

## Chapter 408 - Even Odds (Part 2)

A blaring sound cut across the Verdant Grounds. Ruffled birds squawked and scattered from the sweeping canopies. Ancient wards pulsed and coursed through the vast root systems. And there, in the shadows of a small meadow, four students tilted their heads up, their conversation interrupted.

A breeze fluttered the black flag on a steel pole as the woods returned to their quiet rustling. Aside from their ready poses, none of them showed much reaction.

*Can't even give us time to strategize, huh?* Kai huffed.

"Time's up." Flynn looked at each of them. "Last chance to speak. Any counterproposals, objections or fixes to the plan?"

None of them spoke.

"Everyone understands their roles?"

"Aye," Kai said, echoed by Rain's eager salute and Rowan's determined nod.

They'd already hashed out their ideas in their weekly sessions of playing imagined scenarios. The field wasn't the place for debates. They only had to pick a course and make the fitting adjustments.

"Okay." Flynn nodded, his face thoughtful. "If the teams ally in block, we go with the *Guerrilla Kitten*. Otherwise, it's *Silent Hawk* until we regroup. Whatever happens, stick to the contingencies." His fingers twitched, as if twirling a blade, then stilled. His expression curved into a smirk. "C'mon, minions." He extended his hand, palm down between them. "Let's show them why our team is at the top!"

"Right!" Rain smiled, enthusiastically adding his hand on top. "Let's take all their points!"

"Yeah, yeah." Kai joined the pile. "Let's teach them to never mess with us again."

Rowan rolled her eyes at the gesture, but her hand already covered theirs. "Let's win and not die."

"We'll beat them all!" With a mighty *whoop*, Flynn lifted their arms up. "Team Flynnions!"

"That's not our name," Rowan scrunched up. "We never—"

"And it's time to go!" Flynn grabbed Rain's arm and spun, dashing towards the woods.

"Fast currents!" Rain waved a two-finger salute, leaving Rowan throwing dirty looks at the indigo shrub, where they'd vanished.

She let out a heavy breath, then caught his look. “What?”

“Nothing,” Kai shifted his focus to the verdant woods with interest. Her earnest front really made it too easy for Flynn to tease her, but he wasn’t foolish enough to point that out. Those two had an odd relationship. Despite her frequent glares and arguments, her aura rarely showed genuine irritation.

*Maybe she enjoys the bickering? Or just the excuse to curse at him? A hobby fine as any.*

He’d also considered the obvious. The one time he joked if she liked Flynn, she practically gagged—and not in a flustered way.

*Probably wouldn’t fit as well in our team if she weren’t a bit odd.*

Rowan was truly a bit of a mystery, driven and reliable, easily ranked among the stronger commoners, and had no known House sponsor—everything they could want in a teammate. Outside of that, she never spoke of her life before the academy.

*Not that I have any grounds to pry into her past.*

“So…” Her eyebrow rose in an expectant arc. She motioned to the woods

“Yeah, let’s move.” Kai wove threads of Shadow around them. The constant practice had made his veils quick and efficient. Hopefully, they’d be enough for this test.

Courteously bowing aside, he let her lead the way.

While he’d memorized the map and teams, her sense of direction and ease when stalking the woods were unmatched in the team.

“Tap once for beasts, twice for students?” She glanced, her spear brushing aside the vegetation.

“Sounds good,” Kai said and ducked in after her.

The ten teams started in roughly a circle, with them on the far west. They moved counterclockwise, opposite from Flynn and Rain, as swiftly as they could without leaving an obvious trail. Despite the towering trees blocking the sunlight, bushes and ferns tangled with creeping ivy, thriving across the underbrush.

*It must be the elemental composition and mana density...*

Lush enough to provide cover spots without impeding a charge if they pushed discretion aside. His senses spread outward. The need for keen mana perception and cloaking skills decided their pairs.

Spilling up was risky, but caution would see them hunted down. No matter their boasts, their situation was less than stellar. In clearer terms, the rules of the test screwed them over so *badly*, they could've published it as a case study.

*Probably why Flynn kept making light of it. He did keep morale up.*

Kai tapped Rowan's back once, gesturing to circle around a beast's den.

As long as they minded the terrain, they could swiftly beat nearly every other team. Even three on one, he would've bet on their group's experience and skills.

Only, they weren't three-on-one, or even five-on-one. No, they faced closer to *fifteen* times their number: nine teams, *sixty-two* students against the four of them.

Worse still, their opponents ranked among the strongest teams in class. If just half joined hands, even Rain wouldn't feel confident in a direct confrontation without revealing their aces.

That left only two paths forward: hide until their opponents thinned each other out, or go on a full offensive. No room for half measures. The sheer difference in the collective mana would wear them down, while the mapped terrain and known trackers would make evasion tricky.

So... they took about five seconds to decide on an all-out attack.

Then, they just had to figure out how to beat sixty-two students, all before they united in a threat too large for them to handle.

*A totally fair and balanced test. Spirits, fame truly is my bane.*

That teams would ally against them was a foregone conclusion. The test practically demanded it, offering bonus points the longer a team lasted. Naturally, no one wanted to go out first. They'd all eagerly gang up on smaller, stronger prey until only they remained to settle it out, ensuring a higher score.

The question was how many teams would join, and how quickly.

If they formed two or more factions, they could play a slower game, hunting them down. Their worst-case scenario was them forming a single unified block against them.

They'd considered rushing the closest teams. As long as they eliminated enough students, even if the rest joined, there wouldn't be enough to overwhelm them.

They could probably take a couple groups out. But *again*, the mapped positions sabotaged them. The nearby red and white teams would already be on guard, perhaps already fleeing from them. Even if they caught up, it'd waste time. Other students would sense the ripples from their fight and realize their actions; their offensive risked becoming the very push to rally everyone else against the big bad wolf.

*Really, a masterclass in screwing us over.*

If not for Professor Beltram's unquestionable reputation, Kai would have suspected foul play. But they had to make do. Rather than direct confrontation, the Guerrilla Kitten called for a more careful approach: hide their movements, strike quickly, and sow chaos. The cat naturally came from the master of elusiveness himself.

*Hmm, Hobbes...? C'mon, I know you're not napping! There is nothing better than a nice stroll in the woods to digest your treats.*

The bond remained mute and still.

*Fine then. You fluffy slouch! We'll see who laughs next time you crave salted tuna jerky in the middle of the night. I won't cave for any amount of meowing— huh, what...*

Kai jerked to tap Rowan twice, immediately making her halt.

"Where?" She whispered without turning, her gaze scanning shrubs ahead. A craggy slope shadowed them on the left, with a creek cutting the woods on the right. That left threading a mostly spare stripe.

"Straight ahead, coming toward us. Shit! They were cloaked too. Two scouts in front, the rest following behind. Probably the White team."

They'd purposely taken a wider path to avoid crossing other students; the White team must've had their same idea.

Rowan gripped her spear. "Can we get around them?"

"No, they're too close. Lean on the cliff. Hold still." He pushed them to lie into a nook of the slope. An ivy with red-rimmed leaves shrouded their figure, a weed tickling his neck.

Shadows thickened, mixing the subtler aspects to slip attention with denser layers, concealing sound, sight, and smell. A trickle of Nature mana flowed into the earth. Leaves gently wrapped around them, and a flattened stem they'd stepped on straightened, hiding their tracks.

Beside him, Rowan went still like a block of wood, a white-knuckled grip on her spear. Up close, he could hear her heart drumming and unusual fluctuations in her aura.

"Hey, plans adjust. Just hold tight."

She hummed without answering, though her tension loosened a bit.

Moments later, the scouts emerged from the far brush. One armed with a bow, the arrow knocked but not drawn, the other with his hand on a short sword. They stalked with the sureness of high Dexterity, their aura shifting with the ambient essence. Possibly a mana

obfuscation technique. Both from Martial Studies, lean and sharp-featured. Probably brothers, or cousins.

His mind connected the context clue to the listed names. The White team. Elric and Valmen Widelyke.

The mission envelope had contained sixteen pages, perhaps meant to teach them the danger of too much information without the time to analyze it. Lucky him, Mnemonic Mastery didn't need to mull over every implication to record the names. He recalled the relevant names, cross-referencing with the intel Flynn had gathered over the weeks.

Finding their info, Kai pressed himself harder into the cliff. This wasn't a team he wanted to face alone. They hadn't planned to engage so close to their starting position. That was key to their strategy: conceal their actions and take out students, but *only* if they didn't alert the rest. That's also why they'd split off, hiding their plans and position from trackers, misdirecting any budding alliance. While they sported the biggest target, there were many rivalries and bruised egos among sixty-two students.

*Strategies must adapt.*

"Clear ahead." The Widelyke brother with the short sword waved back. Five students followed from the brush, their auras faint and muted. Three mages with wands drawn, escorted by a second pair of melee combatants, wielding shields and spears.

A team of seven. Annoyingly balanced.

"I told you we'd evade those monsters if we took the wide way toward them," one of the mages said, a boy with a patrician's lilt.

*Team captain. Lightning and Light affinities.*

"Hardly took a genius," a girl scoffed, her steps dragged/trudged heavily through the vegetation. "A child could have guessed that."

*Plant and Shadow affinities. Probably the one doing the cloaking.*

"Well, you did *not* guess."

"I did not try. And this will bring us away from the action. We'll miss on points."

"Let the other teams deal with those freaks. We can finish off the stragglers."

"It's cowardly. You've been scared of them since the waterfall fight."

"It's strategy. And I'm not scared! I'm simply... common sense. Better than drooling after that white-haired upstart."

Kai buried his head deeper in the red-rimmed ivy, holding his breath as the voices moved closer.

Could he beat them? Maybe. If he took out the Lightning mages in the first attack, he could kite and whittle down the rest. It would not be quick or clean, and he could not stop Martial students if they decided to run.

*Too risky. If they run into other teams, it announces our whole strategy.*

The scouts passed their hiding spot without a glance. Kai thanked

“We could’ve joined up with other teams.”

“Who? The Nev’s team? That uppity nouveau riche? Thinks himself better just because he got a couple meaningless high scores. Let me tell you, merchant stock Houses, no better than a lowblood. No offense, Rhett.”

“None taken.” One of the shield bearers grunted with rote habit.

The main group trudged almost past them when their steps abruptly cut.

“What is it, Cliff?” The girl asked, her tone serious.

*Last mage, high Ice affinity. Suspected strategist.*

“I’m not sure... Something’s not—”

A rustle shook the shrubs just five meters from their hiding spot.

The sound of weapons drawn and the tingle of mana pooling thickened the air. Clothes and weeds swished with the students getting into formation.

*Shit.*

Kai resisted the impulse of spreading his perception or look, in case he was sensed. Thoughts flashed, splint into multiple threads. His hand tightened on his sword. Hallowed Intuition brushed his mind. Mana slowly gathered towards his skills. Run or fight? Could he close the distance in a stride?

The brush rustled again.

“Is that... a silver cat?” The captain sounded bewildered.

*“Mew.”*

“Aww!” The mage cooed with the sound of crouching. “Look how cute it is. Come here, kitty kitty.”

The tension immediately broke.

“Don’t be an idiot, Nema. We already had one close call with a beast. It could be feral.”

“Feral cats don’t have such a shiny coat. And it feels barely at Red. Poor thing must’ve gotten lost and wandered in the grounds. Come here, kitty kitty. Wait... Where did it go?”

“What do you mean it just— Strange...”

“See! You scared it away. I swear it had an academy collar. Right, Cliff?”

They resumed walking past the bush of ivy, their bickering never stopping.

*Never doubted you for a moment, buddy!*

The bond rang with haughty benevolence, and the puzzled face of a group of foolish students.

*Yeah, I know. Just wandering here by chance. Poor helpless humans.*

Kai sent his gratitude through the skill, the rest of his attention on his opponents. The White team had almost moved past him; this presented an opportunity. And a risk.

*We won’t win by playing meek.*

“Get ready to bolt away,” Kai whispered, and tied off Rowan’s Shadow cloak. It would last long enough for her escape. “I’ll cover you.”

“What do you—”

There was no time. The dense ambient essence concealed his preparations, but they were moving beyond his range.

The mana he’d pooled into the earth surged. Three spikes of hardened stone burst from the ground beneath the group. Pouring his reserves liberally, a cloud of dust/dirt and ripped weeds swallowed the team’s shouts.

“Now!” Mana rushed through his body. Kai dashed from their hiding nook, turning the exposed rocks from the craggy slope into projectiles. Behind him, Rowan trusted his plan, running for the far woodline.

“Ambush!”

“Who—arhg!” A cry turned to a hacking cough.

“Defensive formation! Shields up!”

Within the cloud of detritus, the team closed ranks with remarkable discipline—at least, some of them did. The red flash of wards flaring pierced the dust. Three students would not be getting up.

Kai strolled for the cover away from the panicked and outraged cries. His enchanted vambrace pulsed three times.

*Uh, neat! That's three eliminations confirmed. That's five points if I got the team captain. Uhm, just fifty-nine more to go.*

He would have liked to press the ambush, but a couple more points weren't worth exposing himself. Better to take the free lunch and go. He'd consumed most of his Earth mana, copying the stone spikes commonly cast in class. The rest of his spells were too recognizable, but he only used Earth Magic for terrain control and the occasional potshot. Even if they suspected him, the uncertainty would keep them cautious of other teams.

Running into another team nearly derailed their plans, but it ended up with a bunch of free points, so maybe he was Lucky?

*Yeah, buddy. All thanks to you. You came and saved the day with your stroll.*

The bond rumbled with smug approval.

"What was that?" Rowan caught up with him, still running.

"Whittling down the numbers." Kai grinned. "C'mon, Flynn and Rain must be waiting for us. Each second counts. And we might still run into more teams on the way."

"What do you mean? Wait, Mat—" Rowan started with a warning note, but he was not slowing, his mind busy refilling his reserves.

*Think you can manage that, buddy? Uh, yeah, sure. You can have all the treats you want. Yes, even the cloud fin tuna. Yes... At any time you want.*

Kai folded like a wet paper against the demands of his purring overlord.

Knowing the White Team's position, and with Hobbes scouting for them, they could push through the vegetation with less concern for stealth.

They'd concealed their tracks; now they couldn't afford to hesitate and lose the initiative. The race had started between their guerrilla and the threat of teams organizing.

Whispers brushed his thoughts as the trees opened around a pond.

*Uh—*

Kai vaulted as a cobalt lizard darted from the field of wildflowers, its jaws snapping on empty air. It gave Rowan enough warning to dodge.

*Sorry, just crossing through.*

There were no points engaging beasts. And he'd rather avoid killing them if he could. Checking in with Rowan, they were heading the right way; his legs pumped with mana.

The woods blurred past. They found no more targets for ambush. The only group Hobbes spotted consisted of two teams, forcing them to give a wide berth.

*Damn, they're already teaming up.*

It would have been nice being wrong for once.

Reaping Nature mana from the vegetation to clear their path, he stuttered upon sensing the violent ripple of magic, immediately confirmed by Hobbes.

Rowan slid to a stop with a questioning glance. "What—"

"Someone's fighting. This way." He turned their path toward a grove of silver pines. "I think I recognize the signatures."

"Wait, you mean..." Rowan groaned and pushed faster.

The forest erupted ahead. Shouts cracked through the trees, barked commands, curses, and hastily formed chants. Wood splintered under impact, trunks creaked under the roar and shatter of spells. Shrubs smoldered in the shade, chunks of earth and branches littering the underbrush.

Kai and Rowan burst into a clearing torn from the woods, the ground gouged, grasses flattened into mud. Access from them, Rain and Flynn stood back-to-back, circled by nine students.

*So much for a low profile. Well... guess no witnesses, no trouble.*

Still veiled in Shadow, Kai poured more mana into his legs, angling toward the nearest flank.

The hunt was on.