

Chapter 148: Matt's Motivations

Matt stared at Fio as she made another outrageous claim. Fighting the goddess and winning? Was that the surge of Qi he'd felt before?

He felt within himself, where that influx of power coursed through his newly advanced wellspring. It was like eating a natural treasure, and it had allowed him to easily reach the second step. That power increase, after his level-up, meant he was stronger than ever.

Slowly, Matt took a breath. Plum blossoms slowly wreathed around his hand. He put on a smile, looking at Fio. "Sounds wild. Good job," he said.

"Thanks," Fio replied. "Just glad Reya's safe."

"For sure," Matt said. He looked at his friend. Slowly, a second ticked by, then another.

"Well?" Emilia asked. "Are ya gonna grab your upgrades, princess?"

"Right!" Fio said, shaking her head as if clearing cobwebs from it. Then, she went to Hir's altar, placed a hand upon it and closed her eyes.

Matt waited another second for the next cataclysm, then closed his eyes. He took in another deep breath, smelling the plums, visualizing his inner world, his path. **Ascent of the Blossoming Firmament**. It used to be about groves and such, but then he stepped past those, and aimed higher.

It was funny, the way one's path through life shifted. Matt had once forsaken his father's dojo, and yet, here he was, wielding a sword. He hated knives and cooking, but he swung his blade. And every time he did, he felt that glint of potential. That innate talent.

He knew he had it for cooking, too. That he could have become the best chef in the world, maybe, but he hated the thought of that.

Sometimes, Matt wondered what it was like to just be mediocre.

Drawing in another breath, he ran a hand alongside the bark of a plum tree, taking a step along the stairs hewn into the solemn mountain he envisioned. The sky was pink, awash with falling petals. He stepped higher.

Truly, meeting Fio and Ann was the best thing to ever happen to him. Because, as much as he competed with them... he was also lazy about it. He could meditate more, advance faster if he tried. But he truly didn't want to. He didn't want to lost himself. He didn't want to be the best. All he wanted was to be good enough. And for these people, he was.

Again, he breathed the flowers. He looked at the pink sky, and let out a long, deep sigh. Sometimes, it all felt so heavy. The pressure to succeed. Sometimes, he wished he'd just die in the next battle he took part in, but then he drew his sword, and felt the change.

It was still him. It would always be him. There was no demon coming out to play - every single beautiful stroke of his weapon was his own, every single masterful cut driving him further to perfection was his. And yet, he hated that part of himself. He wished he were a bit worse at killing.

Another breath. Another sigh. Slowly, calmly, Matt took that fear of himself and let it go. He placed it on one of the falling leaves, and let it drift down onto the fog that covered the entire world below. All there was to do was ascend higher, he didn't need to look back. Down low was a place for him to leave the worries and creeping fears that he hated himself for.

Slowly, gently, Matt took another step. And opened up the status sheet granted to him by the Gift.

[Name: Matthew Myong

Class: Blossom Swordmaster (26)

- Techniques
 - Sword Techniques
 - Sword Technique - Fundamentals (Ascended)
 - Scattered Sword (Inevitability)
 - World Rend (High)
 - Edge of Infinity (Basic)
 - Qi Techniques
 - General
 - Aura Sense (High) (Perceive your surroundings by being in touch with the energies suffusing them)
 - Qi Segmentation (High) (Split your strength into parts, imbuing each with a fragment of will)
 - Plum Blossoms

- Whirlwind Step (Great) (Shape the storm to support your feet. Walk where you will it.)
 - Sword Dominion (Great) (Your Qi infuses your weapon perfectly. It is an extension of your tranquil storm.)
 - Disparate Manifestation (High) (Wherever your storm reaches, so does your weapon, and so do you.)
 - Fury (Basic) (You know anger. Allow it to fuel you.)
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Greater (Intermediate)
 - Agility: Novaic (Lesser)
 - Endurance: Greater (Basic)
 - Resilience: Greater (Basic)
 - Manipulation: Novaic (Intermediate)
 - Capacity: Novaic (Basic)
 - Absorption: Greater (Greater)
 - Qi
 - Plum Blossoms
 - Purity (Superior)
 - Realm (Maelstrom)
 - Stage (2nd Step)
 - Path (Ascent of the Blossoming Firmament)
- Disposition
 - Covenant
 - Protection (You have found your haven. Those in it are precious. Those who threaten it shall die.)
 - Temperament
 - Remembrance (You hold onto kindnesses, and onto grudges.)
 - Vanity (You strive to have your excellence acknowledged, to be appreciated. But not too much.)
 - Easygoing (Forgive others quickly, when in your favour. Find levity in small things.)
 - Brittle Steel (Hard yet tense. You endure much, but when broken, you shatter.)
 - Battleborne (Lose yourself in the bloodlust. There is calm to be found in war.)
 - Talent

- Prodigy (Learn a thousand things when taught one. Your talent is unmatched in the worlds.)
- Sword God [Evolved from Sword Saint] (Your blade may split the skies. Swinging it is more natural than breathing.)
- Furious Fighter (When steel clashes with steel, the world clears. Carve your existence out from another's corpse.)
- Perfect Perception (See a move once, and replicate it easily.)
- Harmony (Your body moves as your mind wills it.)
- Muscle Memory (Each movement is carved into your body, and perfected in moments.)
- Stormbringer (The wind loves you. It follows in your wake easily.)
- Peerless Perfection (Your grace is unmatched. At any stage, your abilities are stronger than those of anyone at the same stage.)
- Blossom Destiny (No path could be better for you. Stride forward, advance with ease.)

Current Status: Tense]

The words of the Gift rallied in front of his inner eye, and he looked at the list of his talents. No new ones, this time. Occasionally, they'd pop up, made easier by [Prodigy]. One of them had evolved. [Sword God], now.

He supposed that was suitable for his swordsmanship ascending. That probably meant he was as good at swinging a sword as a weak god of swordsmanship might be. He didn't have their raw capacity for Qi, of course, but that would come with time. The additional levels went a long way in allowing that.

Slowly, Matt breathed in. Then out again. He let the world pass him by, adjusting to how his body had changed. To how the storm in him shifted. So tranquil and yet so violent.

He thought back to the moment when he had ascended his swordsmanship.

It was during the battle with Black Swan. She had been on the third step of the Maelstrom realm, and yet, he beat her. And he beat her... before advancing.

When he thought back, the memories were in the stark clarity of battle. Everything but his sword lost its meaning, everything but the flow of the fight forgotten. And yet, when it came to war, to butchering his opponents, he remembered every bit of it.

Each illusion he'd carved through, each bit of flesh he'd mangled. And of course, the moment he won. When the lady Swan thought her poisons had finally taken him, when the divine purity of his Qi roared through his veins, when he swung his sword once and it was more than inevitable.

A single strike of his had advanced his fundamentals, triggered [Scattered Sword] and [World Rend] and [Edge of Infinity] all at once. A thousand lines had appeared, carving up the pocket dimension, and every single illusion in the sky had been bisected at once.

As had the real Black Swan.

The cut was hair thin, her body fitting together like puzzle pieces. A heartbeat passed after her death and his storm had torn her body to shreds. A tattered corpse. He'd carved his life out of her.

And then, the dregs of her Qi were drawn into his storm, into his wellspring in a tornado of purification, and he'd advanced. Through murdering another. Again.

He breathed, and meditated. He let the hatred for himself go. He'd protected Fio and Ann. His haven was threatened, and he killed, that was all. Whether that made him good or bad didn't matter, it simply mattered that his friends were safe. If they needed him to... he'd fight the gods. Just like Fio had.

The thought made him smile. She'd outdone him again. He'd need to chase after her to catch up. For bragging rights, and to see her annoyed expression. That'd be fun.

A tap on his shoulder shook him out of his meditation. He opened his eyes. The others were talking, Reya signing at Liam excitedly, and him translating for Emilia while Eric stood, relieved. Olivia was with Iryel and Chris, watching Fio go through the process of levelling. She was taking a bit, as she usually did.

Instead, in front of him, was Rae.

The old man who'd saved Fio. The old man who'd beat the hell out of her in the name of training. The old man who'd made her cry and then stomped away in fury and disappointment.

Matt looked at him. He'd *not* forgiven Rae. "What is it?" he asked.

Fio's teacher looked at him for a long moment. His eyes were unreadable, his face set in a tight, aloof blankness. "Would you walk with me?" he asked.

“Why?” Matt tilted his head, frown deepening.

Rae slowly nodded. “Because I wish to talk.”

“We have nothing to talk about.”

The old man paused for a moment, then ran a hand through his hair. “I think we both have plenty to talk about.”

Matt felt the anger bubble up. “Oh really? And what would that be, huh?” It took him quite a bit of effort to not insult the old man.

Sighing again, Rae leaned forward. “I want to apologize,” he said. “Properly. Please.”

Almost on reflex, Matt wanted to spit venom in the old man’s face. But, looking at Fio, he sighed. She’d never say it, but she wanted him to make peace with Rae. She’d wanted him to do so for a while.

Did people ever change? Matt knew they could, hypothetically, but it had been very clearly shown to him that it was almost impossible for most. People didn’t like seeing their flaws, didn’t like changing. They were complacent - same as him - and so he was slow to forgive when people slighted his friends.

Slowly, Matt forced himself to nod. “Sure,” he said, though the word came out tense and through gritted teeth. He expected nothing. Less than nothing. If anything, he expected Rae to fuck this up, royally.

Instead, the old man simply nodded, then turned around, and walked out of the temple. “We will be back soon, he said just loud enough for the others to hear. And then, Matt followed him out. He felt this would go poorly, and yet, he decided to see how it went, once again. Because his friend wanted him to.