

Chapter 410 - Wrap Up

Grass swayed in the clearing outside the Verdant Grounds. As the first group to finish due to the complete elimination of other contestants, Kai returned to a field bereft of students.

They sat in the shade, awaiting their results. The remaining teams were either still testing or getting ready in their assigned areas, so they couldn't receive hints from the first round.

Squat buildings of bricks and white plaster rose against the woodline. Instructors in gray garb circled, leading the eliminated students out, or carrying them to the Medical Ward if necessary. His team had already gone to return their training weapons and engraved armor pieces to the quartermaster.

In the remaining structures, personnel moved about behind tinted windows, monitoring the testers. Their whereabouts were restricted to the students. No one knew the exact instruments they used to observe the training grounds. Most credible rumors spoke of scrying arrays, which had enough variety to fill three courses. The mystery ensured students couldn't exploit blind spots or devise workarounds.

"Does the classroom ban on snacks still apply?" Rain asked. He rested his head against Flynn's shoulder, watching the swaying canopy above them, his boots propped up on the trunk. "I thought the test would take longer."

"We're still within course hours," Rowan chewed her nails, her left arm wrapped around her waist. "They should've already confirmed the results. What if we missed something?"

The instructor who led them out had given them an odd look, leaving them with the order to stay put.

"I'm sure it's fine," Flynn said. "I double checked the rules. We did everything by the book. It hasn't been long. Beltram will tell us soon." He crouched at the edge of the shade. His fingers dug into two shiny coats of fur.

"*Mrow.*" Hobbes protested the wavering attention on his belly rubs.

Curled into a honey-golden ball, Wisp lifted his little nose and let out a high-pitched yip, attempting to imitate his teacher's indignation. He then turned to look at the fluffy cat, receiving a lazy paw of approval that made him preen and squeak.

Perhaps introducing them wasn't the best idea...

Kai shook his head. He was glad Hobbes had agreed to watch over the younger familiar. The responsibility of mentoring Wisp would help them both. Still... he couldn't help wondering if he hadn't committed a grave mistake.

At least they get along.

"Sorry, bud." Flynn fully turned to the fussy cat. "Of course, we couldn't have done it without you two. Our chief scout and his little helper."

"Mew," Hobbes swished his tail, purring as he graciously accepted his due of praise. Beside him, the stoat hopped through the grass with content yips.

Wisp had remained tucked in Flynn's coat throughout the battles. While combat tests allowed registered familiars as part of a student's skills, participation brought its own risks. The enchanted collars provided by the academy only granted partial ward shielding. Apparently, they could apply to have a custom set engraved, for a fee not covered by the academy, naturally.

I could buy it with merits.

Kai made a note to look into it, if nothing more than for cover. Hobbes could probably run circles around some of the professors, let alone students. But he might use it to keep up appearances. Though... would his Royal Fluffiness even accept wearing ulterior protections? Maybe if they came with shiny spatial gems—

Nope, no. Forget it. One custom collar was enough. A full set of protections might actually bankrupt me.

Memo 163: Look into familiar combat regulations ~~and custom armor sets.~~

"Meoow." Decided that moment he had enough scratches, Hobbes sniffed and sauntered off into the woods. Wisp excitedly bounced after him.

Don't go too far in alone.

The bond thrummed with the grumpy acknowledgment worthy of a teenager, mixed with a glimpse of the promised treats.

Yeah, yeah. I'll let you stuff until you roll.

"Hey, wanna bet on how many points we scored?" Flynn asked, his hands sullenly stretched after the fleeing bundles of fur. "The closest guess gets to pick the team's *official* name."

"Uh..." Rowan blinked, halting her pacing. Her brain then caught up. "No, no, we're not leaving that up to a rigged bet."

"Now, that's just hurtful slander. I've never rigged in my— well, *this* is a perfectly honest wager. Word of honor. What's the fun if you know the result? Why don't we do the winner gets three vetoes on the team name instead? You can veto the Flynnions if you hate fun. Is that an acceptable stake?"

Rowan narrowed her eyes before giving a terse nod. "Fair. I can go with that."

"Great, everyone is in agreement?"

“Aye!” Rain threw up his arm with a thumbs-up. “I say a hundred points.”

“Ninety-seven,” Rowan said. “Beasts took out several students in the last scramble.”

“Okay, a hundred and one for me then.” Flynn laughed as Rain harrumped and tried to swat him. “Hey, no one told you to go first. What do you think, Mat?”

“A hundred and two.”

“Hey, wait... are you sure—”

“Yup.” Kai glanced over. “Closest guess wins, right? It’s not that I don’t like betting because I don’t know basic odds.”

Flynn sulked. His guess left him with the smallest interval. “Fine.”

Of course, they could comb through the sixteen pages of mission guidelines and calculate their own score, but that would be *boring*. Plus, they had no way to verify who’d earned bonus objectives like First Blood or Best Executed Ambush, which depended on Professor Beltram and the instructors’ judgment.

Kai pointedly ignored the glares of the other nine teams, scattered across the clearing. They all gave them a wide berth, their numbers reduced. About two dozen had gone to the Medical Ward for abrasions, mild concussions, or chanting backlash.

Maybe discussing their scores aloud wasn’t the most diplomatic idea. But they wouldn’t know unless they were purposely eavesdropping. Honestly, they seemed less hostile than he’d expected, probably too busy arguing over the merit distribution. Professor Beltram generously rewarded group tests, and they usually weren’t graded.

It was up to each team to split the merits, to the advantage of smaller teams. It had taken some arguing, but Kai had convinced Flynn and Rowan to do it with equal shares. Neither he nor Rain lacked for credits.

“Group one, form up!” Professor Beltram’s low rumble crossed the field. Teams scrambled to assemble. Only once they stood in orderly lines, did he continue. “Knowing your impatience, I decided not to leave you hanging. I’m done grading your showing in the Verdant Grounds.” His glance silenced a mage attempting to speak. “The results are not up for debate. Your team’s performance has been evaluated alongside the final ranking points.”

Kai ignored the ripple of hostile auras that pulsed toward them. Thankfully, Beltram wasn’t the sadistic type who dragged out delivering grades to watch students squirm.

His gaze briefly lingered over them. “I hope you’ll use this as an opportunity to review your own performance. The only real failure is the one from which you learn nothing. You’re still at the beginning of your paths. Don’t dismiss your grades, but neither root yourself to them.

Think how you'll do better on future tests. For any team that failed, you have until next week to turn in an action report."

At his sign, an instructor walked up with a stack of papers. "Team captains, step forward for your assessment notes. Team Violet, four points. Failed. Team White, eight points. Failed..." He listed in a monotone, leaving no room for protests before the next was called.

Several students flinched at each result or stared off with blank expressions.

Of course, they had to announce them aloud...

"And lastly. Team Black, a hundred and five points. Pass. Please, turn in your merit distribution before..."

If someone wasn't glaring bloody murder at them, their score quickly rectified the issue.

We probably won't win any popularity contests. At least, I won the bet.

The gazes made his back prickle, though they avoided him when he glanced over. Beside Beltram, the assistant instructor quickly finished delivering the papers; the teams slipped away with glowers and sullen looks.

It's not like we made the rules.

From how the test was structured, there were only two possible results. Either they got hunted down by a coalition, or they defeated them before they could ally.

"How did we do?" Rain peeked over Flynn's shoulder, unbothered by the stares. Rowan stood stiffly, her eyes far away, before she also crowded over, followed by Kai.

"Okay, give me a moment to check. They sure graded it fast," Flynn held the assessment papers away from them, with the instructors' notes on the first of two pages. "There is a proper order. Lemme see... oh, here! The team showed quick decision-making and adaptability. Like, *of course!* Proved good coordination under pressure, in and out of combat, hmm..." His brows furrowed at the last lines of the page. "Excessively rash strategy and high operational risk. Really, everyone's a critic!"

"Do you disagree with my feedback?" A low voice made them jolt.

Professor Beltram stood behind them, calmly looking down at the papers. Kai bit back a curse and found himself standing a little straighter. How had he not noticed him approaching? For a man so large and bulky, he moved surprisingly quietly.

Is it a skill? I can't sense Shadow mana, or any spell.

"I—uhm—" Flynn cleared his throat. "Of course not, sir. We all appreciate the feedback. I just thought we performed acceptably."

Beltram watched them, perhaps a little amused. He donned the indigo shade of professors, though it looked more like a military uniform on him. "At ease. You don't need me to tell you that you're a singular team. The analysis isn't based solely on results, but on your potential to improve. Praising your known strengths would add little besides swelling your heads. While you were the strongest today, you can't rely on that that'll always be the case. Employing risky strategies in different circumstances could end very badly for you."

Flynn dutifully bobbed his. "We'll study your notes and turn in an action report too. We appreciate your time and guidance."

This time, a smile definitely tugged at Beltram's lips. "That's good. My adjutant instructors can monitor the test takers without me. I'd also like to know my students' feedback. Teaching can be a double path to improvement. Were you not satisfied with the test? I might have made it too easy for you." He studied them, unhurried. "I promise the answer won't affect your grade."

Seeing Flynn's rigid posture, Kai chose to step up. Whatever he said, he wasn't part of Martial Studies. "It was an interesting challenge. Though the circumstances felt pretty stacked against us."

Beltram scratched his square jaw. "Is that so? I would have judged the circumstances quite favorable."

Is he serious?

Kai narrowly kept his straight face; the man seemed to be waiting for an actual answer. "Well... Exposing our names and position in the missing briefing painted a target on our backs. It basically asked everyone else to ally against us, sir."

"Did it really?" Beltram remained unflappable.

Kai opened his mouth, then closed it again. Few professors appreciated arguing.

Am I missing something? Or is he being sarcastic?

With a half smile, the man continued. "Have you considered you could've employed that same strategy yourself? Recruit more teams into a coalition. Once you had joined two or three more, you could have swept through the competition at no risk."

"That..." Kai bit his tongue, wanting to refute him. It wasn't that simple. Even before today, their victories and reputation never brought them much popularity. Most teams were captained by patrician mages, too prideful to lower themselves into an alliance with them. They'd also know they'd be next once they defeated the rest. Still...

Could we have done it?

Frankly, he'd not even considered the idea.

If they'd cornered another team, offering a choice between certain elimination or an alliance, that'd have made a persuasive argument. Not the strongest foundation for a coalition, but it only needed to last for a test. People were remarkably good at ignoring morals and personal distaste when they had something to gain.

Flynn probably knew the team captain we could have approached.

Beltram patiently waited; his trimmed beard could no longer hide his smirk.

"Thank you, sir," Flynn said. "We'll need to discuss every angle we could've improved."

"Do that. I look forward to your future tests." With that, the man turned, marching off with deceptive speed. They didn't move until he vanished into the buildings.

"Finally." Flynn released a breath. "Damn, that man always makes me nervous."

"What did he do?" Rain asked.

"Nothing yet. But the more he likes you, the worse he pushes you."

"Uhm, he did have a point about strategy," Kai muttered. "We should have considered allying— Wait! Had you already?"

Rain gave an ambivalent nod.

Flynn shrugged. "Sort of? It would have just been so *boring*. Can you imagine the bickering keeping together three or more teams? The headaches and pointless arguments! All the while watching our backs for the time they'll stab us. Even if it was safer, it'd have been so stressful. We're our own weird thing. No one is quite sure how to treat us. Once we start, we get dragged into their politics, it's the end." He dramatically mimed slitting his throat. "And there is a point where I disagree with Beltram. He doesn't know our two little monsters as well as I do. We were never in that much danger."

"Who did you call little monster?" Rain hooked his arm around his neck.

"Handsome monster! Hey, sorry, sorry. Leave my hair out of this! Mat's the little one!"

Indeed, four of us are more than enough.

Kai left them to their bickering, heading back for the shade of the trees. Professor Beltram hadn't told them what to do for the rest of the class. Worse, the man had a point.

I should have considered creating an alliance of our own.

He probably wouldn't have gone through with it, but not considering the possibility was a strategic failure. And an obvious one at that.

“Hmm, if it helps, I hadn’t thought about it either,” Rowan said, fidgeting with her red braids. “It doesn’t come naturally when you’re used to relying only on yourself.”

“Yeah. We all have room to improve. By the way, how did we actually do?” Kai turned to the two idiots rolling on the grass.

“Hundred merits! Twenty-five each. Full marks!” Flynn said before Rain downed him.

Hmm, guess I didn’t bribe Hobbes for nothing.

If they scored just the bare minimum on the next test, they were almost guaranteed to pass the course. Naturally, he aimed a little higher. If most students already hated them, might as well double down.

To enroll in Raelion’s second year, he needed five hundred merits and passing grades in all mandatory classes, plus four electives. Even then, Mana Studies allowed no more than a thousand students to continue their education. Many years, it was less. And that was only the qualifier.

Perfect grades wouldn’t matter if he failed the Moon Trials. Unlike the Early and Mid-Term exams, the Moon Trials followed a loose pattern. Each year centered around one of the seven Moon goddesses as its theme, though they remained just as unpredictable.

Whatever they throw at us, it can’t be that bad, Kai grimaced. I just jinxed myself, didn’t I?