

Chapter 372 - Binding Choices

Kai brushed a speck of dust from his cuff and rechecked his pocketwatch. Precisely on time. He smothered the nagging sense that he'd forgotten something. Paranoia tickled that feeling on most days, and he had no time to dally. His knuckles lifted to the redwood door beneath the golden plaque.

An even voice answered before his second knock. "Enter."

Dispelling his Shadow veil, he politely slipped in. The faint smell of aged parchment and lavender suffused the office. His gaze swept over the tomes and gleaming memorabilia lining the shelves. He stopped before the desk, back straight, stiffly performing the proper greetings he'd rehearsed.

"I apologize for the short notice. I came to accept the offer."

Professor Thornwyn set her quill on its glass holder and raised her attention to him. The carmine ink of the interlocking diagram glimmered fresh on the paper. "Mister Veernon." Behind her horn-rimmed glasses, her studious gaze chipped the confidence in his etiquette, as if she'd found a misplaced book in the library and was deliberating where to shelve it. "I had not expected to see you so soon. I assume you wish me to become your formal advisor?"

"Yes." Kai nodded. "If the offer is still open..."

Don't squirm. Don't squirm. How does she make me feel guilty even when I did nothing wrong?

As if reaching a conclusion, the lines in her expression eased. "The terms still stand. Not everyone considers informal offers binding, but it would be incredibly poor form for a professor to retract their word to a student."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't. And no offense was taken." She smiled faintly. "Please, take a seat. You still had six days to consider my offer. Do not misunderstand, I'm glad you came before the last-minute deadline, though a little surprised. Are you entirely sure? Don't you have a page of *questions* for me?"

Uh... is she making fun of me?

"I don't need more time." Kai settled into the plush chair. "I'm sure."

"That's good. I would assign you ten merits for your comprehensive decision-making. But you should know, advisors can't award merits to their advisees, even during ordinary lectures. Before we discuss the details of the contract, I'm curious what made up your mind.

Not everything has a value in your status. And there are few things more valuable than honing your decision-making process. Any unusual event or advice that influenced you?"

Just a moody butler. No... no way she knows, besides, I've got nothing to hide. Don't squirm. Don't squirm.

"I've thought about it plenty. It's a generous offer. I can't say if anything stood out in particular. Well... maybe the Trials. I realized how much I have to learn about magic theory and my skills."

Her eyes widened a fraction before her expression returned to a stern teacher's visage. "Congratulations are in order. First ranking. It's relieving to see you've not let one achievement get to your head. Few things have ruined more promising students than complacency."

Jolene leaned back in her chair. The freshly inked diagram and tomes vanished, replaced by a porcelain tea set on a tray. "Actually, I'd like to go over your experience in the Trials. That's one of the exercises I do with all the students I mentor. The recordings I reviewed missed several crucial moments. Why don't you walk me through your experience and thought process? We can leave your skill usage for later. What were your best decisions? And which were your worst?" She poured from a pitcher too small for the volume that flowed into the glass kettle. "Would you like a cup? Conjured water doesn't quite taste the same."

"Sure... I mean, yes. I'd appreciate that," Kai said, unsure of what the proper response was, only that he'd botched it. Memories of the Trials tangled into his thoughts with a surge of knotted feelings. He realized he'd been unconsciously steering his mind away from the experience since he'd escaped. His fight with the Pale Stalker stood out with painful sharpness, while exhaustion muddled his memories of the latter half.

Not a terribly pleasant experience. But nothing compared to the Sanctuary.

Noticing Jolene's inquiring gaze, he schooled his expression. It couldn't hurt to see how she planned to advise him. "Uh, I'd say teaming with Alden was my wisest choice. For what I could have done better. There are a few things..."

His story gained coherence as Jolene quizzed him on his every action and how he could have behaved more optimally. Her pursed mouth didn't look very impressed with how he'd rushed into the tunnels without studying more of the clues. She pinched her nose with a pained scowl at how he'd brute-forced the door maze.

"That was an *unorthodox* strategy."

"It worked out. Well, until the spider cave."

Despite the blows to his pride, he enjoyed himself. Sipping jasmine tea and arguing about optimal strategies had a nostalgic air, reminiscent of his teachers at the estate. Pose a problem and puzzle out a solution. An oddly similar methodology, though Jolene had a more guided approach.

Tell me I'm not unconsciously chasing the same style. No, it's probably a coincidence...

The questions left little time to ponder as he subtly probed about the irregularities that had nearly killed him. If Professor Thornwyn knew what had gone wrong during the Trials, she was exceptionally skilled at looking appalled and measuredly outraged. Without comment, she set down her teacup with a clink and jotted down a note in a deep-pink diary, face cold and unreadable.

"That will suffice for today. I expect a two-thousand-word essay about augmenting your ten best and worst decisions. I hope you've taken notes with Mnemonic Mastery."

Wait! When did I agree to extra homework—

"Assignments are independent of my potential role as your advisor. You can turn in the papers at the secretary's desk on this floor before the break ends if you can't find me."

"Yes, professor."

"I'll look forward to reading your arguments." She set down her porcelain cup on the tray with a thinly satisfied look. "Have you seen a mental specialist about your encounter with the Pale Stalker?"

Kai's puzzled frown seemed answer enough.

"Being exposed to a Stalker's fear aura during an intense experience is known to cause lasting effects on an unprotected mind, especially at your age. They surely must have told you? Did you not receive a full medical checkup at the end of the Trials?"

"Maybe. I don't remember much."

His vague shrug seemed to hit her like a suckerpunch. "Merciful Moons." Her quill whipped toward her hand as she drew another sharp note in the deep-pink diary. "Raelion has medical professionals available to every enrolled student. All confidential and bound by soul oath." She winced as a second page separated from her diary. "Take an appointment. The academy covers the fees for any injury sustained during formal education, whether they're physical or not."

The note fluttered into his hand, written in elegant, cursive letters.

Medical Ward, Palladium Tower, 4th floor. Open any academic day from the 6th to the 18th hour. Ask the clerk at the entrance for more information. Specify the cause (Trials).

Kai stored the paper. "I'm really fine."

"Are you?" She glanced at him over the rim of her glasses.

"Of course." Probably not, but the Pale Stalker didn't rank even in the top ten worst encounters he liked least to think about, and the stuff he actually needed to work through would land him into an unknown amount of trouble. Oath or no oath, that wasn't a gamble he wanted to take. "Though I appreciate the info, professor." It took all his focus not to fidget under her gaze. "Shouldn't we discuss the contract? I have a few questions."

"Of course you do." The tray vanished in her spatial artifact, and she withdrew a thick folder from a drawer. "Those are Raelion's standard obligations and expectations between advisor and advisee. My draft contract is on the last page. Ask any doubts. I'm sure you've already deeply researched the material."

Hmm... yeah.

Kai flipped through the pages with the nonchalance of a guy who definitely wasn't reading them for the first time. No, sir. What fool would sign a contract without doing their homework?

I did have an inkling I'd forgotten something...

Leaving her office eight days ago, he had intended to comb the library for information. Then, he had gotten thrown into the Mid-Term Trials, followed by a shady butler breaking into his living room. "I should check that I've not missed anything else."

His mind split, darting over the dense, bureaucratic language. After the initial sweaty panic, his nerves settled. He recognized several sections from the Student's Codex and various snippets from other readings. "What do the expectations of obeisance and filial duty entail? Also, about upholding your master's honor."

"The wording's a remnant of tradition. Like every similar relationship, Realion's mentoring takes after from the old mage-novice apprenticeships. In practice, you need to observe the proper forms, be respectful and present yourself with dignity in public. Don't worry, I don't expect a horse to fly. I've tempered my expectations. Just avoid embarrassing yourself or getting expelled, that *would* reflect poorly on me."

"I see. What about the agreement of disciplinary precedence?" He prodded, half for curiosity and half to buy time.

Beyond the legal contract, mentoring relationships carried centuries, if not millennia, of baggage, custom and tradition. Even with Raelion applying just the lightest veneer of those ancient obligations, the implied expectations gave him a headache.

He might be entitled to Jolene's 'earnest instruction' for his education and status growth, and committed to put forth his most strenuous efforts and assistance in Professor Thornwyn's academic endeavors, but there remained few hard laws. The mentorship was more a pact of intent than quantifiable returns—an agreement based on trust and informal understanding.

Even guaranteed monthly hours meant little. A professor might consider sitting in the same room or having him act as their unpaid secretary 'teaching.'

Despite all that, the deal looked incredibly skewed in his favor. He had few guarantees, but also had the most to gain. Most of the professors' reward came from the prestige of mentoring a promising student and the unstated expectation of future repayment after graduation. That naturally didn't include resources and favors traded between Houses that often accompanied mentorships.

Kai massaged his temples and reread the last page. In two hours of conversation, he'd learned more about high-blood ties than he cared to, reinforcing his conviction to stay away.

A dark pit of nightmares and connections.

Thankfully, little of the whole debacle regarded him. Professor Thornwyn seemed to care only marginally more than him about traditions, more focused on the teacher-student core. A few minor rewordings to the contract brought them firmly on the same page.

"For transparency, I should mention you'll likely receive more offers once you're back in classes. You'd already have if you were less anonymous and unreachable."

"Do you mean I should wait?" Kai asked. A small smirk tugged at his lips.

"If you wish." Jolene stared at him flatly, making no attempt at persuasion.

"Uhm... I think I'll sign with you. Can we do it now, or do you need to draft the official contract?"

"I reckon you'd like a binding contract for your privacy concerns?"

Most definitely.

"If possible, professor."

A new page slid in front of him. Jolene motioned him to take it. "These are the standard privacy clauses used by the academy. Ask if anything is unclear."

Kai skimmed the neat text—this part he *had* researched. Centuries of paranoid patrician students and lawyers had honed the wording to safeguard their skills, boons and attributes. He handed back the document with a nod. "Looks good."

"You really..." Jolene gave the tiniest shake. A clean sheet appeared in her hands, unlike any other, with a pale, silvery sheen like woven silk, yet with the rigidity of paper.

Dipping a golden quill in a jar of Merian-blue ink, her hands moved, swift and precise, filling the page with flowing lines. At last, she signed the bottom with an elegant twirl. "Here. Read it carefully. Once you sign, it will be binding until your graduation or expulsion. The privacy terms continue in perpetuity."

Kai caught the contract still fluttering. It felt like paper under his fingers, yet glimmered with filaments of woven starlight in his senses, pale and captivating. Soul paper. One of the hardest materials to source. Expensive and rare, yes, but only in relative terms. The real barrier was the Republic's iron-tight control over its distribution.

How does this work—

"Matthew. I meant to study the *contract*, not the paper."

"Uh, right..." Her level stare killed any excuse in his throat. "Yes, professor."

He dutifully leaned on the desk to read, calling on Mana Analyst. A single page, front and back, straightforward as far as contracts went. Clean. No ambiguous language, or hidden clauses tucked into the margins.

Everything we've agreed on. Guess I'm doing this.

His chest tightened in trepidation. Not a good or bad feeling, just strange. Years of hiding his status had ingrained the habit deeply. "Do I sign down here?"

"If you're satisfied with the terms, yes." Professor Thornwyn looked on calmly, smooth features and auburn hair tucked in a tight chignon. It was probably routine for her. "There is no rush if you wish to think about it more."

Kai lowered his chin, chewing his cheek. Should he give it more thought?

Doing nothing is an action. No more dithering.

His impromptu lessons with Elijah had reinforced his certainty. He was just scratching the potential of his mana skills, blind to what else he might be missing. Instead of stumbling in the dark, he could have Professor Thornwyn light the way.

"I don't need more time. I'm certain," he set down the contract on the desk. Jolene's faint smile made him feel like he had given the right response in a test. "Do I need to sign in a certain way? Mix blood with the ink or..."

Her approval faded into an unamused line. "Simple ink will suffice." She offered her already dipped quill. "Infuse your mana inside as you sign. The binding magic for this contract is in the paper. The signatures are a legal formality."

He had worried his fake identity might complicate things. "How does it work? Are there different kinds?"

"I've no idea," Professor Thornwyn said.

"You don't—"

"Professors are not omniscient. I always encourage a curious mind, but it must be tempered with sound judgment. Unauthorized research and production of soul paper is a capital crime."

"Oh... I see." Kai sank into his seat, his curiosity ignited by the ideas of forbidden knowledge.

Guess if you know how to make it, you know how to break it. I don't think I've seen a single mention of Soul Magic in the library.

An intriguing mystery best left for a later time.

Holding the wispy quill, he lowered the tip to the glossy paper. His essence mingled with the Merian-blue ink as he poured every scrap of Dexterity into writing his full name. The result still looked like a child's doodle beside Jolene's elegant calligraphy, though at least a bright child's.

So... is this it—

A sudden tug on his mana made him flinch back. Time held its breath for an instant. An ephemeral ripple spread from the contract, only noticeable for his intense focus. A cold tingle slithered through his chest.

Kai rubbed his sternum, the sensation already fading.

Jolene took the sheet from his stunned fingers. "With that settled, I look forward to overseeing and advising you in your studies." Her gaze sharpened just a fraction. "I have high hopes for you, Mister Veernon. See that you don't fall short of them."

Kai swallowed. "Yes. I mean, I won't." Kai took a folded paper from his ring and slid it across the desk. "I've copied my current status." All accurate except for renaming his profession and halving Favor points.

Her eyebrows staggered up her forehead as she opened the paper. "How can you... Space Magic so high. And Hallowed Intuition. I've never heard of it. Or Astral Pathway and.... Most of your profession skills seem quite unorthodox. I'll need to visit the vault to offer proper guidance." She glanced up at him. "You won't tell me how you chanced on them, I imagine?"

"Lots of dull training and couple lucky encounters." He smiled, giving away nothing.

"I see... you've given me a lot to think about." She schooled her expression. "I also have your schedule for the upcoming term."

"Oh, thanks." Kai skimmed through the list. All his applications had been approved.

Lecture courses - Second Semester

Mandatory:

- ***Mana Theory - Novice***

- ***The Guide - Status Theory and Growth***
- ***Foundations of Combat Magic - Novice***
- ***Merian Ascension & Ethics through the Ages***
- ***Runes & Enchanting - Adept***

Electives:

- ***Applications of Water Magic - Adept***
- ***Applications of Earth Magic - Adept***
- ***Applications of Shadow Magic - Adept***
- ***Applications of Nature Magic - Adept***
- ***Herbal Alchemy - Novice***
- ***Words of Power - Introductory***
- ***Beast Bonds & Familiar***
- ***Arcane Physiology & Phenomena***
- ***Mixed Sparring and Battle Strategy - Novice***
- ***Fundamentals of Scrying and Fate Reading***

"You've selected ten electives in addition to the mandatory courses," Jolene observed dryly. "You're aware you only need four?"

"Yes."

She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled. "Those lectures will be quite different from the basic courses you've completed. If you insist on this schedule, you'll either burn yourself out or scrape through with mediocre results. I *strongly* advise you to cut at least three courses."

"Three?"

"Four, if you intend to pursue Space Magic. I'll submit a request on your behalf. We'll both have a lot to think about. You may consider this your first assignment as my advisee. We'll review it tomorrow at the tenth hour. Be punctual. There is a lot to cover if we want to discuss your skill paths too."

Kai dipped his head. What else could he do? "Yes, professor."

I should have guessed an advisor meant extra homework.

"Enjoy your day, Matthew." Her gaze gleamed through her enchanted lenses. "I've heard you've gained quite the unrequired popularity."

He stiffened. "I've found ways around it."

"An apt application of Shadow Magic. Practical incentives often accompany the most fruitful learning. I'd like to meet whoever taught you another day." She smiled. "Though you won't be able to avoid your peers forever. Lectures resume next week."

“They’ll all be busy with classes.

Her head tilted a fraction. “Of course.”