

Chapter 386 - Easy Sparring

"I know. Many of you were looking forward to testing your team's mettle against your peers." Professor Beltram raised a large, scarred palm to forestall the murmurs rising from the arena.

"Sparring with your own companions isn't as exciting. You picked them because you already know what they can do. But there is knowing and *knowing*. Can you trust them to have your back? With every single member? When you're together in the trenches, a moment of hesitation can cost your life. Or, in a less drastic case, your graduation at Raelion."

He rubbed his bearded jaw. "You likely have at least one member you don't know as well. Many more if you were among the ones who failed to turn in a complete list before the deadline. Don't worry, every year someone gets left behind. I've already matched any individual and partial group into a complete team. As I'm speaking, the instructors are coming to inform you of your companions. You might not end up in the team you hoped for, but if you can also see this as an opportunity. Out there, you don't always get to choose who stands beside you when something needs to get done."

In position between Flynn and Rowan, Kai watched the instructors stride through the ranks and pull several youths aside. Dozens of students had failed their first assignments. Despite the speech, they hung their heads, dejected. The sneers that followed them didn't help.

"For everyone who filled a team, wait to celebrate." Professor Beltram's voice boomed across the arena. "Choice can be both a boon or the rope to hang yourself. The groups who had their pick are often also those with the most problems. While excellent teamwork will multiply each member's effectiveness, the inverse is also true. But let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"I could spend the next two hours telling you the pitfalls you'll fall into. Describe *how* and *why* you'll trip step by step. You'd nod and smile at me, then turn and still dive face-first into the holes I just pointed out. Perhaps a dozen of you might listen. Probably not. You'll sooner claim you can leap over the traps, fly above them, or that there is no hole at all and you walk on solid ground."

Kai nodded along with the speech. Looking at the other students, he could easily imagine the man would be right. Thankfully, he'd already learned at least some of those lessons.

"Keep your grins, while you can. My job is to point you in the right direction and ensure you don't get too hurt before you learn." Professor Beltram swept his stern eyes through the ranks and sighed heavily. "I see many of you think I'm not talking about you. That you are wiser. That you are the exception. I won't waste my breath trying to convince you now. Words tend to be more persuasive after you've cracked your skull a couple times." A wry smile touched his lips. "Who knows, maybe this is the year I'm proven wrong? Nothing would make me prouder."

His chuckles told them exactly how likely he considered that.

"But enough chatter! Today, we'll start building up your teamwork. Learning how to work in a group is the goal of this year's course. If you think you have that covered. Good for you. Take these principles and apply them to other situations. For everyone else, can anyone tell me the main requirement for effective cooperation?"

Several hands shot up.

"You there."

A girl in the first line stepped forward. "Celina Arequilla, professor," she enunciated in a clear voice. "You must know your companions' abilities and behavior in the field."

"Seems someone listened to my ramblings." Professor Beltram chuckled. "Indeed, knowledge of your teammates is fundamental. Sparring together is often the best way to improve your teamwork, but that doesn't explain the underlying reason."

A student from Martial Studies took word next. "Essemi Valra, sir." The young man rumbled. He stood at least a head above his companions. His low voice matched his stature. "The key requirement is strong leadership. A battalion is only as effective as its commander."

Professor Beltram cocked his head. "The larger the group, the more important the head becomes. That's very important, but not the core foundation that holds up everything else. Anyone else?"

By then, most hands had lowered. Two more students gave hesitant answers before only one remained raised.

"Maynard Avellus Hart," the boyish voice from the first row said. "The main requirement to work in a team is trust."

"Correct!" Professor Beltram clapped his hands. "The head can't command the body if its limbs don't trust its judgment. The right hand can't coordinate with the left if it doesn't trust what it's doing, or if it's worried about where the legs are walking. Only when all the parts trust each other to carry out their duties can a body work effectively. The higher the stakes, the more trust becomes important."

"Thus, the reason for today's lesson. You can't trust what you don't know. Learning what your companions can do is key to working together. Now, the obvious question is, how do you build up trust?"

A few students attempted to answer before Professor Beltram continued. "The answer here isn't as clear-cut, but in my experience, one aspect stands above the rest. No, it's not becoming friends. Do not misunderstand, working with people you like is always nice, and can make you better. But it's not a requirement for an effective team. What you do need is *respect*. Your teammates must respect your ability to do your part, and you to do theirs.

“Now, that kind of bond isn’t something you can build up in a day. For some of you, the rest of this course might not even be enough. All I can do is point you in the right direction. The rest is up to you. No amount of money, words or favors can buy you trust and respect. Earning it is solely up to you.

“For today, we’ll start with some simple group drills and sparring. Then expand the competition across teams in the next lessons. Remember, the goal is not to win, but to experience what your companions can do. So that when you fight together, your skills will become more than the sum of your parts. The second pillar of this course is strategy. I hope you’ve also considered utility when building your teams. Direct fights will only count for a minor part of the final test.”

Professor Beltram gazed at them as if hoping against his own advice that words would be enough to teach them. Then, he sighed. “Alright, trainees. Gather your teams and follow your assigned instructors. Each team leader should have received a number. One to four. We’ll go for a little warm-up before starting the spars.”

The students broke ranks in organized chaos. Kai stretched his back from the stiff pose before glancing at his companions. “We have a team leader?”

“Of course, we do.” Flynn winked at him, smiling brilliantly.

“*You?*”

“Hey, no need to look so shocked!” He straightened, chest out and shoulders squared. “I know it’s hard to believe. But I’ve indeed picked this team to lead. You needn’t feel guilty for all the opportunities I turned down for this. What value is wealth compared to friendship?” A fist clutched on his chest, he let out a stoic sigh. “I’ve always suffered from a generous spirit.”

Kai blinked, looking at his teammates.

“He asked me if I wanted it.” Rain chuckled. “It sounded fun, but what I’ve been taught about command wouldn’t *fit* this course. He’ll do a better job.”

That’s... probably true.

Despite Rain’s ludicrously numerous talents, Kai struggled to imagine him as a reliable and responsible leader.

Rowan shrugged. “I would do it. But let’s be honest, I’m the newcomer to the group. Better if one of you does it. And Flynn...” She pursed her mouth. “He’s clever enough when he sets his mind to it.”

Fair enough...

“You don’t think I can do a good job?” Flynn slumped. “Well... I can still tell the instructor we made a mistake if you want the spot.”

Huh?

"No, wait!" Kai grabbed him before he could move a step. "Sorry. I was joking. You'll do a fine job."

Flynn glanced back at him. "Are you really sure?"

"Absolutely." He answered a little too fast. If his experience as his sixth-grade class representative taught him anything, it was that responsibility brought hassles and ungrateful work. "You did basically set up our team on your own. And you're the best candidate since you know everybody best."

Uttermost ends aside, Kai realized he spoke true as the words left his mouth.

"Oh... thanks, Mat. That's sweet of you." Flynn gave him a one-armed hug. "We each have our strengths. You're smart, but you do tend to overthink decisions. That won't work with the scenarios we can't practice ahead of time. And Beltram loves those."

What is he saying...? I don't have decision paralysis. Did he talk with Jolene?

"Alright, team. Let's move. The instructors aren't known for their patience." Flynn strode toward the first group, streaming toward the east exit of the pavilion.

They arrived outside the arena in time to hear their instructor yelling to start running. "Forty laps. You don't stop until all members have crossed the line."

Of course...

Already prepared from the previous week, Kai began jogging. He wore the same light clothes from Combat Magic, woven with runes for protection without restricting his movements.

They could have sent me a second pair. Who's really the cheapskate, huh?

With constant use and washing, even enchanted fabric would wear out. The price he'd have to pay for another pair made him curse. Unless he wanted to use merits, of course.

What a scam.

Setting aside the injustice, Kai regulated his breathing. Hundreds of steps hit the pavement at once. Ahead of him, Flynn set the pace with long strides, his face strangely serious. Rain easily sauntered beside him, Rowan behind, and he last.

Kai suppressed the childish impulse to push harder. They were making good pace, already moving past several teams toward the head of their line. Usually, they split by physical stats, so he'd never trained with his companions.

Forty laps flew by. He bent, hands on his knees, to catch his breath when the instructors yelled the next exercise. "First team to finish gets ten merits to split amongst themselves."

Running in diamond formation, carrying an 'injured' teammate, running holding weights, suicide sprints. Apparently, no one had warned him it was leg day. Naturally, boosting skills weren't allowed since they would defeat the purpose of training. Fresh teams stumbled along, mana students pale and wheezing to keep up.

With a team of four instead of the full eight, they had a major advantage in coordinating. To balance the competition, the instructors assigned exercises counting the laps as the total addition completed by its members, meaning they had to do effectively double a team of eight.

Kai heaved, legs burning and back bent under the suspiciously heavy backpack. Rain looked barely winded—hardly a surprise. Rowan's breaths came just slightly labored, understandable given her profession and recent enhancement to mid-Yellow. Flynn was the biggest surprise. Still setting the pace, he looked tired, but hardly at his limits.

Damn. When did he get that fit? Or did I get out of shape?

Likely both. Their physical attributes couldn't be that far apart, but the numbers couldn't describe the full condition of their bodies. While Kai spent the last few months shaping the elements and bent over books, Flynn and the martial students had a different curriculum. He'd been foolish to think a couple hours of exercise would let him keep the stamina he had in the Sanctuary.

"Let's slow down."

Dripping sweat and only seeing his next step, Kai took a moment to put together the meaning of the words, and another for the implications. "No... I can... keep up."

"I know you can," Flynn said. "But this is just the warm-up. It's not worth it to exhaust yourself now."

Kai panted, but lacked the energy to argue. "Fine..."

Seeing as every other mage fared worse than him or far behind made him feel marginally better. Two teams ran ahead of them. Stumbling to the finish line and dropping his weighted backpack, he couldn't hide his relief when the stern-faced instructor didn't give more exercises.

"Acceptable time for your first team class. Rest five minutes and head back into the pavilion to start sparring."

"Thank you, sir." Flynn tersely saluted. They joined another two dozen students, leaning against the building's outer wall to rest. "No berating." He gave a half-smile. "We must have done quite well. Good job, everyone."

Kai weakly nodded, burying his wounded pride. He gave up after his third attempt to dry himself with Water Magic.

Back in the arena, another instructor waited to hand out a helmet and chestpiece of training armor. Similar to Combat Magic, the pieces were engraved to work with their uniforms. The enchantments seemed slightly weaker, split between physical and elemental damage.

"Listen up, trainees!" Professor Beltram tersely snapped. "Since you lot have already completed the warm-up, no point waiting around. Spread out to the marked dueling rings. For today, I'll leave the sparring rules to the judgment of your own team leaders. You already know the goal. The instructors and I will observe. I'll count on your common sense to keep things civil. I'd rather not need to intervene." His gaze burrowed into them. "Okay, that's all. What are you standing around for? Get to it!"

"Yessir!" The staggered shout echoed as students quickly dispersed.

Finally, the fun part.

"Follow me." Flynn dashed to claim one of the rings along the edge of the pavilion. Four bronze poles marked the borders twelve meters apart, a humble sight until you noticed the ward leylines flowing beneath the red earth.

Flynn set himself, hands at his sides, rocking on his heels. "So, how do we want to do this? I think we all have an idea of each other's skills. Explaining more won't help much. Not before we share a few punches. But I'm open to listening to the proposal of my minions." He waved magnanimously. "Rowan, you're the newest and most splendid addition. You probably have the most questions."

"Sure." She scoffed at him and threw back her red braids. "I've already fought with you enough for a lifetime. And I saw Mat sword sparring. And heard enough of his elemental prowess from Valela and Lys." Her cerulean eyes landed on Rain. Seconds stretched. Realizing she was staring, she wrenched her gaze away. "Uhm... Guess I'm most curious about Rain? What can he do? He must be good if he ranked just below Mat at the Trials."

"Yeah, well..." Kai pulled his arms back to begin stretching. "He can probably take the three of us standing still." Their swimming lessons had taught him that holding onto pride with the siren was a pointless endeavor.

"Right." Rowan looked between their flat faces for the punchlines.

"I'm in if you guys want. That sounds fun!" Rain grinned, pearly teeth and slightly pointed canines that could outshine the sun. "I don't have much experience with... this kind of sparring." He dug his foot into the soft ground.

"I bow to the will of my minions." Flynn rested his arm on Rain's shoulder.

Rowan furrowed her brows. "Are you guys serious?"

"Yeah, why not?" Kai shrugged. "It'll be fun."

More fun than running, at least.

With the match decided, they quickly narrowed down the rules and fetched the practice weapons. In minutes, they stood at opposite ends of the ring. Three and one. The metal poles in the corner thrummed, tapping into the pavilion's arrays.

"Come whenever you're ready." Rain drew in the reddish dirt with a dull trident. "These wards look a little flimsy. I'll try to be careful."

"I'll not aim for your face too," Kai tested a few swings with a blunted longsword. Decently balanced. "Can't speak for the rest." All blades seemed shabby after Elijah's gift.

Rowan held a rapier with an intricate guard. She stole a glance at them, again with the same silent question. Yes, they were actually doing this. From her expression, she must be beginning to wonder about their sanity.

"Alright, we're ready." Flynn finished strapping on a bandolier with seven throwing knives to his chest, a swordshort in hand and an unknown number of other daggers on his body. He gestured them closer. "You both know the strategy. Rowan, don't hold back. Because Rain won't."

She reluctantly dipped her head.

With no judge to oversee them, Flynn dashed into the shade of the wall to the left. Motes of Shadow shrouded his figure. Rowan darted right. Her figure turned into a blur of speed and metal. Kai took the front charge. Essence rushed into his muscles. He wove a dozen colorful threads, ready to react and support his teammates.

They picked a pincer manoeuvrer, obvious and generally effective. Use their number to overwhelm the siren before he could mount a defense.

She's too fast.

Kai had just crossed half the distance when Rowan already reached Rain's side. Her rapier glimmered like starlight to his senses. Her role was to prod and the handsome teen busy, but seeing his apparent opening, she struck her charge. Her blade lunged at his armored back.

Shit.

Kai released his spells. A pulse of Earth mana rushed to disrupt Rain's footing; the weave shredded before it could take hold. Ice darts hissed through the air, their trajectory somehow curving around their target.

The rapier cut closer. As the strike seemed inevitable, Rowan *stumbled*. A Gravity well turned her momentum against her. Her eyes widened in panic and confusion as she tried to retreat. Too late.

Twisting with superhuman speed, Rain swung the flat of his trident at her center of mass like a bat, an easy smile still on his lips. A wall of ice crystallized at his back, blocking a cloaked dagger. More knives widened the spiderweb of white cracks.

Rain easily dodged the rapier and sent Rowan flying out of the ring. A flash of Lightning finally shattered the ice shield. Before another attack could come through, the pieces melted. The surging wave washed over the shadow, trying to stab him and carrying Flynn out too.

Great.

Before Kai even reached him, the fight turned one-on-one.

Rain merrily raised the trident at him. "Whenever you're ready, Mat."

Alright then. Cheeky bastard.

Not wasting his breath, Kai spread his senses for any shift in Gravity. Earth mana wrapped around his arms and sword, doubling their power. He brought down his weapon with the momentum from his charge.

A blue glow coated the trident, angled to meet his downward strike. Metal rang. The impact throbbed up his arms and numbed his fingers. Kai grit his teeth, pushing up the trident to swing low. A whisper warned him an instant before Gravity would have pulled him forward to meet Rain's kick with his face.

Kai dug in his heel and pulled back. Jagged shards flew as quickly as he could form them—each ice spell was diverted or intercepted. Steel clashed and spells tingled over his skin. Icy brine stung his face. The word narrowed down to each moment.

His mind split, drawing on his repertoire of magic. Aside from his profession skills, he held back nothing: cloaked spells, sword feints, sly tricks, elemental boosting. The rhythm of the spar swallowed him. Muscles burned, his body twisting into narrow dodges. He danced, evading strikes, always a whisper away.

Until they weren't.

Reserves depleted, body exhausted, he reacted a fraction too late. Slick ice froze his boot. The instant that he freed himself broke the precarious balance. One bad dodge flowed into the next. Brought on the backfoot, he leaped back, nearly tripping, to avoid the swiping trident.

He recovered rapidly, but, strangely, no attack followed.

"You're out." Rain gestured down at his feet, his breath slightly labored.

Kai lowered his gaze to realize that he'd indeed crossed the boundary. He was out. With a groan, he let himself fall and sprawled on the ground, too exhausted to care about dirtying

his clothes. His head throbbed; his body burned. He'd lost track of his position in the ring. How embarrassing.

Dammit.

"Great spar! We should do that again." Rain beamed. "I couldn't even begin to wrench control over your Water spells. At best, I could disrupt them. And you were still holding back. If you fought with *everything*, it'd be tricky." He scratched his ear with the trident. "You likely wouldn't win, but... I might not be able to beat you either."

"Uhm... thanks." He pulled himself up on his elbows and then sat to brush himself off.

"It was amazing." Flynn grinned and stepped up beside him with Rowan, who was staring at Rain as if he'd grown a second head. Behind them, three dozen gawkers looked at them with similar expressions.

Oh... shit.

Kai let himself fall back down with a groan.