

"I'll trust your word on—"

“You seven with me! You five, over there!” The instructors’ shouts cut them off. The gray uniforms marched between the students, dividing them with brutal efficiency.

“A hundred mesars that this will involve running,” Kai called.

“No chance. I’m not a sucker,” Flynn snorted. “And I’ve told you my policy on obvious bets.”

“You—join the second group.” A stern-faced woman pointed out six students, including Flynn and Rain.

“Alas, seems they’re splitting us up. You’ll have to be strong, Mat Mat. Don’t miss me too much. I’ll catch you later.”

Kai rolled his eyes. “I think I’ll manage.”

“See you later, Mat.” Rain waved and hurried after him.

Left alone, Kai found himself without the snippy remark he expected. Perhaps, being in company wasn’t *too* bad. Sometimes.

They’ll be lost without me.

Getting assigned to the third group, the logic became apparent—they were being divided by physical attributes. Martial profession naturally skewed toward Strength, Dexterity and Constitution. And while Rain’s own status remained a mystery, anyone could see he’d reached the peak of Yellow.

Guess this makes the most sense for a workout.

Kai joined the mixed group of martial and mana students, gathering around a trio of instructors.

“Listen up! We start with ten laps around the Quartz Pavilion to warm up. Then we move on to team exercises. The firsts students to finish get to pick their teams. Is everything clear? Good. Start running!”

Spirits, I hate being right.

* * *

Around an hour and a half later, they lined back beneath the pavilion’s artificial lights—exhausted and drenched in sweat. The mana students weren’t the only ones looking on the verge of collapse.

“Quiet in the back.” Professor Beltram swept his gaze across the slumping and heaving crowd. “While this course focuses on decision making, it’s still a combat class. There’s no

point debating tactics if you lack the fitness to complete basic exercises.” He scratched his beard, poorly concealing a smirk. “Now, can anyone tell me the shared factor by most scenarios in my previous speech, as it relates to combat? Anyone? Use your heads. Hint, hint. Look at the exercises you did today. Yes. You, in the front line.”

“Maynard Avellus Hart,” the student spoke up loudly, though his boyish voice still carried through. “Is it team fighting, sir?”

“Correct. Five merits for initiative, Hart.” Professor Beltram nodded. “Humans are a social species. We survived the wilds without fangs or claws by cooperating. We come together to build cities, share knowledge, wage wars, and... grow communities. As it relates to our topic, in most planned and unplanned engagements, you’ll be fighting alongside others. Be they friends, teammates or whole armies. If you find yourself brawling alone, you’ve already screwed up somewhere.

“Strategy and teamwork are the core pillars of this course, and the reason why we mix paths. Scholars and mages love to split us into neat categories, but out there, you’ll encounter with a hodgepodge of individuals. Regardless of profession or background, you must learn how to deal and cooperate with them. Because when your life is on the line, you don’t get to choose allies. You do the most with what you have, and thank the Moons that you have them.

“That’s why during this class, you’ll often be split into teams. You may end up with familiar faces, strangers and rivals. You don’t need to become best friends, drinking buddies, or even just like each other. But you *do* need to cooperate, or fail this course.

“Your first assignment will be to form a team before next week. You may choose your own members. We’ll balance you with your Mid-Term Trials’ rankings to avoid entirely lopsided teams. The details are posted by every exit. Anyone who fails to submit a list by the deadline will be placed by us.”

Already near the back, Kai flicked Water Magic to wipe off his sweat and stood on his toes to read the displayed rules.

Rules for Team Composition:

- *Teams may contain up to 8 members.*
- *No more than 50% of the team may be from Mana Studies.*
- *Teams must be made up of students worth a maximum of 100 points:*
 - *Top 10 Rankers* *35 points each*
 - *Ranks 11-100* *25 points each*
 - *Ranks 101-500* *20 points each*
 - *Ranks 501-1500* *15 points each*
 - *Ranks 1501+* *10 points each*

Note: *Ranks reference the First-Year Mid-Term Trials results.*