

Chapter 382 - Offers and Confessions

Easy chatter and laughs washed over the Topaz Hall. Clumps of students lingered among the desk rows, trading muttered woes and plans for the evening, while volunteers stored the Earth Magic supplies in their cabinets. It earned just two merits a week, enough for commoners to fight over.

"Matthew Veernon?" The shadow of a girl touched where Kai stood, bent over his satchel from his chair.

I should've recast my veil... the cruelty of hindsight.

Covering a yawn with his arm, Kai stuffed the Earth Shaping Exercises' textbook in the bag and straightened. He met a pair of wide brown eyes with an arched brow. "Uh, is that your name?"

"My— uh— no. Are you not..." His nonsense answer scrambled her wits, features scrunched up and pupils darting about in thought. If she was acting, her skill was quite good.

"Just joking. Yes, that's me. How may I help you?" Kai offered a smile of terse politeness. Exhaustion pushed him to fall back on familiar patterns.

Her head lowered with a flush. "Oh... I see. Sorry. It was funny." She let out an awkward giggle, hands gripping the hem of her uniform. "I'm Elaria of House Elmelle. I saw you in class and thought I'd introduce myself. How did you shape that Earth Spiral so precisely? Your mana control is quite..."

Kai thoughtfully nodded as he finished packing his notes. Even Shadow Magic couldn't let him pass unnoticed in every course. Curiosity about the first ranker had waned, but not faded. Among thousands of first-years, some missed the memo, some ignored it, and some wanted to try their Luck anyway.

What does she want?

Seeing the girl's expectant stare, he tried to channel the ease Rain had in dealing with people. "I have an appointment now, but if you need help studying, you can find me in the library most days after classes. Sometimes my friends join too."

"Uhm... that's fine, but..." She chewed her lip. "I thought we could talk somewhere more private. It doesn't have to be anything formal. Not yet. Though my family would support us if we got to know each other."

Huh?

Kai blinked, his face flushing. Despite his slight headache, he still caught the obvious innuendo.

Spirits, I need a nap. Should I cut and run? What would Rain say?

"I'm flattered you and your *House* think so highly of me. But I've already pledged my future. I'll have to ask them what they think."

Her dove eyes froze over. "*Them?*"

"They prefer discretion." Kai threw her a look full of empty meaning. He tried to appear subtle enough for a proper retainer of House Blackwoods, while still conveying the intent.

From her pale face, Elaria grasped all he left unsaid, and *more*. "I—I heard... I thought... It was a rumor. I'm sorry. Truly, no need to bother *them*. Please. I meant... I didn't mean to overstep."

Grasping his success, he leaned in, "It's fine. I'm sure they'll understand. What House did you say you were from..."

"No—no one important..." Still mumbling apologies, she spun and fled the hall before he could finish latching his satchel.

Uhm... I should thank Alden again.

Kai shrugged and went to the queue by the lecturer's platform. What had rattled her enough to flee in panic? Was it implying she wanted him to break his alleged oath and poach him for her House? Allusions and vagueness. Nothing he said could match the scenarios she'd concoct on her own.

Just as long as it works.

Eleven students stood before him. Not every professor stayed to answer questions after class, but those who did never lacked petitioners.

Kai pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the headache building behind his eyes. It had been a long day, and a longer week. The skill strain pulsed like a faithful companion.

I've survived worse. Almost over.

The line quickly thinned as he organized his mnemonic chains. It had taken some time to fit both their schedules. Going last meant he didn't need to worry about people waiting on him. The hall was nearly empty when he walked up to the monolithic desk.

"Matthew." Professor Thornwyn greeted him first and set a paper aside. The wispy plume of her quill drew whirls above her ever-present stack of essays. "You caught up well with theory. I enjoyed your take on the physical properties of Earth despite the rushed delivery. Though I did notice your mana control slipped *four* times today during practice."

How did she—

"I'm keeping up with the class," Kai blurted, forgetting what else he was planning to say. Few students managed to squeeze into an Initiate course with their skill at Orange, and none who had to split their time with four other elements. "Once my Earth Magic skill catches up, I'll easily reach the upper part of the class."

Jolene's eyes rose to watch him above the golden rim of her glasses. "And is that the best you can do?"

"That... Maybe I was a little distracted today." Ten hours of lectures had crammed his mind, and the headache didn't help. "I'll do better next class."

Jolene studied him impassively for a heartbeat. Her gaze returned to her essays with the slightest shake. "So, what can I do for my mentee?"

"Well..." Kai cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. He'd prepared for this. "I had a few matters to discuss. Is this a good time to talk, professor?"

The corner of her lips slightly quirked. "I appreciate the attempt at manners. Go ahead."

"Yes. Could I get—"

Jolene flicked the finger holding the quill. Privacy wards sprang up around them.

"Thank you. So... I attended Fundamentals of Space Magic this week." Kai picked his words carefully. "Professor Asterelle asked me for a demonstration to gauge my skill. And I cast a blink on an inanimate object. Much like what I'd shown you. The reaction I got... wasn't what I expected. By a lot. From what you implied, I had the impression having the skill at Yellow was standard to join the course."

Jolene gave no reaction to the silent accusation. The elegant whirls of her quill never slowed. "Did I say that? Or did you make a wrong assumption?"

"Well..." He frowned. The exact words evaded him. The conversation happened just before he was abducted into the Mid-Term Trials, but he remembered the gist of it. Her rebuke for endangering her priceless tome. "Maybe you didn't explicitly say it, but you also gave me no sign what I did was *that* impressive." Hearing it out loud, the argument had sounded a lot stronger in his head.

"I see, now." Jolene set aside her last essay and laced her hands above the desk with a faint smile. "Your skills are very impressive, Matthew. Forgive me, I didn't realize you were fishing for praise."

"What? No. That's not—" Kai broke the stare, his face heating up. "That's *not* what I meant. Just... why did you not warn me my Space Magic would stand out that much?"

"I did not think it important. I have only a superficial grasp of Space Magic. And no affinity myself. Professor Asterelle could have given you a more accurate assessment of your ability. And your level would be apparent once you compared with your peers."

"I would have liked to know before."

"Why?"

"I showed my skill in front of everybody. The *dean* was also present."

"And how is that a bad thing? You still haven't answered the why."

"*Because...*" Kai bit his cheek. The glint in her eyes told him all he needed: he'd fallen into her trap with both feet. "I just don't like being caught unprepared, professor."

"I'm sure. Could it be you were trying to hide your skills? *Again*. At the course where you're supposed to learn how to better yourself?"

Shit.

"I..." Kai found his mouth dry, his mind empty. The damn headache throbbed, thwarting any chance of recovery.

Sat across from him, Professor Thornwyn missed no details. Her nails drummed on the polished wood with a soft *clack-clack*. "Is it perhaps you were downplaying your magic even when you displaced my tome?"

Kai opted for silence, unable to find a reply that didn't dig him into a deeper hole. He wasn't tired enough to consider lying to her face.

Why did I think confronting her was a good idea again? She already knows.

"We hadn't signed the contract then. And you were yet to become my advisor."

"I have now. You know I can't share anything regarding your skills and status that you tell me in confidence. Why were you waiting to tell me?"

Because he didn't know enough about oaths. Because any magic always had a workaround. Because any person who knew beyond him was another point of failure. Because when the next beast, god or cultist tried to kill him, secrets were the only safety that let him sleep at night.

For that, and another dozen reasons. Shit... She'll definitely think I'm crazy. Am I... crazy?

Silence bore on him as he shuffled on his feet and clutched the fabric of his blazer with sweaty fingers below the table.

"Matthew," Jolene half-sighed, more tired than angry. Her gaze wandered the mosaics on the ceiling as she tucked back an auburn lock in her chignon. "Caution is good. Necessary, even. For a mage in your position, more than most. But as with all things, you need a healthy balance or it'll turn on you. I can't guide your path if you are not honest with me."

"Do not take this as an ultimatum. I don't know the life you've lived. It seems a safe guess that it's more than most boys your age. You likely have good reasons for keeping your guard up. Watch for the exits when you walk in. Feign yourself weaker than you are. And keep contingencies." She sighed, looking back at him. "Just be aware, excessive caution has a cost. Specifically in regard to teaching and learning."

"I understand," Kai said, more at ease seeing she wouldn't dig into his secrets. Her considerations mirrored his own. He knew his paranoia wasn't always rational, or likely to realize. But neither was getting trapped in the hidden realm of a crazy god, or barely escaping from bloody cultists. *Twice*. Improbable scenarios had a tendency to ambush him when he least expected them.

Years ago, he narrowly escaped being forcefully conscripted into the Merian army.

Still, she also has a point. Improving my own strength is the surest way to keep my friends and myself safe.

"So I'll be completely safe if I show all my skills here?"

"Who's to say?" Jolene leaned on the carved chair. "Do you know anything worthwhile in life that comes with no risk?"

Kai paused to seriously consider it. "No... not really."

"That makes two of us. I've been to enough cities and campaigns to wage my wand that some of your paranoias are legitimate. Young, talented mages without backing or ties are a prized commodity, and desired as such by people with pure intention and not. This is doubly true for Space Warpers."

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "That's not much of an endorsement."

"It is not. But it *is* the truth. So trust when I say, your years at Raelion might be the safest you'll ever be. My position gives me a front view of the academy's flaws. And this is the best time to explore your skills, try foolish ideas, fail and learn. As your advisor, I believe this to be the best course. But ultimately, it is your own choice."

Kai nodded, recognizing she had a compelling argument. Though... would she advocate the same if she knew about his three *divine* Blessings and boons? Maybe not. What was the right balance?

She's probably thinking more about skills...

"One last thing. Knowing you, I thought to borrow this from Dean Astares." She reached into a drawer. Her hand hid the object as she set it down on the desk with a metallic *clink*. "Are you familiar with it?"

Kai swallowed, fighting the impulse to recoil and hiss at the feathered monstrosity of brass and blue enamel. "We're... acquainted."

"Twee."

"Good, then." Her index patted the infernal bird. "I have no interest in bringing you any kind of harm, or tricking you into going against your best interests."

"Twee."

"That's the best I can do for you." Watching him amused, Jolene returned the infernal bird to the darkness of the warded drawer, where it belonged. "Unless you have questions."

"Nope," Kai said. "I mean, that was very thoughtful. Thank you, professor."

"Of course. If that's all, I assume you'll want time to ponder your decision."

"No, I don't need it." Kai glanced back at the empty rows of desks and forced the words out of his mouth. Risk and payoffs. He was cautious, not stupid. "It's true, I've understated my skill with Space Magic. I'd rather not demonstrate here in the open, but I'm quite good. Especially at blinking objects. And people. Mainly myself, really. I've displaced someone else without Spatial Shift once, but I probably could do it again. If they stand still. And not too far."

Jolene watched him blankly for several seconds. "I shall temporarily ignore what sounds like a rarely powerful profession skill." Her voice came out stiff. "You're saying you have displaced yourself through free casting? Without chants or other aids? That's a very reckless—"

"I'm aware of the dangers. And I'm always careful." Kai lifted a hand to wiggle his unharmed fingers. "I never hurt myself. Well, never more than a nick. I didn't really have a choice but to try. Nowadays, I mostly use Spatial Shift. It's more practical."

Counting Jolene's slow blinks, he rambled about his spatial capabilities and a couple more details about Hallowed Intuition. "That's about everything about my general skills."

"I see. We can discuss your profession skills in a few days and in a more comfortable setting." She produced a lilac handkerchief and studiously wiped the lenses to a crystal shine. "Your status offers an interesting puzzle."

Kai concealed a smirk. "Thank you, professor. I'll await your word." Coming clean felt surprisingly good. "Just... I'm not sure I want to share my entire abilities with Space with everyone in my course."

"That would indeed be wise."

"Huh?"

"I said an *overabundance* of caution would harm you. Not that you should practice no caution at all. Space Warpers *are* a delicate matter. You needn't hide so much from Professor Astarelle. Maybe don't mention spatially displacing humans. Or your profession skill."

Got it.

He bobbed his head.

"Is there anything else you wish to say, Matthew?"

"I— actually, yes. I attended Words of Power before coming here." He briefly explained how Professor Almelune ignored his existence.

"Mhmm." Jolene pursed her lips in displeasure. "It's a regrettable situation. Her actions tread the line. Unless she assigns demerits or unfairly marks your exam, we have little recourse. Raelion's professors aren't required to answer questions or show equal regard to all their students."

That's bullshit.

"I know," she said, reading the thought in his expression. "Any countermeasure I'd suggest would end up being more trouble than it's worth. Do not waste energy on what you can't affect. Have you considered dropping the course?"

I won't let her win that easily!

Kai unclenched his jaw. "Despite *that*, chanting seems interesting."

"Many courses are *interesting*, Matthew. Not everything can take up your time. But I've already expressed my opinion in that regard. Do consider what you get from learning Ældūm. And if it's worth the investment. How are the other new classes? Are you intent on attending nine electives?"

"It's difficult. But I'm keeping pace. I'm doing fine."

"Fine, you say?" She enunciated as if weighing its flavor, then gave a small shake. "That's not how I'd call your sloppy mana control during my lecture. But I guess you know yourself best."

I slipped four times in over dozens of exercises!

"Again, I won't repeat myself," Jolene continued candidly. "Mages must take care of their minds as warriors take care of their bodies. I'm sure you'll reach the logical conclusion in time."

I'm sure I will.

"I'll ponder on your advice. Thank you for your time, professor." Kai respectfully bowed. "With your permission—

"Is there nothing else?"

He halted. Her smooth expression gave away nothing. "I'm... not sure. Nothing urgent."

"Mhmm... since you corrected your skills and status, I thought you might also update me on your attributes. From what you told me of Hallowed Intuition and my own research, would I be right to assume your Luck is higher than you let me believe?"

Oh... that.

"A tad higher, yes. My highest attribute."

Though I do not feel particularly Lucky right now.

"I do appreciate the honesty, Matthew. I've committed to becoming your advisor. I don't do half measures. I take my job seriously, and expect the same from my students. I understand why you're cautious, but I won't work with someone who hides information from me. Don't let it repeat. Are we clear?"

"Yes, professor. Clear. And... I'm sorry about it." Kai hung his head, unsure of the proper forms. "Um, if I may ask. Why didn't you simply bring out the brass bird if you thought I was lying?"

Professor Thornwyn arched her eyebrow and laughed. "Do you think I need an artifact to tell when a student is lying?"

"No, I... I think I'll take my leave. With your permission."

"I'll see you next week, Matthew."

"Next week." Kai dipped his head low and hurried to the door.