

Chapter 387 - Team Spirit and Socializing

Rows of crystal lights lined the curving vault of the pavilion. Kai raised his sword to deflect as Rowan struck at his shoulder. She'd switched the rapier for a spear. The strength of the jab rang up his arms, the glimmering spearpoint swiftly retreating to maintain her flexibility and momentum.

At his back, four buckles of ice cracked against as many daggers. A whisper warned him instants before a fifth cloaked dart hit him. With a curse, he lunged forward. The dagger whistled at his back; Water mana threaded through his burning muscles. He twisted beneath a spear thrust and swung a rising arc to force Rowan back.

Already, another cloaked knife flew at his calf. Earth rose to protect him. The attack was just a distraction to let Flynn's veiled figure dash in and stab at his right.

When did he learn to cloak that well?

They'd cut off all his escapes, and he was too extended to dodge. Splitting his mind, Kai hurled a volley of frozen shards to break Flynn's charge, while blending Earth and Water to mess with Rowan's footing. A tapestry of muddy sludge and slick frozen dirt chased her blurring steps.

Caught her!

Instead of seeing her slip or retreat, her boots gripped the slippery surface as if it were solid ground. Was that a skill? A mana technique? An enchantment? No time to find out. The shaft of her spear spun to deflect his swing, her body poised, preparing to dart back in.

Behind him, Flynn somehow twisted or shattered all his projectiles—all except the cloaked shard that grazed his side.

"Rotten—"

I can use that trick too.

Kai gave a slight smile despite the precarious situation, the clamor of the arena forgotten in the background. The minor strike failed to net an elimination, but bought him time to fix his stance. A glimmer of steel and a whisper alerted him. He ducked beneath a spear jab.

Again, Rowan pulled back before he could retaliate. Her thin red braids whipped around her face, sharp features drawn in concentration. She dashed around him faster than his spells, using her superior speed and reach to safely harass him. Her spear danced in and out like a biting snake. No hasty strikes. The loss to Rain must have cut her deeply to make her so zealously patient.

So damn fast.

Kai adjusted his grip, pivoting on his heel, trying to keep both within his sight. A futile endeavor unless he put his back to the edge of the ring, which was probably what they wanted. Whispers tickled his mind. Steel and ice clashed. Both Flynn and Rowan circled him like wolves waiting for weakness, not letting him catch his breath.

I shouldn't have let them strategize.

He could hold on, but for how long?

Weaving elemental essence into his body and sword took too much focus. The strain of multitasking pulsed in his head. If he drew out the fight, he'd drain his reserves, while their reliance on physical attributes would sustain them.

This will need to be enough.

The ice shield hovering at his back shattered and reformed. Kai narrowly deflected the spearpoint flashing toward his thigh. Jaw clenched, Rowan pivoted the strike into a swipe at his ribs. The angle of the strike almost wrenched his sword from his hands.

Almost.

As she moved her weight on her back foot to retreat, Earth Magic hammered into the ground. Her uncanny ability to keep her footing failed when he wrenched a layer of dirt out from under her. Blue eyes widened in surprise as she tried to adjust. The butt of her spear struck the ground to push herself back and regain her balance.

Not so fast.

A freezing wave crackled over her boots. Another instant bought. A water curtain shielded his side, bursting to protect him from a bolt of Lightning. Boiling droplets hissed on his neck. Kai ignored them. Mana flared through his arms. With a smooth arc, he advanced and slashed her armored chest just as she freed herself.

A lethal strike.

One down.

Grinning, Kai spun to face his last opponent.

"How can you cast that fast without even watching?" Flynn huffed. The tips of his fingers smoked from his hasty spell. "Well, we probably can close it— Wait—"

Ignoring the attempts to stall, Kai pressed the attack. His swings cleaved the air. The ground churned to snag his opponent's feet. Frozen pebbles revolved around him, ready to strike.

Biting back a curse, Flynn raised a short sword to parry. Forced to dodge, bright mana gathered in his hands with a stagger. Despite his shorter weapon, his height gave him equal

reach. He fought with quick and slippery grace that he hadn't possessed before Raelion. Yet, it wasn't enough.

Free to dedicate his focus to a single foe, Kai harried him across the dueling ring. Mana augmented his flashing longsword. Ice shards cut at his openings from opposite angles, giving no ground to mount a defense or channel a dangerous spell. Cornered by the chained strikes, Flynn was forced to parry head-on with a grimace.

Two down.

A dull gleam coated his blade attack. Enhanced with Earth essence, Kai hammered at his friend's ribs, sending him sprawling out of the ring.

"Good... match." He breathed out, exhaling slowly to control his heaving and lowered his sword.

"Yeah. Ow." On the ground, Flynn massaged his side. "Was the last strike really necessary? You could have gone a little easier."

"You must have barely felt a sting with the arena's wards."

"Well... yes. But it still hurts my pride. Deeply!"

Kai rolled his eyes and offered him a hand up. "If you want to last longer, get better."

"Spoken like a true tyrant!" Flynn snorted but accepted his help. "Are you sure you don't want the team leader position?"

"Nope, all yours." He nodded at Rowan, who joined them, frowning at her spear. "I was losing my mind trying to keep track of you both. You improved a lot."

Flynn accepted the canteen Rain handed him with a thanks and chuckled. "What? Did you think you were the only one getting better? The martial course might not look as fancy, but that means we get even more competition."

"Yeah, of course I knew that." Kai casually looked away. He'd hoped to defeat them through skill rather than overwhelming them with magic. The class's goal was to familiarize with his team's abilities rather than to win in the most efficient and brutal way. Yet, it had been too dangerous to prolong the fight. Flynn needed a single opening to fry him. And Rowan moved too quickly, hitting with a deceptive amount of Strength.

"I should have stuck to the rapier." The young woman sighed, dusting off her shoulder.

"Nah, the spear was a good idea," Flynn gave her a thumbs up. "We'll need the flexibility when we're up against other teams."

"Yeah, you fought well together," Kai nodded at her somber face. The spar with Rain must have really shaken her confidence. He could empathize. "And you both basically ignored any attempt to control the terrain until I used a bucket of mana. You put me on the backfoot."

"That's one of the most classic mage tricks." Rowan shrugged.

"Yup, one of the first things they drilled us to counter. I still have the shouting ringing in my ear."

"Huh, actually that makes a lot of sense." Kai scratched his ear with his thumb, feeling silly. Perhaps, he should have spent longer considering what his friends learned.

Memo 14: Ask your friends about their classes. Two birds with one stone!

"Hey, look lively." Flynn clapped his back. "It's a classic because it's one of the most effective tricks. Few can counter it as well as Rowan."

"You all fought well. Gave me lots of ideas to test myself." Rain raised his gaze from the chubby squirrel he'd sketched in the dirt. Resting the trident on his shoulders, he hung his arms over it, dishing out compliments. "Your Earth Magic improved a lot too, Mat. Weaving spells and swords together isn't easy." He threw a look at the bustling arena and grinned. "I heard many students are also impressed."

Great.

Kai fought not to glower. After their flashy bout, the wily siren somehow managed to redirect all the attention to him. Even after the instructors had dispersed the gawkers, gazes continued to follow. It was plainly unfair.

Whatever.

Strangers' opinions could only bother him as much as he allowed. Alas, Shadow Magic was much less effective in deflecting the attention of people who were already staring at him.

"So, who's up next?" He looked at Flynn. "Does our glorious leader have suggestions?"

"In fact, I do! Glad you asked, minion. Dueling rings are limited. Let's not waste time. We should spar two-on-two, start working on our teamwork, then cycle the pairs. We'll add limitations to balance it out. You won't always have access to all your elements. Or the mana to cast them. Later, we can test formations." Without pauses, he continued presenting a plan for the rest of the class.

Did he come prepared?

Seeing Rain and Rowan's attentive faces, Kai swallowed his teasing. He teamed with Flynn as all four stepped into the ring, adding restrictions on skills, magic, and weapons. Despite not going all out again, a few gazes stubbornly persisted.

What do they want?

“Clear the ring and rest!” An instructor bellowed at them as another team took their place. With nearly four hundred students, they inevitably needed to share.

Passing around an icy canteen, Flynn puffed his chest and imitated Professor Beltram’s cadence. “Now that we have a better understanding of each other, we should discuss our skills. Specific details aren’t necessary but appreciated. I’ll go first. As you’ve probably guessed, Dexterity is my highest attribute, followed by Strength, Mind and Perception.”

Breaking the first hurdle, the conversation flowed smoothly around the circle before shifting to what they could improve.

Kai sat cross-legged. “We should set some code words to communicate when fighting other teams.”

“Good suggestions!” Flynn clapped his hands with a wry smile. “Want to use your fantasy language?”

“You created a language?” Rain perked up.

Rowan threw them an odd look.

“Something like that.” Kai pressed his lips and hung his heated face. “We can use English.”

A brief commotion interrupted them when a student was rushed to the Medical Ward. Rock spike, ice and clasts of fire roared through the arena. After sweating buckets in the warm-up, the mages seemed a little trigger-happy—at least those fast at casting.

The protection wards didn’t account for people lacking common sense or restraint. Kai shook his head when the umpteenth teenager was rushed out of the building. Not even dissuaded by the threat of demerits. Professor Beltram’s speeches already sounded like an inevitable prophecy.

Half an hour later, they stood back in the dueling ring, testing the rough formations and ideas they’d discussed. Thus, the lesson trickled by with sweat and bruises.

Up above, tall arches opened to a view of the darkening sky tinged with the oranges, reds and pinks of twilight. The bell would soon signal the end of Mixed Combat.

It has just been two hours... I'm dead.

Kai sank onto the red dirt floor. Leaning against the outer wall, a groan escaped him. The cool marble grooves pressed into his back. Too tired to grab one of the canteens, he dipped into his Wellspring Amulet and cast a stream of water directly into his mouth.

Conjured water tasted oddly bland to his high Perception. It lacked the subtle tang of minerals, though the icy relief down his parched throat more than made up for it.

“Convenient trick.” Rowan motioned at the spell, sitting beside him much more gracefully.

“Uh, thanks. It’s just a cantrip.” Kai angled himself to stand in her shadows. New murmurs must already be brewing.

Don’t look and ignore them.

Frankly, he was too exhausted to care. All his body, muscles and ligaments ached in protest. The pain would worsen before it got better. Still, he felt satisfied. A couple of his skills had gone up, and he made progress in many more.

Beside him, Rowan raised a canteen to her lips, trying to hide her peering. She looked about to speak, but desisted.

Have I got something on my face?

“You know some neat tricks too.” He filled the silence before it got too awkward. “You sparred well today.”

She smiled halfheartedly. “Thanks, but I’ve lost nearly every one-on-one round. I couldn’t even scratch Rain when he didn’t use magic.”

“Don’t get hung up on that. Logic has the annoying habit of avoiding Rain,” Kai said sympathetically. “You truly did well. I just had the advantage on a plain field. The ring gave you no way to avoid my spells, but you still made me sweat. I’ve never seen someone at Yellow move that fast.”

He’d never considered the potential of a purely physical path. Strength and Dexterity offered less flexibility than magic, but what did that matter if she moved faster than one could react? Any mage relying on chanting would be dead before they uttered their first verse. He would be put in a hard spot too without Hallowed Intuition.

“Thanks,” Rowan muttered. Her gaze turned away. “Guess there is a reason we’re a team of four. I must admit that after seeing you spar with a sword, I thought Lys was exaggerating how good you were at magic. I’ve never seen a student cast so fast, or accurately. The rumors about you held more truth than I gave them credit for.”

Huh?

“No, those are absolute nonsense!” Kai snapped. His fingers dug into the dirt.

“If you say so.” Rowan chuckled, turning to watch the last bouts. “I actually worried I’d fail this course when I found that Flynn had dragged me into a team of four. He swore we’d be with the strongest mages. And he didn’t lie there. But still... fighting two for one is not easy.” She snorted a laugh, shaking her head. “It sounds ridiculous now. I thought I could handle anything Raelion threw at me. But maybe not. Guess normal logic doesn’t apply to everyone.”

"Well, yeah... Rain is... *Rain*. Fighting against him can be maddening, and you can't still help but like him." He nodded, realizing she was watching him with a strange expression. "What?"

"Oh, nothing." Her canteen failed to hide her amusement. "Just... I wasn't only talking about Rain."

"Who? Me? I'm completely normal. He wiped the floor with me too."

"Hmm, wipe the floor must have a different meaning where you're from. Your first spar looked quite close if you hadn't stepped out of the ring."

"It *wasn't* close."

"If you say so, you must be right." She grinned. "Though the other students think differently from what I've heard."

Kai groaned and pressed his head against the wall.

Why only me?

At last, the bell brought a wave of sweet relief.

"Sorry, I gotta rush. Day's not over. I'll catch you up later." Bidding goodbye to his team, he aimed for the closest exit before the mass choked them. Professor Ermellie would yell him out of her class if he didn't clean up before his last block. The enchantments in his clothes didn't protect him from sweat and dirt.

Across the wide arching passages, the well-lit arena opened to the flowering gardens. Navigating through the stream of students, he almost caught a way out when a girl with fiery copper hair blocked his path.

Who... uhm, is everybody in this class?

He recognized her from Combat Magic.

"What a happy surprise! I didn't know we also shared this class." Isadora Forlow beamed brilliantly. "Sorry, I didn't want to bother you during the class. I just saw your fight earlier. To think I believed our last duel was close." She gave a wry laugh. "Seems I've still catch up to do. I'd love some tips on free casting. If you have time, of course. Maybe we could grab dinner after classes and meet to practice?"

"Uhm. Yeah, sure." Kai nodded distractedly. His path out was quickly disappearing in the sea of people, and he was trying to be more social.

"Great! We can discuss the details in our next class together."