

Chapter 409 - Even Odds (Part 3)

Bellowing fireballs hissed on the streams coiling around Rain and Flynn. Mist lifted off the scorched ground, the litany of chants muffled by the clank of steel. Nine against two, arrayed in two semicircles, five melees with three mages and one archer in the backline.

Nine against four now.

Kai swept his senses ahead, into the broken clearing. An explosion made his skin tingle as he emerged from the brush. Gusts buffeted dirt and leaves, obscuring the details of the fight. No time to piece together the combatants' information, even if Rain could hold, the disturbance might attract more teams.

We must—

"Pincer." Without slowing, Rowan lowered her stance, angling her charge to the right flank.

"Right." Kai nodded and adjusted his approach to the left. Utilizing a surprise attack would more than make up for a small delay.

Shadow essence flowed down his channels, cool and elusive. His presence dimmed, unlike any external cloak could manage. The woods themselves seemed to darken, colors tuned muted, and the clangor of battle muffled, almost as if he dove underwater.

It was a tricky element to use for augmenting, harder than Water and Earth, though easier than Nature and Space. He still hadn't managed those. At least Shadow wasn't likely to cripple him if he messed up. It felt like trying to grasp smoke, and left him with an odd sensation. He could only channel it for a few seconds, but that was all he needed here.

Drawing his longsword, Kai synced his approach with Rowan's, his feet adjusting to the uneven terrain.

Three attackers had protection wards gleaming gold and bronze, where they'd taken non-lethal damage. The patches would be fragile, but not slow them during this test. Three more lay on the ground, covered in webs of flaring red. They would not be getting up.

Whisperers stirred in warning.

Through the mist, a pair of amber eyes flickered to his position. An aura surged like the tides then swiftly resettled. Rain looked away, a faint smirk on his lips. His trident never stopped whirling, flowing through arcs and stabs with unerring precision. He fended off blades, parried strikes, and redirected spells, each step of his dance fluid and unhurried.

Streams and bubbles drifted around he and Flynn, unchained by gravity, intercepting jets of flame and shards of stone. Wherever he couldn't reach, a cloaked knife punished anyone pressing the opening.

“Stop being shy, come all at once.” Rain sneered, parrying a heavy blow with his trident.
“Let’s make this a *fair fight*.”

“Laugh while you still can. I’ll make you choke on those words.” The Air mage snarled.

“Keep them pinned, don’t give them space. Finish the slippery one! They know they’re trapped. Their mana must be running dry.”

“Fool thinks he has a chance. Still playing hero.” One of the two swordsmen jeered. “You should’ve stayed with your team.”

Rain didn’t answer, still with his faint smile, that only seemed to enrage them further.

“You—”

Voices cut off as Flynn reacted to the code phrase—make it a fair fight, reinforcements coming. A crack of thunder and a flash. Lightning forked across the front line, searing into their vision.

Damn, he did not hold back.

Even in the Shadowed reality, Kai squinted. His mana poured into him to maintain his cloak. Tied off from its source, Rowan’s was stripped bare. It didn’t matter. While the Martial fighters reeled from the bolt, they stood upon the backline.

His sword stabbed through a Fire Breather. Wards flared red as his target went limp. Across from him, the Wind Blower’s shout cut short when Rowan pierced his heart.

“Ambush!”

“Enemies at the back!”

Covered in the bronze patches, the jeering swordsman reacted swiftly. His figure blurred to intercept her from attacking the last Fire mage.

Too late.

Kai dashed towards the archer, mana burning through his channels. She stood stunned, blonde hair pulled in a tight ponytail. The boost finally unbalanced his Shadow argumentation, just a ripple, but enough.

“Wha—” the girl pivoted, eyes widened. Her surprise didn’t stop her from reacting. Her body flared with some kind of movement skill as she snapped her bow up to block.

Probably a danger skill.

Without a need for stealth, Earth mana rumbled through his veins. The rough application stung his arms. Still, his strength swelled, and his sword assumed an earthy sheen, descending in a heavy arc.

Before impact, the archer angled her bow to deflect the blow down. Unfortunately, she failed to properly anticipate its power.

“Argh!” Steel carved a groove in the enchanted wood. The bow didn’t splinter, though she staggered back, wincing. “What kind of... mage ...”

Kai ignored her shock; his mind finished his spells. Seven icicles shot from the mist, aimed at her vitals.

Eyes widened, mana flared from her blindingly bright. She twisted through the barrage, dodging five shards and turning the rest into non-lethal hits. Her wards gleamed orange, but she didn’t slow or halt. Abandoning the bow without hesitation, she drew two crescent moon daggers. The blades flashed towards his face.

Kai narrowly ducked, warned by Hallowed Intuition. The knives that would have taken his eyes instead trimmed his hair. A reminder to never underestimate Raelion’s students.

Before he could recover, she pressed in with a flurry of lightning-quick slashes, clearly comfortable in close quarters.

What kind of archer...

Kai shifted his stance, channeling Water to parry. If not for the opening shot against her and his spells, it might have turned into a close contest.

It took six swings and two volleys of ice before he used a root to snag her foot, opening her to his finishing thrust.

Breathing heavy, Kai spun to survey the battlefield. Rowan still battled the no-longer-jeering swordsman, their clash driving them through broken underbrush.

A cry from the central melee. Taking advantage of the distraction, Rain impaled the last swordsman left to engage him. The student dropped with a groan.

“Disengage!”

“Hold the line!”

“Run!”

Conflicting orders quickly threw the alliance into chaos. A shieldbearer tried to organize a retreat, but it was already too late to run. Five on four, the balance had reversed. Cornered beasts were the most dangerous, but these were students. Elites perhaps, yet still

inexperienced. Rather than their survival, the stakes were a bad grade on a test. So panic made them predictable and less effective.

Kai dashed to intercept the last mage as he tried running. Unlike the archer, the teenage boy did not keep his cool. He threw a panicked glance over his shoulder and stuttered his chants. His spells turned into sloppy Water and Earth cantrips, more akin to mudballs.

“Just leave me alone!”

So dramatic.

Kai deflected the spells, funneling Nature mana into one of the surviving shrubs. Branches quivered and whipped to entangle the runner’s legs. Panic notably simplified the fight. Two feints and one thrust. Another student dropped, leaving just the swordsman and three shield bearers.

Not wanting to intrude on Rowan’s fight when she had it well in hand, he turned to the thinning melee. The last martial students posed little threat, though they were the most defensively aligned, shrugging off and disrupting any spells that snagged them.

Each carried one kind of heavy shield, paired with a spear, a gladius, and a steel mace, respectively. Their bulky frames fit the part too, looking well into their twenties despite supposedly being closer to his age.

“Hold on tight! We just need to last until more teams come!” The polearm wielder shouted, tightening his guard.

Damned smart people.

Breaking them would waste time and mana. Though he worried for nothing.

Before *Smart* Spear Boy could finish his rousing speech, Gladius Boy broke formation and bolted for the woods. His frame burst with mana, sharply accelerating his charge. Still, speed didn’t help his straight path. Flynn’s dagger took him in his back halfway through the treeline, sending him tumbling against a trunk.

Ouch! Thank the Spirits for stupid people.

“Bloody idio—” Smart Spear Boy ground his jaw, adjusting to close the gap in their formation. “It’s alright. We can still—”

Mace Boy pivoted and smashed the poor guy’s helm, not seeming to care as he opened himself to Rain’s finishing blow.

“You—”

“Sorry, man, we’re done. I gotta get points for my team. No hard feelings, yeah?”

From how Spear Boy glowered even as they collapsed into the mud, there *would* be hard feelings.

Hmm, I feel a bit bad. Poor guy.

Kai offered a sympathetic look.

Left alone, the last swordsman misstepped and fell to Rowan, leaving a field of groaning students. Altogether, the battle had lasted less than a minute from their arrival—still enough to leave his head throbbing with warning.

Kai released Split Mind before the pain worsened and massaged his eyes. Casting spells, while augmenting his body and blade with elemental mana still took a toll. And the test wasn't over yet.

"Questions later," Flynn called. "Thirty seconds to *sweep* the field, then we need to reposition."

With an exchange of glances, they set about camouflaging the most obvious signs of their passage. The elemental spells had torn through the clearing, leaving little to hide. They smoothed over the flattened patches from Rain's Gravity Magic, concealed the branching burns from Flynn's Lightning, and broke up the lush growth where Kai cast Nature spells.

Good enough.

The defeated students remained on the frozen mud and scorched grass. The wards stiffened their limbs and blocked their mana, though they could still move with enough effort. The red web showed they'd taken lethal damage, not that the protections were close to failing.

None of them looked pleased. From their lingering glares, the wards must have let through a portion of the attacks as distributed kinetic force. Test rules demanded they stay downed until the instructors came to lead them out of the Verdant Grounds, but they best avoided discussing sensitive topics.

Regardless of rules, they might still snitch to another passing team. Even if Professor Beltram later buried them in demerits, the damage would be done.

No point worrying about what we can't control.

Kai cast his senses through the surrounding woods. The commission would likely attract more teams soon.

"Time up!" Flynn called. "Rowan, Elusive Otter maneuver. North-west."

"Right away." She took the lead, circling a burning bramble towards the woods. Once they had enough dense brush between them and the clearing, they turned to head north-east.

If any student had a large mouth, they could at least minimize the damage.

Taking the backguard, Kai used Nature Magic to cover their trail. Stomped plants perked back up, branches realigned, and grass crept over their footprints. He continued channeling for some distance away. If anyone followed them this far, their tracking skills were better than what he could hide.

The fight replayed in his head as they wound a path through the verdant woods, passing a beast's den. Rain had the least experience trekking, but his attributes more than made up for any awkwardness with his legs.

A nice test run.

Both Water Magic and Mana Analyst reached level 50 in the past week, and for both, he'd stayed the course. Unlike his supporting skills, those two made up his foundation. Barring something truly exceptional, any specialization that limited the breadth of his abilities wasn't worth it.

At Yellow, even the baseline choice provided a significant boost. Mana Analyst was the unsung hero that helped him filter and isolate key details among the flood of sensory information. Without it, his Mind would hit its limits long before his range.

"Okay, this should be far enough." Flynn stopped in a dense copse of spruces. "Three minutes to catch your breath and fill us in. Then we move again. With that, the Green and Blue teams are out. How did it go on your end?"

"We also ran into the White Team," Rowan wryly recounted their encounter and ambush before they joined the melee.

"That was risky, but well executed." Flynn frowned. "Are you sure no one saw you?"

"Pretty sure," Kai said. "More than from the risk of the last battle." He arched his eyebrow, giving him a look. "Speaking of which, weren't we supposed to keep a low profile until we regrouped?"

"Yeah, well..." Flynn rubbed his neck, having the decency to look sheepish. "There were some unexpected developments. We had to improvise."

Rain glanced up from wiping his trident. "We overheard the group discussing recruiting more teams to eliminate us."

"Yeah," Flynn nodded. "We estimated the risk of attacking them lower than leaving them alone. We managed to eliminate four in the opening salvo, but they had skills we didn't anticipate. It would have been a bit annoying if you didn't arrive when you did."

Okay, I would have probably done the same.

Kai broke his judging gaze. "That's what the team's for, right? Glad it turned out fine."

"More than fine," Flynn smirked. "We're ahead of schedule. But once we start cutting teams, we can't slow. We're already in phase two. Time to keep hunting."

"Uh." Rain raised a hand, catching their attention, peering past the spruces. "I think I got them."

"Great! All here then." Flynn extended his arm palm down. "Everyone's ready?"

"Do we have to?" Rowan sighed. "It's embarrassing."

"Team morale is as important as battle strategy."

"C'mon, it's fun." Rain joined in, dragging in Kai too before he could slip away.

"Okay, minions. On three!"

With another mighty whoop, the team set off from their hiding.

Seconds later, Kai sensed their target where Rain had pointed. He was too far to make out details, except the most important one.

"They're alone." Flynn crouched, weaving a cloak of Shadow. "Probably the Indigo team."

Rain moved ahead to intercept them, as Kai circled to cut off their retreat. They could let none escape.

"...say we should have checked out that fight. Or at least scouted."

Another voice groaned. "It was too risky."

"What if they take all the points?"

"We'll last longer..."

Uh, we should have agreed on which signal to use.

Kai stalked behind them, heeding the whispers to toe the line just before he'd been spotted.

A gurgling crash broke the forest's hush as the Indigo Team approached a creek crossing. Water surged, coiling around a familiar figure. Rain slammed into the frontline, throwing back a shield fighter. His trident flashed, striking a backline archer before snapping back to his waiting hand.

Guess that works too.

Shields snapped up, and panicked skills flared, but Rain was already upon them. His trident flowed in relentless arcs, each strike backed by a crushing current that battered guards aside and drove them into disarray. No tricks or traps, only overwhelming force.

Glad he's on my side.

Blade low, Kai charged from the rear before they could reorganize. Vines lashed from the underbrush, snaring ankles as the ground turned slick with mud. His blade flashed, driving into a student as undergrowth locked their footing.

One mage down.

A flick of his will sent jagged icicles through their backline. Another fell. Panicked shouts thwarted any chance of a defense. Roots twisted to trip a girl who tried to flee, leaving her open to a swift thrust, augmented with Water mana.

With three students already down, the fight was as good as over. Flynn picked off the last mage in the mayhem, while Rowan chased a runner.

In less than thirty breaths, only the four of them remained standing. Kai spun in place, his heart still drumming as if expecting more enemies.

Rejoining them, Rowan blinked at the defeated teams with a hint of disbelief, Flynn checked their map, and Rain muttered about points.

"Okay, good work, everyone." Flynn tucked away the chart. "Another one down. Let's save the celebrations. We have more to do."

Kai had to prod Rowan to move as she stared, a little dazed.

They left the group of glaring students. As their wise team captain said, once they started hunting, the safest plan for them was to keep moving.

Trees and shrubs rushed past them. Prioritizing speed over stealth, it took them about ten minutes to spot their next target. Rather than hiding, the Yellow team raised stone walls around a craggy outcrop and dug in their position. They were probably aiming for the points for holding out until the timer ran down. Not a terrible strategy.

Pity we tested together.

Their fortifications were offset by turning themselves into a static target. Perhaps with more mages, it would have worked.

Connecting with the woods, Kai found ample plant life to turn their fort into a death trap, while Rain gleefully played the hammer.

"Another one down..." Rowan muttered, staring at the destruction.

Given their smaller team, most tests forced them to split up and ration their resources for optimal results. In a direct confrontation from ambush, the battles felt almost unfair.

“How many points are we at?” Rain cupped a hand over his eyes to squint at the woods.
“Think we can get to a hundred with the bonus objectives?”

“Eh, probably. But we shouldn’t discuss it in front of them.” Flynn threw the fallen Yellow team an apologetic look. They didn’t seem to appreciate it.

They moved off as the enemy team captain began snarling.

With four teams fully eliminated and one crippled—not counting any infighting without them—they could afford a breather, trekking with more confidence.

They took out the Brown team twenty minutes later, then the challenge became finding more targets. It turned into a slow cleanup. Still, that meant their strategy had already won. There weren’t enough teams left to overwhelm them.

“Depths, we won’t get enough points if they keep fleeing.” Rain sulked.

Really can’t imagine why they keep running.

Kai patted his shoulder. “C’m on, we still got time.”

Hey, bud. You still around...? Uhm, yeah. That looks like an amazing sunny spot to nap, but maybe...

A measured combination of bribes and flattery later, Hobbes lowered himself to offer his scouting services, mostly because he refused to get associated with a losing team.

Kai might have swept over a few details, beside it being a battle royale to the last standing

Of course, the more points the better. I’ll get Flynn and Alden to give you all the belly rubs you want if we finish quick.

“Uhm, let’s try this way.” Kai pointed at a patch of aquamarine bushes dotted with white flowers.

“You sure?”

“Yup. I’ve got a hunch. Let’s get a hundred points!”

It truly was an unfair test.