

## Chapter 91 - Give and Take

His sword drew a crescent arc in the air, followed by a lunge. Kai didn't hold anything back, testing the new limits of his body.

Elijah sidestepped his attack, redirecting his blade with a light jab. Despite his improved attributes and Empower pushing him to new heights, the man easily parried or evaded his flurry of attacks, taunting him.

Kai hadn't expected to win, but the butler could have at least given him the illusion he was taking him more seriously. Instead, Elijah increased the speed and strength of his movements.

Sweat ran down Kai's face and back. His muscles screamed in protest. There wasn't anything more they could give. Elemental magic was too slow to meaningfully impact the fight, and Empower was already burning through his mana. Any further his body would not be able to withstand it.

Elijah never attacked, dancing around his strikes with irritating ease. Kai knew he had improved tremendously, but it didn't stop him from feeling like a child swinging his father's sword. Clumsy and without any idea of what he was doing.

"Damn!" With a last burst of mana, Kai dashed forward in a desperate strike, slashing in a wild horizontal arc. Instead of dodging, Elijah met him straight on. Their swords met with a loud metal ringing, the blow reverberated up his arm. The butler's blade didn't move an inch. He might as well have tried to slice a boulder for the little difference it made.

Unable to contain the blowback, Kai lost his grip on the hilt. His sword flew out of his hands. By some miracle did he manage to regain his balance before ending butt-first in the sand.

"That's not fair." Kai was fuming. "How much strength did you use?"

“That last strike was stupid,” Elijah calmly said. “You’d already given up. There was no point in continuing.”

“What difference does it make? It’s not like I can actually defeat you!”

“Not with that attitude. There might be a chance in a million, but when you give up, that turns to zero.”

“You’re just using that as an excuse to make me go against impossible odds until I lose it.” Usually, he kept these comments confined to his thoughts. This time he was too angry to care. Would it kill the man to give him some encouragement after his recent upgrade?

Elijah stared back coldly. Kai’s frustration rapidly drained away as he started to wonder if this was the time the butler would actually slap him.

“What if I am?” Elijah smirked at him, breaking the tension.

*Damn, jerk*

“Have you checked your Swordsmanship skill?”

Curiosity won over his irritation.

“...I got 2 levels.” He had never gotten more than 1 level since the skill was in the single digits. His sudden attributes spike must have played a part. But without someone to push his limits, it wouldn’t have mattered.

“Ever heard about the word *gratitude*?”

This was even worse than Elijah snapping at him. He was making him feel guilty.

“Thank you, master.” Kai forced the word out of his throat. “In your inscrutable wisdom, could you not have helped me achieve the same result without me losing my mind?”

“You can’t forge a good sword without blazing heat and some battering. Both your mind and body need to be tempered to become a great fighter.”

Kai narrowed his eyes in a skeptical look. That wasn’t a *no*, and Elijah always preferred practical examples to flowery nonsense.

“Irritating you is an added bonus and payment for my time.” He admitted without any shame. “You are free to look for another teacher if you want to complain.”

Kai gritted his teeth. The butler won this round.

*At least, he’s honest.*

“I’d never dare look for someone else, master. But I was wondering if you could share some of your boundless knowledge with me.” When victory wasn’t possible, he could at least minimize his losses.

“Go ahead, dear disciple.” Elijah looked amused. “I’ll try to make my words as simple as possible so even you may understand them.”

Now that he had regained his cool, Kai wouldn’t lose it that easily.

“Are there weapon skills that encompass more than one weapon? I like Swordsmanship, but it doesn’t even work with a knife.”

It was the ever-present dilemma of limited skill slots. They would never be enough, so he needed to find any workaround. And make the most of the ones he had.

“Yes, there are,” Elijah answered. “Weapon skills are one of the most studied fields. Beyond the basic red skills you learned, there are *wider* ones, such as Polearms or Blades. Or even further, with the Melee and Ranged Weapon skills, till the *legendary* Weapon Master which allows you dominion over every kind of arm.”

*Why did nobody tell me before?*

“How do I get it?” With a single skill, he would be able to use anything to defend himself.

“You don’t,” Elijah said curtly. “I won’t have my disciple become a *legendary* laughingstock.”

*Did I miss something? I’m not sure I follow.*

Seeing his confusion, the butler continued. “Tell me, kid, how do you train a skill?”

“By practicing it...”

“Does your dim mind see the problem with having a skill that encompasses every weapon type?”

*Oh...*

“Can’t I then learn Melee Weapon and train with swords, spears and knives?”

Elijah gave him a serious 'are truly dense' look.

"I'm not sure you understand how many different types of short-range weapons exist. Even rocks like your head can be considered as such in the right circumstance.

"It would be like training Mana Manipulation by only moving the mana in your pinky, or Runes by drawing a single rune. You technically *can* do it. But I hope I won't have to tell you why that would be a bad idea."

Kai blushed. "I get it." When something sounded too good to be true, it usually was. He had just wanted to believe so hard that he found a loophole.

"What about Blades then? I'd gain more flexibility without having to practice too many weapons."

"Kai. How many weapons do you think fall under Blades?"

"Knives and swords...?"

"And sabers, axes, saws, razors. Just to name a few. Any weapon that uses a sharp edge as a primary means of attack. It might not be as bad as the other, and it's not impossible to level, but unless you plan to make use of such a variety of weapons daily, it isn't worth it.

"Swordsmanship is already wide enough with dozens of different subtypes of swords. In fact, most people prefer to narrow down its scope when they evolve the skill, choosing to specialize in Longsword, Rapier or Claymore. You lose flexibility, but if you'll only ever use that weapon, you'll improve faster that way."

"So, I should look to specialize further rather than expand my scope?" Kai asked.

“That depends on you. Each weapon your skill encompasses that you don’t use will drag you down. However, being able to switch between different arms will make you more unpredictable and harder to counter. There is no universal right choice, only what works best for you.”

Kai nodded, thoughtful. Naturally, the Guide offered no loopholes, only trades. “Then if I want to use a knife or spear, I need to take a second skill.”

*And sacrifice another of my limited skill slots. Damn, that sucks.*

“That or choosing a specialization at a milestone. You won’t be able to shoot a bow with a Swordsmanship skill, but you can gain some leeway for something closer.”

A myriad of thoughts swirled inside Kai’s head, Elijah had proven surprisingly helpful and detailed with his explanation.

*There is a first time for everything.*

“Thank you, master,” Kai said, honestly.

Elijah turned away. “At least you won’t embarrass me too much if someone discovers you were my student.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Do better. Also, you can go ahead and discard Steady Runner. We’ve gotten as much as we could out of it.”

*I had almost forgotten. I can finally learn Water Magic!*

“Do I do it now?”

Elijah shrugged. “No moment like the present.”

**\*Ding\***

**Do you wish to discard **Steady Runner (lv7)**? Be aware this choice is irreversible.**

Kai prepared for the blowback and gave the mental command. That was the last thing he remembered before the world turned black.

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Elijah watched his disciple casually discard an orange skill like the fool he was. The highest skill he had ever abandoned was red and more than 50 levels lower, but the brat didn't stop to think what that meant.

His determination was above average, he'd give him that. The kid knew what had to be done and didn't hesitate. However, sometimes he was too careless, not thinking about the consequences. As his master, it was his duty to teach him.

Like a puppet whose strings had been cut, Kai flopped to the ground, starting to drool on the sand.

His excitement and naive expression right till he gave the go-ahead almost made him break a laugh. A chuckle escaped his lips.

Since Kai had reached Orange ★★, there would be no lasting consequences, apart from fainting and remaining unconscious for a while. There were too many factors to say exactly how long. Nothing quite like first-hand experience to remember a lesson.

There was only one problem: now he had a fainted kid drooling on the sand. And no servants to take care of it. Worse yet, Theodora had just started to cook for him again.

*Damn.*

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A throbbing headache welcomed him. Kai wished to go back to sleep. His mind was muddled, and he was not exactly sure of what was going on, or where.

Massaging his temples, he opened his eyes. White sheets, fluffy bed. This was his room. No one had kidnapped him.

*What the hell did I do?*

Slowly standing up, he leaned against the wall to maintain to maintain the balance. He was awake, but it somehow felt like moving though a dream.

With a lucid thought, he used a burst of Empower. A trick he recently discovered to wake himself up in the morning and stave off tiredness. Mana surged through his body, rousing his muscles and mind.

His memories trickled back, the details still fuzzy. The conversation with Elijah, choosing to discard Steady Runner, and then nothing. Blank.

*Skills:*

- **Meditation (lv80>85)**
- **Herbology (lv78>84)**
- **Awareness (lv74>80)**
- **Acting (lv58>67)**



- **Swordsmanship (lv56>68)**
  
- **Mana Sense (lv56>59)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv32>37)**
- **Inspect (lv22>26)**
- **Alchemy (lv21>24)**
- **Empower (lv20>27)**
- **Runes (lv10>14)**
- **Nature Magic (lv6>11)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv1>6)**

*Yep, I have an empty slot.*

He underestimated the toll of abandoning an orange-grade skill by quite a margin.

*Well, at least it wasn't for nothing.*

**\*Ding\***

**New skill learned! **Water Magic (lv1)** – Mold the ever-flowing Water mana to your desires and attune yourself with the fluid water.**

That made him feel better. Outside, the sun blinded him momentarily. He couldn't exactly remember how much time had passed, but it looked like it was late morning.

"Took you long enough." The butler welcomed him with a somber look.

Kai glared back. "Why didn't you tell me this would happen?"

“What difference would that have made? Would you truly have preferred knowing how bad it was going to be?”

*Mhmm... maybe? Probably. Still an asshole move.*

With the headache pulsing in his head, Kai didn't have the mental capacity to ponder the question or argue back. “How long was I out for?”

“About three days.”

*What!?*

“What?”

“Trust me,” Elijah said. “I wished it had been shorter too.”

The butler left him there as his brain struggled to make sense of the situation. Three whole days were gone just like that. Kai had imagined puking his guts out or losing all sense of balance and falling to the ground. He had not considered fainting, and *certainly* not for three days.

Eyes closed, he inhaled and exhaled deeply, sitting down on the spot to Meditate and regain his bearings. Grounded in reality once more, he paid attention to his condition. He was famished, but otherwise fine, probably thanks to his grade. After a quick visit to the bathroom, he followed his stomach desires and headed to Dora's place.

The alchemist hurried out of the garden when he came closer. “Oh dear, you should have told me you were planning to discard the skill. Come.”

With some food in his tummy, Kai started to feel better. He wasn't full yet, but Dora told him he shouldn't gorge himself after fasting for three days.

"Are there going to be other side effects?" Kai asked worried.

"No. You are through the worst of it." Dora reassured him. "Your mind couldn't handle the shock of losing such a large part of itself, so it shut down to protect you. Just remember to never discard skills higher than your grade."

*Yeah, I won't be able to forget that even if I try.*

They moved to lighter topics. Dora kept him company till lunch, then they went to work in the garden, taking care of mana plants always helped. Kai still felt weird. It was impossible to describe the visceral sense of emptiness and meaning. Like unbalanced, but not in a physical sense.

"You'll feel as good as new in a few days. The first time it's always the worst. If you had come to me, I could have brewed something to lessen the blowback."

*Damn, butler.*

"I'm sorry, Aunty. I was so excited to finally get Water Magic that I acted impulsively."

"Be more careful next time."

"I will," Kai promised. "Speaking of which. When I was in Sylspring I saw someone cast a spell using a strange language. What's that about?"

"Oh, that," Dora shuffled nervously, the rose bush in front of her suddenly blooming. "I think you should ask Virya about that."

“Okay,” seeing her unease, Kai didn’t press.

He didn’t have to wait for long. That evening Dora informed him that Virya had invited him to dine with her.

“Kai, remember not to insist if Lady Virya evades your questions.” A slight nervousness in her tone.

“I promise to behave.”

*Not like I would have done any differently if you hadn’t told me. I’m not suicidal.*

Passing by his house to shower and wear his best set of clothes, Kai headed to the main mansion with some trepidation.

*What the hell is going on?*

The door was open, like usual. He knocked anyway before stepping inside. The large table had been set for three people, laden with plates of steaming food. The flame of several crimson candles gave the normally beautiful hall an unsettling vibe.

Virya *and* Elijah sat there.

“Come sit, child.” The mage commanded.

