

Chapter 406 - The Chosen Paths

Dawn rose and dipped, students filled the halls, professors assigned merits and demerits, all into the busy rhythm of the latter half of the academic year. No announcements were made about the malfunctioning arrays or assassins. Even the buzz around the Burning Party and the infamous Fire Dancers ebbed as new rumors took over among the first-years.

Guess you can ignore problems until they disappear.

Undeterred, Kai didn't lower his guard. One subconscious thread stayed alert on Hallowed Intuition. Flynn had confirmed that nine students from the party weren't seen again, though the steady trickle of first-year dropouts made it impossible to learn more. After all, a traumatic experience could easily justify taking a leave.

As weeks turned without leads, Kai had to prioritize. With eight electives and his five mandatory courses, he couldn't afford to chase dead-ends, not if he wanted to squeeze in time for his friends and keep up his grades.

Even without a social skill to track, he thought he was improving, paying closer attention to the people around him. Having two threads of thought helped, as did his growing library of notes and memories.

I picked the right specializations.

He'd probably never brew acids and explosives, but that's what he had spells for. Since evolving Herbal Alchemy, his potions had soared in scope and potency. The same was true with Cognitive Archivist. He didn't need drastic leaps in his mnemonics to see the value in his path.

Every student wanted a perfect memory, but few stopped to consider what that actually entailed. Sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. The higher your Mind and Perception, the more sensory and internal information you absorbed each second. No memory skill before Green would truly let you remember *everything*, but it was enough to clutter your head.

If he hadn't talked to Jolene and Valela, he might have fallen into the same trap.

Having an eidetic memory was only as useful as his ability to recall what he needed when he needed it. It would take years more to properly index his mind like that, but Mnemonic Mastery was already shaping up well to fit his needs.

Hmm, I've got Combat Magic next.

Adjusting his Shadow veil, Kai headed for the domed building cresting over the hills—the Aegis Arena. Pity he couldn't keep himself concealed during class.

Cloaks were an art, and his levels reflected how deeply he'd explored that elemental aspect. Strong enough to let people glance over him, but not enough that they'd bump into him. Student's different sensibility to magic made striking the balance all the harder.

Another worthwhile specialization. At this pace, I might hit Yellow in a few more weeks.

Passing the stone doors of the Aegis Arena, he descended the long staircase. The flow of students thickened as he emerged into a vast underground. Large crystals glowed coldly from the ceiling high above.

Like all sparring classes, Combat Magic rotated through different facilities: lush grasslands, sandy arenas, or as today, indoor rings that looked more like colossal caverns. The variety offered different elemental advantages, though the sparring fields remained largely straightforward.

Familiar with the layout, Kai entered the left locker rooms to don his sparring uniform. Once ready, students already lined the cavern in rows.

"Form up, you brats!" Professor Valdibal bellowed. His shiny bald head bobbed over the students up front as he paced.

Already feeling the strain, Kai resisted splitting off his mind. Threaded Consciousness had proved to be everything he imagined and more, but the toll on his mind was equally steep.

Truly, what naive and blind arrogance to think he could keep it up all day. Double the chain of thoughts meant double the effort. Jolene's one-hour intervals already skirted the line. Alternating skill and rest, he got a mild headache by noon, deepened into a migraine by evening.

Uhm, there's probably a lesson in there somewhere.

The strain varied with how he used his threads. Idle musings were easy, reading two texts at once harder, but still manageable; it was when he combined multiple skills that the toll spiked. Mana exercises wrung his brain, and active combat melted it into a puddle.

The throb from his last spar with Rain took two days to fade—entirely worth the hit he landed. At least that one time. Each level in Split Mind lessened the strain slightly, but he still had to pace himself.

A whole day of classes ahead.

"Hop, hop!" Professor Valdibal finished his drilling. "The laps won't run themselves!"

"Aye!" Kai shouted, and dashed to grab the weighted protections from the instructors. Better to run ahead of the grumbling crowd, though the physical conditioning was mild compared to Mixed Combat, mostly focused on casting while moving.

He much preferred running on grass than stone. His strides carried him halfway through the first lap when the familiar scowls stabbed his back.

Again...? What's their deal?

The other high rankers weren't overt in their distaste, but they were *persistent*. By now, he had given up figuring out how he'd upset them. Maybe they couldn't stand losing to a no-name commoner, which would be hypocritical, considering most of them came from mid-tier Houses and were relatively unknown before the Mid-Term Trials. Some even had their own rumors of famous Houses secretly siring and grooming them.

Uh, whatever...

He had more laps to run.

Keeping an even breathing, Kai wove the mana as instructed. The instructors shouted corrections at anyone who cut corners. None of the exercises pushed his limits, but he enjoyed the warm-up. He'd have enough to challenge him later today.

Half an hour later, students panted in a sweaty heap when Professor Valdibal and other instructors began calling pairs for sparring. No games or point exercises, just straightforward one-on-one today.

"...Matthew Veernon." An instructor in gray garb called. "Eighteenth ring. Step forward!"

Kai stepped onto the marked square. Wards thrummed in the stone beneath his feet. A teenage boy with a dusting of freckles on his nose squared up across from him. A new face. Classes shuffled continuously between the dropouts and professors cutting students who fell short of expectations.

From his opponent's scowl, the boy *did* recognize him and likely knew his affinities too.

Being famous sucks.

Kai grumbled. To balance the sparring grounds, students could raid the elemental supply room for shaping materials: bags of dirt, metal shavings, even potted plants. Anything they could carry was allowed. Since the freckled teen had nothing, that narrowed his potential affinities.

"Salute." The instructor called.

Kai followed the formalities of polite dueling. Dozens of spars had taught him not to underestimate his opponent. Raelion's students may lack experience, flexibility, or grit, but almost none lacked firepower.

A *snap* signaled the start of the bout.

All ahead!

Earth mana flared through Kai's legs. He halved the distance with a bounding step. Unfortunately, Professor Valdibal frowned upon outright punching or stabbing his opponents, but close quarters still had other advantages.

A hail of icicles crackled in the air, lancing toward his foe ahead of any chanting. Eyes wide, the freckled teen threw himself aside, his mana bubbling in inefficient surges. A wobbling water shell covered him as a gale buffeted the icicles off course.

Water and Air. Not a bad reaction.

With a nod of respect, Kai pressed the assault, not letting his opponent organize a defense or employ his foreknowledge to gain an edge. There was always a gap between rumors and reality.

"Ish kē—"

An ice spear interrupted the chanting. Frost and wind lashed across the arena as they exchanged more spells, finally the teen slipped on a slick sheet of ice and went flying. Before he could recover, an icicle struck his chest and made his ward flare red.

"Veernon wins."

"Good match." Kai bowed. "You were pretty fast to react."

His opponent ground his jaw, flicking off his drenched sleeves, but still nodded and went through the forms.

Kai returned to the waiting stands, veiling himself in Shadow. It wouldn't do much, but it was good practice and gave him comfort. He had made the mistake of dragging out the fight *once*. Chants were pretty damn annoying when people prepared counters for him.

Quick matches paired well with Threaded Consciousness too. If fully using Split Mind exhausted him, he'd just have to swiftly close his bouts. If he disregarded the strain, he could almost double his spells for a couple minutes. Only his reserves held him back, since they didn't double.

Sitting crossed-legged on the stone floor, Kai barely got to refill his mana when Professor Valdibal called him out again. This time, a petite girl squared against him, her green hair tied into pigtails. Two heavy sacks of rocks dragged behind her.

Hopefully it's Earth and not Stone.

He'd seen enough students bring random elemental bags as misdirection not to lower his guard. That caution proved unfounded. Before the starting bang even faded, the girl chucked half a ton of stone at him.

Kai threw himself into a roll as another rock hurled for his head, the missing shot breaking into dozens of flying projectiles. Forced on the defense, closing the distance would be out of the question.

Damn, is this karma for the earlier duel?

His ice constructs shattered before they could properly form. A storm of jagged rocks raged around them. It likely cost a ton of mana, but she didn't seem to care as he was forced into another awkward dodge.

A hushed chant reached his ears—no time to waste.

A damn Stone Breaker.

Kai bit back a curse as a stone whistled past his ear. Naturally, his opponents could go all out, while he still had to ration his reserves. Truly, fame was the biggest scam.

He channeled Water mana into his body, jumping into the gale of death.

The move took the girl aback. Her chant went off tempo as she swerved the storm of stone to recenter on him. While her power couldn't be denied, her aim left much to be desired.

He released his next spell. A stream coiled around him, ice coating the flowing current. Ideally, the sheet would deflect, while the liquid water absorbed the blunt impacts without shattering. It didn't need to last long.

Kai circled his opponent. The complex construct bought him time to weave a volley of frozen darts and attack. Stones on the ground jerked up to defend her. But the more pressure he applied, the more gaps formed in her assault.

With a mental push, he channeled his will to wrestle control of the rock storm through Earth Magic.

The girl squeaked in surprise, then glared at him. Her magic skill swelled to crush his attempt, buying him a small diversion.

Under the cover of their contest, he locked onto one of her discarded rocks.

To her senses' credit, her head immediately whipped toward the hurling stone. Her mana poured out into a panicked defense, but she miscalculated the angle. The projectile shattered on her face with a *heep*.

The *wrang* of the wards signaled her defeat.

Kai dismissed the icicles arching on the high ceiling with which he planned to close the duel and bowed. "Good match. You almost had me there."

"You—" The girl glared at him and marched off, fists clenched at her side.

Hey, you were the one who tried to hit me with a boulder first. Not like you even felt it...

Sighing, Kai paid respect to the instructor and returned to his corner. The hum of the training hall filled the space, boots scraping, spells fizzling out, instructors calling for the next rotation.

Bout after bout, he had grown familiar with the rules of dueling. In real fights, he rarely had the luxury of focusing on a single opponent or having a flat, predictable battlefield with marked boundaries. His unfortunate fame added another layer of challenge. He also wasn't used to fighting so many mages.

It had taken weeks to fully adjust. But now he had the class down to a science. Win quickly, pace your reserves, and show as little as possible. Rather than big, flashy chants, he applied textbook spells in creative ways.

After another spar, he caught onto Sebastian Elcarin's scowl and Ambrose Willow as he returned to his seat.

Really, what did I do to them?

If they couldn't stand losing, they could work harder to beat him. It wasn't just cheek. Despite his winning streak, many students were improving too, some at a scary pace—like those two. The gap hadn't closed yet, but neither had it widened.

Kai rubbed his eyes. No more Split Mind for this class if he wanted to arrive at team combat in peak condition. Magic Combat would be much more fun if he got into the same block with Valela and Rain, instead of alone. He'd even take Lys' teasing.

"Hey, Matthew. Great spar! Your casting got even faster!" Isadora dropped onto the bench beside him, her red hair pulled back in a high ponytail, a few loose strands clinging to her temples.

"Oh—hi." Kai glanced up. "Uh, yours was good too." He scrambled for specifics. Her crimson flames were hard to miss. "Nice work playing fire and shadow for cover. I might've also fallen for that. Your feints have improved a lot."

"Thank you." A small smile tugged at her lips. "Though if we're talking about misdirection, I'm an amateur compared to you."

"Flatterer." Kai huffed a chuckle. "You overestimate me."

"Do I?" Isadora leaned back, bracing her hands on the bench. Her gaze tracked his to the students, who were giving him dirty looks. "Huh, don't mind them. Envy always comes with winning. Trust me, I know." She winked.

Kai reached for his water flask. "I'm sure you do. Have you ever lost to your brother?"

She gasped, chin tipping up. “It offends me that you ask. Of course not. Well... never in a serious contest since we’re old enough to matter. I may have taken pity on him a couple times. What can I say, I’m burdened by a kind heart.”

Kai fixed her with a skeptical look. “I’m sure.”

Their small talk continued until his next bout. He wasn’t sure why she chatted with him. It wasn’t quite awkward, but it felt strange when most other top fighters in class circled wide of him.

Entering the ring without Split Mind forced his musings away. A squat teen stood across from him; they’d fought twice before.

Water and Shadow affinities.

Kai settled in his stance and reviewed his memos from their previous bouts.

He won within a minute.

Then, after three more spars, the bell chime saw him dashing for the locker room.

All Raelion’s uniforms carried self-cleaning enhancements, but he still scrubbed himself with Water Magic to get rid of the sweaty tackiness. Really, he had no idea how other students coped.

Uhm, probably by having empty blocks between classes.

Leaving the underground arena, he smiled at the warm kiss of the sun. Five heartbeats of lull, then he was off again.

His feet brought in the shade of the Terris Tower and later Umbra Tower, nestled between its taller siblings of the central cluster. During Initiate Shadow Magic, Professor Gravemont paid students little mind as long as they did their exercises. If not particularly inspired, at least he was inoffensive.

Finally, Mixed Combat. I should—

“Mat, wait!”

Kai turned back with a smile. Valela descended the marble steps of the Aula Ordinis as quickly as her poise allowed. He slowed to let her catch up. “Hey, I thought you’d be ahead. How was class?”

“Professor Ermellie’s lecture ran long.” She fell in on the cobble path beside him, leaning in conspiratorially. “I’m almost sure Lys learned how to doze off with her eyes open. She even nods and mumbles when you call her name, but her breathing is too even. Then of course, she begged to borrow my notes, though that’s hardly proof.”

Kai arched an eyebrow and tilted his head, impressed. "Think she can teach me how to do that too?"

"Don't you start encouraging her!" Valela swatted at his shoulder.

He evaded innocently. "Hey! It just sounds useful."

"So I assumed you won't also ask to borrow my notes too?"

"Well, if you insist... I could use a full copy." He shamelessly grinned.

Valela glared at him, then let out a resigned breath. "If that's so... You better get in line." Her smile peeked through. "If Lys can teach that, I'm first! Do you have any idea how many meetings I've sat through? When I was younger, I would have drowned someone for the ability to doze off."

Kai gave a mock scandalized gasp. "That's not very princess-like."

"Princesses get bored too." She snorted, her nose turned high. They exchanged playful jabs before turning the topic. "So... Is it bad if I'm enjoying the classes more now that more people have dropped out?" she asked. "It's like the professors are finally paying attention. And we get to ask *questions*."

"Nah, I think it's the same for everybody," Kai said. "I noticed too."

With few exceptions, many professors sped through the lectures, as if students had to prove they were worth teaching. It was a little grating, but cynically understandable. Why invest yourself in students who won't be here next year? From the Fall and Winter Intakes, three thousand had enrolled in Mana Studies; less than half remained. The Moon Trials would cull hundreds more, so no more than a thousand were allowed to the second year.

No point worrying now. It can't be worse than the last Trials.

The academy designed and secreted those tests to be impossible to prepare for. Whatever they threw at him, he would meet it head-on.

"So," Kai pulled back his full focus. "How long did you hold out before you caved and handed Lys your notes?"

"Hmm," Valela refused to meet his gaze, mumbling. "Two minutes. That's why I was late."

Kai continued looking at her.

"Alright." She puffed her cheeks. "Closer to one and a half. Her puppy eyes were unfair. Stop laughing!"

"I'm... not," he said, his twitching lips.

“Is that so?” She folded her arms with a harrumph. “Then you'd better take your own notes.”

“I do, yours are just better.”

Valela glanced at him and sighed. “Fine. I'll pass you a copy.”

That was way faster than Lys.

“Thanks.” Kai scratched the bridge of his nose to hide his smile.

From the glint in her emerald eyes, she saw straight through him, though she didn't seem upset. “Think we can talk later? I want to hear more about those magic communication bricks, scryers... things. You *know*.”

Phones?

“Sure. Same hour, same place?”

They had made their own language of looks since the party, enough to make their other friends roll their eyes. He'd been so scared of her reaction once he told her the truth. It seemed foolish now. For each question about his first life that he answered, she had three more, her curiosity only growing over the weeks. He couldn't say that nothing had changed, but different didn't mean bad.

Too soon, their destination forced them on branching paths.

“I'll see you later...” Valela lingered at the paved intersection before the flow of students pushed her on.

“Later.” Kai waved. His cheery mood lasted until he checked his pocket watch.

Shit, I'm cutting it close.

Mindful of a passing professor, he headed off at a brisk march. Wide paved streets narrowed into winding paths. The chosen grounds for Mixed Combat lay quite some distance away, alongside a woodland. Opposite the clustered towers of Mana Studies, Realion's Martial grounds sloped across for miles—Flynn insisted it was by design, to keep its trainees always running.

Nearing the woods, more students jogged on the same trail. A ring of engraved pylons marked the perimeter of the Verdant Grounds. Teams were already assembling on the open grassland. Beyond it, the woods thickened into uneven terrain and dense underbrush.

Kai dashed to fetch his sparring equipment and get ready. Rolling his shoulders to loosen up, he joined the students in a grid formation, scanning the crowd for his team.

The murmurs of conversation faded as Professor Beltram and his instructors took position.

“I won’t waste time repeating what’s already been discussed. I hope you’ve all prepared. Today's exercise *will* count toward your final grade.” Professor Beltram swept his gaze across the field and nodded. “You know the rules. The first group starts in five. Disperse.”