

Chapter 375 - Beatdown

“Salute!” Professor Valdibal bellowed. His stern aura set the ranks of spectating students in an exemplary formation before he returned his attention to the arena.

Kai also straightened his back, one arm loose at his side, and flicked the steel wand with a formal flourish. Chains of runes wove beneath their feet, the wards rearranging into a glowing boundary for the duel.

His opponent mimicked the greeting across the field.

Rather than scoff or sneer, Ambrose Willow returned the nod of greeting and intently studied him with pale green eyes. His pale face and delicate features stiffened into a mask of focus. He seemed a slightly bookish teen, as willowy as his name suggested, though not frail. His aura and mana thrummed with intent, a dozen small details no skill or attributes could define, marking him as an opponent to be wary of. He might be a sheltered patrician, but one who put in effort to match his status.

Looks like he didn't get tenth place for nothing. Peak of Yellow too...

“Ready!”

Kai raised his guard with a faint smile. Given his own abnormal Spirit, the disadvantage in attributes should be manageable even with his profession at a lower level.

It might even be fun.

“Start!”

A whisper. Roots burst from the grass, trying to impale and tangle his boots. Kai sidestepped them, twisting to avoid three spikes of granite heading for his chest and face. A volley of ice shards flew in response, but he wasn't the only one on the move.

Ambrose nimbly darted to the left, further than Water Magic could adjust the spells. A round disk of stone, formed from ground and dust, rose to intercept the remaining shot.

“Teverth ne karth...” The young man muttered quick words under his breath, treading the arena to keep the distance.

Kai didn't wait for him to finish chanting and cast a hail of ice. The projectiles shattered on a wedged sheet of rock. The few glancing shots that slipped past didn't seem strong enough to count as a hit.

Plant and Earth Magic, close to the first Yellow milestone.

Sharp whispers accompanied the last word of the chant. A stone spear with dark green veining shot toward him. Air split. Kai threw himself into a dodge, his muscles flushed with

mana. A sharp whistling whirred dangerously close. Wind brushed his face. Grass and dirt erupted at his back.

Would the pauldron wards protect him from that spell? Kai wasn't keen to try. A staggered wave of mana disrupted his attempts to cast Earth and Nature beneath his opponent.

How did he—

Ice and stone cut across the field in an exchange without respite. Kai tried to close the distance as Ambrose flung darts and dashed along the edges of the arena. The angles, numbers and speed of his Water spells were better, but still failed to find their mark.

His mana pressed through the sluggish resistance in the steel wand. He'd thought it might be a defective engraving, but had confirmed his opponent's was the same after the first duel. The inefficiency seemed an intentional part of the design. Each spell took just a bit more effort to form, and each flaw in its design would be exacerbated.

A training aid to punish sloppy casters.

Despite his slight figure, Ambrose moved with surprising athleticism for a mage student. No obvious opening. The mirrored frustration in the teen's stiffened jaw at the repeated misses was a meager consolation.

So damn slippery. Much better when I'm the only one doing it.

Kai bounced and tiptoed without ever getting a breather. Each step, the earth and grass at his feet conspired to trip, stab and snare him. His attempts to channel his own mana to disrupt those spells were wrenched away or pierced by roots of essence.

How does that work...

He couldn't help but have a begrudging admiration for his opponent.

Focused on dodging the attacks, he fell into the rhythm of the battle. Seconds ticked by with neither able to land a hit. Curiosity soon surpassed his annoyance, fascinated by how Ambrose wove his mana.

Is it a specialization? But it doesn't look like a skill-locked ability.

A tangle of bony brambles tore the ground from both sides, slithering to wrap him as two veined spears flew to impale his heart and stomach.

Shit!

Threads of mana burned through his muscles. His legs coiled as he leapt where a sheet of ice pushed down the thorns to open a path. An exemplary dodge with a retaliatory trio of icicles already in flight—all perfect till a blow slapped his forearm.

What—

The mana soaking the field, added to Raelion's wards, had camouflaged the stone dart shooting from the ground. The pauldron wards had weakened Hallowed Intuition's warning. A weak, slow attack, no more than a glancing blow even without protection, but a ripple in the enchantments told him it broke the threshold for a valid hit.

If he weren't busy evading the creeping vines chasing him, Kai would have buried his face in his hands, embarrassed and angry with himself.

That's what I get for relying too much on the whispers.

He doubted any first-year at Raelion could match even half of his fighting experience, but this wasn't a life and death battle. It was a magic spar, one patricians likely practiced since childhood.

Ten meters from him, Ambrose lightly heaved as he morphed his stone shield to push himself into an awkward dodge. No triumph or smugness, just focus.

Letting go of his irritation, Kai brought his attention to the duel. A smile tugged at his lips. This might actually be a worthwhile spar. His limbs pleasantly burned with effort and mana. Unless Ambrose had a high level acting skill, he was confident he'd win a contest of endurance, though it wasn't ideal.

How many other Trial rankers would Professor Valdibal call forth? His mana and stamina were good, but so were the highest-ranking students'. He could make a valid excuse to refuse, but he only had one chance at a first impression

Two hundred students were watching them, all with their own opinions of him. What would they say if he only narrowly beat tenth place? If he didn't shut down the rumors now, they might believe they could easily push him around.

Kai stomped on a frozen vine. Thorns shattered into splinters as he twisted below a stone spear and summoned vines of his own to intercept a sneaky dart for his back. Falling for a trick once was a misstep, twice was foolishness.

"...te kar'nath."

Fist-sized balls of compressed earth pelted his position. A revolving Water bubble slowed and altered their trajectory. Kai angled his body and easily stepped aside in a rain of dirt and grass.

Chanted spells were powerful, but predictable. The build-up of mana snapped into a rigid shape; the glowing lines arranged with swift and mechanical precision that looked almost—

Kai shoved surging thoughts into a mnemonic chain.

Later.

His mind split to evaluate and discard strategies as he continued to evade and weave ice and water.

Winning at range didn't look realistic, not quickly. If he had access to his profession, Water Cannon would shatter that stone bulwark. But then again, rules limited his opponent too. The scion of some ancient House wouldn't have a simple profession.

He trusted his casting speed and reflexes, but the more he closed the distance, the less time he had to react. The speed and power of the stone spears might be static, but Ambrose could adjust their trajectory until the last instant.

Overwhelming his foe with raw magic power also wasn't feasible without draining his reserves.

Should he force a charge with Hallowed Intuition?

The stern face of the butler scowled with disapproval.

Alright, alright. I'm not gonna become a one-trick pony and make it my go-to crutch.

What did that leave? He'd rather not publicly use Space Magic, especially a freeform cast. If he at least had a sword, he could have...

Mhmm... worth a shot. Can't improve without some calculated risk.

More ice cracked a wedged rock shield. Ambrose burned through his mana to defend. He didn't look tired, though his dodges were getting sloppier.

Wiping the sheen off his brow, Kai set his knees, ready to spring, eyes on the hovering stone concealing his opponent. A tendril of water held his wand. A gleaming stone half-moon flew at him at an angle. Throwing himself below the spell, his arms flexed, palms pressed on the wet grass to push him forward. Mana coiled through his body to fuel his momentum.

Two strides from his opponent, a wall of dark thorns burst from the ground, thick and writhing.

Kai dug in his heel to slow down. Water formed around his wand into a familiar shape. After an excruciating instant, his body sliding toward the brambles, Elemental Swordsman flowed into his blade.

Water sharpened to an edge by will and skill.

What else did you need to make a sword?

Blues motes wove along Body Augmentation as he swung. Thorns parted with surprising ease. Waves of Nature mana thrummed to disrupt the control of the lashing vines. More raw mana than finesse, but it bought the instant he needed.

Kai flowed into the opening, closing the distance. His blade crackled with mana and ice, breaking to part the stone defenses.

Pale green eyes opened in shock. An ice shard slipped through the crack in the defenses, shattering on his chest.

Ambrose fell backward, as much from surprise as strength.

Did they not teach you this?

“Five to two. Veernon wins,” Professor Valdibal announced with a slow drawl.

Huh... He got me with another one.

Kai stood back and rubbed his arm. He'd noticed the stone dart sneaking during his charge too late, angling to defend his heart.

A flick of his skill rid of shredded grass and dirt. Aside from some creases, his uniform would look good as new after a washing. He had no interest in finding out how much it'd cost to get a replacement,

Kai dismissed the notification in the corner of his eye and offered his hand to Ambrose. “Good match.”

A hard flicker twisted the teen's expression, though it eased too quickly to distinguish. “Good match.” Ambrose took his hand with a faint smile. “Looks like you didn't rank first by chance.” Dusting off his vest, he moved to the professor.

The students' files buzzed with loud whispers and scattered cheers for *him*.

“What kind of skill was that?”

“Did he just use a sword?”

“Blackwood didn't team with him by chance...”

“You really know him?”

“A proper mage wouldn't need a sword. Why doesn't he join the Martial brutes?”

“I want to learn how to do that too!”

The sounds of the crowd drowned out as Kai refocused on the professor.

Hmm... Guess it looked kinda impressive.

Kai looked on stoically—definitely not smug.

The sword strike had been a closer gamble than he'd let on. If he'd failed to apply Elemental Swordsman to his conjured blade, or to enhance his body, the backlash would have left him exposed. *Still*, no pain, no gain. He trusted he'd have held the advantage improvising in close quarters.

"An exemplary showing," Professor Valdibal said dryly. "Both of you." His aura blanketed the chattering class. "I hope you've paid attention. Let this be a reminder of the importance of movement and terrain management. You're not a rooted tree. Outside of a formation, you don't need to stay put to cast. Meeting an attack head-on when you could evade it only wastes mana..."

Ambrose rejoined the ranks as the balding man droned on. When Kai attempted to slip away, a pointed glance froze him in his tracks.

Dammit.

"I'll be expecting a three-page analysis of these spars before our next lesson." Valdibal took in the crowd's chagrin as the warmest applause. "Isadora Forlow, step forward."

Wait... Forlow like...?

A girl emerged from the crowd. Fiery copper hair cascaded down her back. Her features carried an unmistakable resemblance to the sneering boy from his first duel.

Oh... great.

Kai steeled his face, wishing the professor would stop lecturing and start the duel. Letting the adjutant instructor check his pauldron, he went to take the position. Lush grass had regrown over the torn field, only the lighter shade distinguishing the uneven patches.

Isadora joined him in seconds. Her eyelashes narrowed to give him a studious look. "Hi, I was hoping Professor Valdibal would call me."

"Hi..." Kai focused on the growing meadow. "So are you—"

"I am. Kastor is my twin brother. He's the *younger* one by sixteen minutes," she specified as if that held a lot of importance. She gracefully dipped her head. "Please, let me apologize for his behavior. I know he's an idiot. Mom never could tell him no. Please forgive his behavior."

"I... yes. Sure. Don't mention it."

"That's kind of you, thank you." A shining smile lit her face. "I always wanted to meet you since I saw the ranking. When Kas was called first, I wanted..."

Words and giggles flowed freely from her lips. Kai nodded along with monosyllabic answers until Professor Valdibal returned his attention to them.

“Can you continue, Mister Veernon? Do you need to refill your pool? Few first-years can properly manage their essence in a fight.”

“No, I’m good. Thank you, professor.” Kai smiled ruefully. Maybe if the man hadn’t asked *after* they’d already prepared and taken position.

“Get ready, then. Salute!”

“Let’s do our best,” Isadora whispered.

“Yes...”

“Start!”

Isadora's beaming smile didn't stop her from blasting him with a torrent of flames the instant the fight started. Waves of fire rolled over the field with roaring violence, crashing against the warded boundary.

Kai threw himself away from the conflagration. The arena was too small to avoid the searing heat entirely. The water shielding him hissed and evaporated even as he channeled more mana to reform it.

If he hadn't used the Wellspring Amulet to refill his reserves during the break, he might have been in serious trouble.

It was a solid strategy: overwhelm him with the opening. She had already seen his skills from the previous duels, while he would have just grown tired.

At least in theory. If I were a newbie and didn't have Hallowed Intuition.

Kai dashed along the outer edge of the arena and held his breath, wary of the scorching air. If she wanted to close it quickly, he was happy to oblige.

Mana flared through his veins. He reinforced his Water shield and dashed forward two strides before planting his foot and throwing his momentum sideways. A dense, man-height jet of flames flew where he had been standing—as expected.

The roaring fire had covered her chanting, but not her intention. Once she committed to the first attack, she'd used too much mana to let the duel drag on. Smart opponents could be more predictable than fools at times.

Now she must be running low on mana.

Still, caution never hurts. Kai circled his foe, closing in, attempting a few more feints to tease out her spells. Fireballs swarmed him, though Isadora couldn't sustain the barrage. The raging inferno across the field reduced to smoldering embers. Flames shrouded her figure as he methodically retaliated with ice and earth.

"I really thought I had you. You're good!" She called behind the dying fire.

Kai split his mind to cast a volley of nine staggered projectiles without stopping his dashes—he wouldn't be taking any chances.

No flames rose to protect her when a sudden blare lit her figure. She twisted with superhuman speed, somehow dodging all nine, but not the tenth that rose from the ground behind her.

A triumphant grin was about to curve his mouth when whispers rose without warning and fire scalded his back.

What—

"Five to five. Draw," Valdibal spoke before Kai could figure out what had happened. "Pay more attention, Veernon. All spells released before the end of a duel are valid. You struck first, but you can't say you truly won if you're also dead."

Still stunned, Kai sensed a scattering of fluttering motes, dissipating amidst the ardent Fire mana.

Huh... Did she cloak her spell with Shadow Magic?

"Gods, you still got me." Isadora pouted, though a smile soon beaming on her face again. "Blackwoods truly has a good eye to get you. Sneaky."

Her rambling endured throughout the crowd's cheers and Valdibal's lecturing until a new student was called.

"Sebastian Elcarin, step forward."

I might as well go all the way.

Kai set himself in the arena for the fifth time that day. None of the duels had been particularly intense, but he could begin to feel the exhaustion and compounding skill strain.

Despite finishing with a draw he hadn't known possible, the opinion of the spectating students appeared to lean in his favor. Even if he lost now, his reputation stood on solid ground. And he had no intention to lose.

"Try not to lose too quickly," Sebastian Elcarin huffed. He stood a head taller than him, with squared features and a stout physique. He looked down at him, taking position with a scoff. "I've got you figured out."

Okay...

"Salute."

He performed the formal steps with fresh familiarity.

If this guy is better than the last two, this might be a little challenging. He did rank third in the Trials.

Kai raised his guard, pushing through the veil of tiredness clouding his mind. He'd fought far more dangerous beasts in far worse conditions.

"Start."

Contrary to his worries, the duel proved remarkably easy.

Barreling through a hail of ice, Sebastian charged at him. Bright mana outlined his figure—likely an enhancing skill. In a heartbeat, he'd crossed the distance between them.

Is he actually...

Kai didn't know why the teen thought this would be a winning strategy.

With Hallowed Intuition and years of fighting experience, he prepared to flare Body Augmentation. Timing was everything. As the teen swung, Kai sidestepped the blow into his guard and punched. His fist connected with Sabastin's nose. Bone crunched. The buff boy went down to the ground and didn't get up.

Did I hit him too hard? No rules against punching, right? He started it.

"Five to nil..." Valdibal massaged his temples. "Veernon wins. Someone please accompany Mister Elcarin to the medical ward. He might have suffered a concussion. Veernon, you may rejoin your peers." His gaze smoothed with the shadow of approval. "Good showing."

"Thank you, professor." Kai scurried back to the safety of the crowd without needing to be told twice. The last duel had left more than just him speechless, though the students quickly recovered. He ignored glances, whispers and congratulatory slaps on the back.

Damm, my hand hurts. What was his face made of?

He pulled up his earlier notifications to distract himself. Several skill levels blinked in his vision, and—

I finally got the specialization!

Ding

Body Augmentation (lv50) →

As you reach the second milestone, you are presented with three choices to continue your journey.

- **Stay the Course** - You won't gain new significant benefits, but you'll deepen the insight into your path.

- ***Bloodrush*** - Let your mana flare brightly. Ignore pain, injuries and fatigue; force your body beyond its natural limits to keep fighting. Be warned: prolonged use may increase physical strain and cause lasting damage.
- ***Elemental Attunement*** - Enhance your physique through the elemental aspects. The boost scales with your proficiency and affinity. Be warned, poor channeling may result in severe backlash.