

## Chapter 369 - Cashing In

Golden lines and spiraling diagrams glimmered on the obsidian floor. The silver needle stabbed above his heart. Kai watched the liquid stardust flow into his veins. A cool tingle spread through his body with no pain or discomfort.

With a perfunctory bow, the attendant retreated to her station outside the vaulted chamber, her eyes trained on the crystal lab controlling the arrays. The quiet tapping of her nails was audible through the glass door left ajar.

Circulating his mana following the instructions, he had plenty of space to analyze the formation. How had they processed the Parallax Eye crystal into a potion? What about the enchantment circle?

The etched grooves thrummed beneath his bare feet. Sweltering heat and cold shivers rippled through him. He wore undyed linen clothes reminiscent of hospital apparel. Metal, artifacts, and enchanted fabric might interfere with the ritual, causing an inverted chain rupture. Whatever that was, the mana theory was years ahead of his studies.

*Alchemy, enchanting and a ritual just for an affinity enhancement.*

It seemed excessive, though the treatment came with the Trial reward, so he couldn't complain. Had he wasted the treasure from the Sanctuary with his rough preparation? They had helped him survive. From the courses he'd passed, it felt more like the academy was going overboard.

*They must be deep into optimizing. Even rounding errors make a difference with thousands of students. And the Parallax Eye didn't look like the easiest affinity to use.*

Shivers ebbed over the minutes, leaving Kai sweaty and lightheaded. His channels shimmered with iridescent speckles when the runic circle finally dimmed.

*Guess that's it? How many points did I get?*

He waited for the attendant's signal to step off. His clothes and spatial ring lay neatly on the steel table where he'd left them—always within sight. He wore his artifact first. Space motes rushed to his fingertips. Were they more responsive? He itched to test a spatial cantrip, but common sense held his hand.

The attendant circled the golden scripts with a double-prodded wand and the glowing crystal matrix. "The absorption ritual was successful. All parameters appear in the normal range. Truly an exquisite treasure. Hmm... I've never seen these value spikes..." Her words seemed vaguely aimed at him, though her gaze never left the arrays.

Putting on his clothes over the linens, Kai was tying his boots when she realized and jolted toward him.

“My apologies, Mister Veernon.” She bowed deeply, the crystal matrix on her knees, her fingers lightly tapping. It seemed to take physical effort for her to wrench her attention away. “The Trails left us short-staffed. I’m at your full disposal. Do not exert yourself. The likelihood of side effects has diminished since the dean updated the procedure, but the Parallax Eye is an exotic treasure. You may experience dizziness, phantom itching, nausea, balance distortion, essence displacement, paranoid delusions and loose bowels.”

*...did no one think of warning me before we started?*

Kai scanned his channels, flexed his neck and balanced himself on his feet. Everything seemed fine. His shoulder blade was itching, though that was probably his own suggestion. “I’m feeling fine. May I go?” He tried walking around her.

“Please, the appearance of side effects is highly variable between individuals. We lack sufficient experimen—*tal data* to draw definite conclusions. Naturally, the academy covers the costs for your recovery.” Her eyes sharpened with interest. “Are you experiencing no side effects at all, Mister Veernon? Do you have unreported experiences with Space mana? I do not recall your affinity results...”

“I’m...” Kai rubbed his temples with a feigned wince. “I have a slight headache. And nausea. I’ll rest at my dorm.”

“Could you describe the symptoms and grade them on a scale from one to ten?”

*Ugh...*

It took half an hour to extricate himself from the attendant, signing a triple-copy waiver to absolve the academy’s responsibility. Then, another round of persuasion let him access the measuring chamber *alone*.

Rain’s black pearl doubled the privacy wards.

The room held a single table, draped in red velvet down to its carved legs. Atop it rested a contraption of interlocking golden disks and elemental gems—moonstones, diamonds, topaz, bloodstones, garnets, emeralds, and dozens more. The array looked more like an extravagant vanity project than a functional artifact, though the thousands of etched runes left no doubt about its craftsmanship.

*Explains the guards at the door. I could buy half the archipelago with this glittering monstrosity.*

Kai spent minutes studying the enchantments and seconds figuring out how to operate the reading. Gaudy or not, it was surprisingly intuitive. Raelion always had students who preferred to keep their affinities private. He set his hand on the edge: the disks interlocked with soft clicks as he channeled his Space mana.

*Three quarters. Five and six... looks like my Luck paid rent.*

He ran the math again. No mistakes.

### **Space Affinity 64 > 67**

Each point higher grew drastically harder and more powerful. So close to the upper limits of the Parallax Eye, he should have been lucky to gain half that.

*Is it just my Favor helping, or is there more? My spatial boon? Or Hobbes?*

Kai carefully hid his smile before slipping out the door, coming face to face with the attendant's bright smile.

*Damn persistent.*

"Mister Veernon. I've analyzed the ritual readings. If I could just—"

"Sorry. I'm late for an appointment." He feigned a step right before twisting to move past her on the left. Seeing her not try to tackle him convinced him she truly didn't know his results.

*"Please, Mister Veernon."*

*Hmm... Was hearing loss one of the side effects? Maybe mental confusion? Anyway, later!*

He didn't slow till the shouts let up. His stomach churned—walking at a runner's pace demanded more effort than an all-out sprint.

Thousands of Raelion's unseen clerks filled the lower levels of the Aula Ordinis, a hive of paperwork and dusty archives. Not a speck of burgundy first-years anywhere.

*And I'm here alone...*

Kai resisted the temptation of going on unauthorized wandering. Did looking for the bathroom actually work as an excuse? Veiling his appearance, he emerged in the atrium. A crisp early-spring gust buffeted him in from the courtyard outside. No students spared him a glance. The hunt for the first rank had died down over the last two days, though the busybodies still searching were the most troublesome.

He reapplied the weave of Shadow and strolled toward his dorm.

*And that's done too.*

Collecting the Trials' rewards had taken an exhausting amount of creative subterfuge, but he was satisfied with his choice. The Wellspring Amulet rested cold against his chest—a clear aetherstone set in a lattice of chromium and runes.

He still didn't fully understand how it could hold his entire mana pool without exploding, but it did. A rechargeable mana bank, capable of storing up to *five* distinct elements. Getting that last feature approved had pushed the limits of a first-year custom reward.

External elemental reserves weren't unusual among Raelion's elites. Most functioned like pocket nodes of ambient essence; very few could store mana attuned to their owner. It meant he had to personally refill the Wellspring Amulet, in return for making the mana far easier and faster to absorb. Enough to matter in a fight. It was as close as one got to artificially expanding their reserves, besides offering a stockpile if he found himself in a zone absent one of his elements—as the underground had taught him.

*Definitely the best prize. I should ask Rain and Alden what they picked...*

Kai stifled a yawn. The ritual might have actually had a toll; or dealing with unreasonable, snooping people; or madly practicing to properly use Elemental Swordsman; or the two nights reading dry tomes and agonizing over two specializations.

*Could be any of them, really.*

The old oak looming over his dorm had begun to bud. He checked for watchers before crossing the ornamental shrubs to climb the façade. The creeping ivy made for easy handholds—far better than squeezing past the cadre of first-years blockading the atrium.

*I swear I'll find the bastard who spread the rumor that I live here...*

At least they didn't know the exact room. Spirits willing, they'd get bored once they found nothing. Elijah's cloaking tricks gave him hope he could outlast the ordeal.

*How long can a teenager's attention span last? Unless some rich brat is paying them... Truly, nobody can mind their business.*

He pulled himself up onto the balcony ledge and *shifted* inside the glass doors. The alarm wards didn't trigger as long as he held the room token.

*Is it my impression or did the blink feel smoother?*

All his roommates were out enjoying the mid-term break. Kai dragged himself toward his room with just enough strength to shrug off his coat before collapsing face-first into the pillow.

*Just two minutes. Five tops!*

"You shouldn't neglect your rest."

Kai jolted, half-falling off his bed. A dagger appeared in one hand, a Water Cannon primed in the other.

"Passable reaction," Elijah said, flipping through his textbooks, sitting at the cluttered desk.

*When did knocking go out of fashion? And why did I ever tell him to 'make himself at home'?*

Kai released his mana and rubbed his shoulder where he'd hit the floor. "How did you get in? The door and window were locked. Wait... were you already waiting here?"

Elijah snapped the book shut with a scoff and smirked. "Next time, try checking the room before leaving yourself open to an ambush."

*I'm in a heavily warded building. What paranoid maniac would check their own damn bedroom? Hmm...*

Half a dozen common-sense objections came to mind. Kai pushed them all down, made wiser by the last days of lessons. "Yes, master." A shadow pat brushed his head—gone without proof.

"Good boy," Elijah said. "Have you decided on your skills? Both of them."

*Okay, traight to business.*

"I have." With two skills pending specializations, he'd have been a fool not to ask the butler. Just as he'd been a fool to expect a straight answer.

"I'm eager to hear your reasoning." Elijah leaned back in the chair, legs stretched before him. "There are no wrong answers."

Kai pulled out his notes—he'd come prepared.

"*Except* reading from a list." The butler sighed. A cloaked spell made the papers flutter toward his waiting hands. Skimming through the pages, he clicked his tongue and crumpled them with a shake. "Kai, if I wanted to know the opinion of some dead author, I would have read their skill compendiums at the library. Tell me what *you* think."

*My notes...*

He tore his gaze from the crushed hours of effort. "Isn't studying synergistic skill paths the best way to make an informed decision?" Honestly, he was still a little peeved no one at the estate had ever mentioned skill theory. He could imagine several reasons why, but *still*.

"And what happens when the paths you're relying on run out?" Elijah asked, trimming his perfect nails with a dagger.

"Uhm, what do you mean exactly?"

"The further you climb, the more scarce and heavily guarded the information becomes. This academy's library only shares compendiums at Yellow. If you choose a specialization for the advancement it opens down the line, how do you know that same choice doesn't lead you to

a dead end one step beyond the charted path? Unless you follow a few specific paths, you won't find any reliable knowledge past Green in the Republic."

*Okay, I see your point.*

"Isn't that too far away to worry about now?"

"It is. And also, isn't the whole point of paths to plan ahead? Unless..." Elijah tilted his head. "You'll be satisfied once you reach Green?"

"No," Kai snapped, fully aware he was being baited. Any professor at Raelion would gnash their teeth if they heard him. "Why would anyone choose to stop, really?"

"Often, a poor foundation built on poor choices. That and starting a life. Every master hopes to see their students surpass them." Elijah gave him a vexing smile. "You'll likely fall short, but that's no reason not to at least try."

*Just wait, old man.*

Kai snorted, refusing to take another hook. "If I can't learn a skill path in the Republic, I'll just look elsewhere."

"You could indeed travel the continent for answers. Some do. Though you'll find few places share knowledge as freely as this academy, and *much* fewer welcome outsiders. Can you picture asking a foreign elite, likely from a different race, for their most guarded secrets? How do you think that ends up?"

"Hmm... probably poorly?"

"If you like misguided euphemisms, then yes. Among those who survive, nearly all have to sell themselves or swear oaths of service. The few exceptions who get away often benefit their descendants more than themselves." Elijah steepled his fingers. "How can you know the knowledge you bleed for will fit you without seeing it? Skill paths are a priceless aid, but they're just that: an *aid*. They can't become your entire compass.

"Despite the labor of millennia, new combinations, synergies, and exceptions are discovered every year, even at Yellow. If inheritances to Violet actually exist, no human has ever touched them. Compendiums can raise the overall level, but no one ever excels by threading someone else's steps." His gaze sharpened. "Only you can discover your ideal path."

"I think... I understand." Kai nodded slowly. All the lectures had made him treat his status too much like an equation. "If you're capable, skill paths are more like suggestions?"

"Close enough," Elijah grinned thinly. "To travel the long distance, you must distinguish when to follow advice and when to carve your own path. Learn all you can, but make sure it's your choice. Better to make your mistakes early, when they're still fixable." He folded his arms. "Now. Explain to me your reasoning again."

“Yes, master.”

### **Shadow Magic (lv75) →**

**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.
- **Domain of Shadows** - Shape the shadows near you. Improve your control, resilience, and responsiveness when casting spells in your immediate range.
- **Shadow Weaver** - Master the subtle art of concealment, weaving shadow into seamless veils that blur the line between what is seen and unseen.
- **Cutting Shadows** - Grant the ephemeral form. Mold shadows into edges and cut down your foes.

Looking at the scroll window, Kai's thoughts slid into order.

Stay the Course failed by virtue of having more diverse options. As Virya taught him, there was such a thing as spreading yourself too thin and mastering nothing. Five major affinities already gave him plenty of versatility. He could afford to use his elements for what it did best and still cover all his needs.

Domain of Shadows tempted him. He rarely projected his spells beyond his own body, though that was more lack of skill than of potential. The butler had shown him a myriad of applications. It was the most powerful specialization and also the most limiting.

Cutting Shadows was undeniably the coolest option. He'd likely unlocked it by copying Elijah's Wraith's Edge. But, despite how the butler acted, cool didn't mean useful. He didn't need another suboptimal offensive element. Water already filled that niche better, and he could always learn to shape Shadows without sacrificing a specialization—it would just be much harder.

Which left Shadow Weaver. Cloaking was the aspect he relied the most upon, and the last days had shown he'd just scratched the surface.

“And that is all,” Kai said. He dried his palms on his blanket, waiting for the verdict.

Elijah's face betrayed nothing except his infuriating smirk. “I told you there are no wrong choices.”

“So it's a good choice?”

“It is not wrong.” The butler enjoyed letting the silence stretch for over a minute before chuckling. “If it aligns with what you want from Shadow Magic, it's the right one.”

*Thanks.*

**\*Ding\***

**You chose to follow the path of a Shadow Weaver. Congratulations, Shadow Magic (lv75) can now reach lv100.**

"It's done." Kai relaxed and threw a look of challenge. He almost expected Elijah to begin listing why he'd made a poor choice, but the man only smiled.

"I thought I'd die of old age before you made up your mind." He rapped his knuckles on the chair seat. "What are you waiting for? You have one more to go. Have you discussed it with your ridiculous familiar?"

*How did you know?*

"I have."

"Good. Tell me your reasoning. I shouldn't need to remind you that this choice is even more important."

*Indeed, you don't. You're doing it on purpose.*

Kai huffed, taking the pillow to sit more comfortably, and began organizing his thoughts.

**Hobbes (lv50) →**

**As you reach the first milestone, you are presented with four choices to continue your journey.**

- **Stay the Course** - You won't gain new significant benefits, but continue to deepen your bond. Both you and Hobbes will benefit from your shared affinity as your understanding and connection grow.
- **Borrowed Power** - Claim the independence of your path. Though the resonance with your familiar may not deepen, you'll exert greater influence over the bond and draw power from your familiar and their path.
- **Entwined Fates** - Loosen your control and reach through your bond. Let your familiar's instincts and powers strengthen you as you do with them. Be warned, depending on your use and abuse, your familiar may influence you to different degrees. If your will falters and you fail to find balance, the bond may even sweep you away entirely.
- **Released Potential** - Yield command over the bond and let your familiar's instincts and path take the lead. One purpose often leads best in battle. Your bond may reach farther. Your personal benefits will lessen in favor of strengthening Hobbes' path and abilities.

Even without Elijah's teasing, the different wording already set the skill apart from any other.

*No need to doubt.*

Two options were easy to dismiss.

Borrowed Power would grant him an immediate active ability at a steep price. Their bond was the cornerstone of his familiar skill. Limiting it would inevitably undercut its growth potential too. The library confirmed it: a shallow, if dependable, specialization. A favorite among Tamers, juggling multiple beasts, aiming for quantity over depth.

He had found far less information on his particular flavor of bond. His familiar skill, apparently, sat at quite the far end of the spectrum. Most of the texts in the library focused on lopsided contracts, with heavy warnings against letting a beast draw strength from its master.

*What's the point of bonding with a familiar if you can't trust them?*

Released Potential was the second discard: the only option to tilt their bond, just toward Hobbes. Despite the purring manipulations, Kai knew better than to indulge His Royal Fluffiness' rise to tyranny. Best he kept the despotic fantasies as amusing idle wonderings.

That left two real contenders. The reworded Stay the Course sounded appealing in its simplicity. Slow and steady growth.

Then there was Entwined Fate—the only choice with an explicit warning. It sounded complex and confusing, and with uncapped potential.

"Are you certain?" Elijah's tone sounded oddly serious. "An equal bond is a double door. You gain as much as you give."

*Greater risks for greater rewards.*

"I'm sure," Kai nodded. He wasn't blind to the warning. If he wanted to gamble and experiment, better with a specialization than full advancement.

*Hey, bud. Wanna come here? We're in this together.*

Flashes of color, relaxing belly rubs, and a mouthwatering scent answered him. Flynn bought a new selection of salted fish treats and Hobbes had a clear hierarchy of importance.

*...alright. Suit yourself.*

**\*Ding\***

**You chose to follow the path of Entwined Fates.**

**\*Ding\***

**Selection rejected! Both parties must agree to proceed with a specialization. Please, reach an agreement and try again.**

*Huh?*

Kai blinked at the scroll window, too stunned to mask his reaction. Why had no book mentioned *this*?

“What is it— Kai...” Elijah dragged a hand through his hair. “Do you know what an equal bond entails? Your skills grow together, and your selections mirror each other. Didn’t you discuss it with him?”

“I did.” More or less. With some slight miscommunication. His flushing face threatened to betray him. “He’s just being fussy. Give me a second.”

*Hobbes! No, you’re not becoming my despotic overlord. C’mon, you said you liked this option. Just agree—*

Kai shoved down his blooming embarrassment and irritation, acutely aware of the butler’s judging gaze.

*Look, you know how helpless I am. And... yeah, that too. I get kidnapped quite often... You can see how I need your priceless instincts and guidance.*

**\*Ding\***

**You chose to follow the path of Entwined Fates. Congratulations, with Hobbes’ generous agreement, **Hobbes (lv50)** can now reach lv75.**

*Thank the Spirits.*

Kai let out a breath and resisted the urge to bury his face in his pillow. “It’s done. Maybe we can talk more later. I... have an appointment. Flynn and Valela wanted to meet today.”

“Naturally,” Elijah watched him flatly. A large box wrapped in a dark-blue covering appeared in his hand before he casually tossed it at him.

*What’s this for—*

Kai caught it, unprepared for the weight. He fell back on his bed with a groan.

“Did you think I’d forget if you didn’t mention it?” Elijah looked smug. “I’m not that cheap.”

“Uhm...”

The butler met his blank gaze. Seconds passed as the smirk morphed into a frown. He rubbed his eyes. “Your birthday, Kai. You are fifteen.”

*Oh, that. Was it today?*

“Thank you.” Kai grinned. In his defense, Mat had officially turned fifteen a few months ago, and he had never celebrated in the Sanctuary. Looking from the package to Elijah, he got a flicker of déjà vu to the last time the butler had given him a gift. “Are you leaving?”