

Chapter 378 - Basic Weaves

Kai forced his cold and sweaty palms on the desk and pushed himself to his feet. The chair rattled back with a slight screeching. Though his legs felt like lead, he put forth his most composed appearance. Dithering would only tip his hand, show that he had something to hide.

“Chin up.” Rob shot him a look of seemingly genuine encouragement. “You’ve got this, man.” He spoke without moving his lips, his tone barely audible even this close.

“Moons bless.” Jill’s whisper came a hair higher from the row below. The fourth-year sent a tiny wink as he trudged free of the desks.

Were his nerves so apparent?

Not for the first time, Kai wished he still had his Improvisation. He didn’t regret ditching it, not *truly*. Beyond lending to bad habits, such abilities offered too few benefits and no paths for growth he cared to pursue. Not now, and certainly not at Green, when even his core skills might take more slots than he had. No, he could learn to deal with social inconveniences without relying on the Guide.

I just need to survive till then.

Kai descended the steps toward the raised platform of the Onyx Hall. Despite his churning stomach, his Dexterity and training allowed nothing but a smooth gait.

I’m overthinking.

Any first-year would look nervous showing their skills in front of older students and the highest authority at Raelion—especially in a notoriously tricky element like Space. Though for him, his peers’ inquisitive glances were an afterthought compared to the two adults waiting below.

“Come here, dearie.” Professor Astarelle gestured with a smile, almost motherly, as if trying to reassure a skittish deer no harm would come to them. Her flighty manners might have helped, if not for the man beside her.

Dean Cassian Astares gave off nothing and said nothing. Pale lilac eyes tracked him. Neither cold nor warm, merely studious. He stood there, and that was all that was needed. Without a ripple in his mana, his presence seemed to swallow the hall.

Cursed Luck.

Kai had lied to him.

That it happened through misdirection rather than technical wording changed little.

Approaching the desk, his thumping heartbeat deafened his thoughts. He performed the dictated bow and courtesies. His ears rang numb to the words, but if he made any misstep no one threw him dirty looks.

"Are you alright, dear? You look a little pale." Asterelle peered at him behind the thick lenses of her glasses. "Did you skip a meal?"

Kai blinked, unsure of when she'd stood up or cleared the papers from the desk. "I'm... I'm fine, professor. Hmm... Thank you," he squeezed out. His mind clung to her, hoping to ignore the man looming within a stride from him.

Maybe he's forgotten our last meeting.

Ego and power often walked hand in hand. If the dean felt slighted, his life at Realion would get a lot more complicated.

Her intent stare lasted a heartbeat more. "Good, then. Let's not waste daylight." A tome appeared in her hands, the leather of the mustard-colored cover worn from use. "As I said, you can't fail this test. The demands of Space Magic are too wide to start most students from the ground up. Professor Thornwyn was scant on details, but, knowing her, you must have a solid grasp on gathering and shaping. I need to gauge your skills to adjust our future classes."

Leafing through the pages, Astarelle twirled a quill through a lilac curl. Her head dipped and bobbed with her muttering. "Uhm, maybe... no, no... too advanced... this is a maybe. And... yes, this..." The book snapped shut, and her eyes rose. "Alright, Matthew. Let's start simple. Static dimensional quivers, localized stretch and folds. The standard stuff, you know."

A pile of wooden cubes clattered onto the desk, each identical and fist-sized. Their smooth faces highlighted the nicks missing in their sides. The origin of the cuts was obvious, what she wanted him to do with them not so much.

Astarelle stacked three layers in a four-by-four base, then set one more on top. "That should do. Don't worry about the cubes. But mind the lecturer's desk. I fear we've reached the limit of what the academy is willing to replace this year." Her look at the seated students drew a few chuckles. "Start with a static dimensional quiver. Bonus points if you can chain more than one. No chanting, naturally. We're testing your skills. Go whenever you're ready, dearie."

Uh huh...

Kai nodded and licked his dry lips.

Without a formal education or a single volume on Space Magic, he could only guess at the exercise. Some way to move the cubes. Should he blink them a few times? That usually worked. Better to improvise, or to ask what seemed extremely elementary questions in front of the class? This wasn't the first impression he'd hoped to—

"Why not try a short-range inanimate displacement instead?" A voice cut in.

The presence Kai had strenuously ignored flared back with crushing ease. Bound by chains of courtesy and threats of demerits, he met the dean's gaze, irked by the wry humor he found there. The Codex was clear: turning his back on the man without being tasked or formally dismissed constituted a punishable breach of etiquette.

What game is he playing?

Astarelle's gaze flitted between them. "That... may be a little hard for a novice."

"Short-range displacement is a fundamental application of Space Magic. Better one aim at the moons and hit the hills, then fear to look up. Even failure has much to teach. Unless Mister Veernon objects, I'd like to check what progress he made since our last talk."

Kai fought not to grit his teeth. Ever since selecting this course with Jolene, he knew the dean was bound to learn his Space skills were far higher than he'd let on—be it through a test score, faculty talk, or lines buried in a report. What he *hadn't* anticipated was revealing the ruse face-to-face in his very first lecture.

There was only one acceptable answer. And if the dean was deliberately trying to make things more difficult, at least now he understood the assignment.

Kai dipped his head to hide his expression. "I'd be honored and thankful for the guidance. I just hope not to disappoint."

"Is that so..." The corner of the dean's mouth curved upward. His thumb idly spun one of his enchanted rings. "Teaching others often sharpens one's own understanding. I'm confident we'll both benefit from this." Still standing, he tilted his chin toward the desk beside him, not breaking his stare. One of the few pristine cubes appeared on his open palm. "Displace this as far as you reliably can. The less damage, the better. Don't worry about my fingers, you have no chance of harming me."

Fancy trick. Ugh... If you wanna put on a show, I'm game.

Kai moved to the opposite end of the table. Feet set apart, he exhaled slowly and locked the cube with an intense stare. His brows knitted in faux focus. He briefly considered wiggling or snapping his fingers, but there was something as too much theatrics, a balance between tasteful and garish.

Blinking an object fell well within the skill level he'd planned to show. Spatial magic was his greatest ace and shield. Reveal too much, and he'd leave himself exposed; too little, and he'd make attending this class pointless.

He hadn't accounted for the dean's presence. Still, he needed a decent showing to get some useful teaching.

Those other exercises must have been truly basic. Better stay on the safe side. And low-key.

As Professor Valdibal shouted, any spell would look far less impressive if it took a minute to cast.

Iridescent essence swirled down his arm, over three times what he'd normally need. A vein throbbed on his temple from his *unwavering* concentration. The audience brewed with murmurs at the delay. Asterelle pursed her lips with a guilty look, as if she wanted to speak up.

I might have overdone it a bit.

With a *fwip* of air and a silver flash, both telltale signs of poor control, the cube vanished from the dean's palm and dropped in his waiting hand. Roughly a three-meter blink.

Kai stared at the intact cube as if surprised it worked at all. Then he proudly held it up, feeling very foolish. Awful casting speed and waste of mana. Embarrassment threatened to creep up his neck. He could have managed better back in the Hidden Sanctuary. Really, anyone with Space Magic at Yellow would.

Hopefully, they'd give him another attempt after this mediocre showing.

Hmm...

The hall had fallen oddly silent.

Professor Astarelle blinked, a knotted quill forgotten in her hair. In the seats, students stared mutely. Only the dean's cool expression remained unchanged as he spoke.

"A smooth displacement, if a little wasteful. And slow. You could halve the mana consumption by locking better onto the entry and exit points. Still, not terrible for a novice. Seems you *do* have talent for Space." The dean smirked, then lowered his voice. A thread of mana rippled toward Asterelle. "I have a few more exercises in mind. May I handle his testing? I wouldn't wish to overstep, cousin."

"Uhm... I... no. Of course, you may proceed. I reckon it'll be educational for the whole class."

"Excellent." His smile widened. "Set down that cube here, Mister Veernon. I'd like to test your cast speed when you disregard distance and precision."

Okay... at least he doesn't seem angry? What's with everyone else? I didn't do that bad.

He stepped closer, dismissing the thoughts tugging at him, afraid to miss the next instructions. Giving the dean anything less than his full attention was begging for trouble.

"Proceed when you are ready, Mister Veernon. Speed and efficiency."

Will do.

Kai lightly clenched his jaw and repeated his concentration act. Slowly weaving the spell, he counted to seven in his mind. The cube blinked a couple centimeters right of its original position on the table.

Relief and happiness mingled on his face. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, glad no one could distinguish sweat coming from nerves or focus.

“A passable attempt.” The dean picked up the cube and ran his fingers over the smooth faces. “Not a scratch. Remember, the focus was speed. Not precision.”

“My apologies, but I’m not sure I follow. I thought that speed only matters if you successfully cast the spell.”

The dean met his gaze levelly. “A fair point, Mister Veernon. I agree. Though if the cube has not the faintest marring, you’re likely not pushing your fastest speed. I’d advise working on it in your own time. That aside, your mana shaping is passable; your visualization not so much.” His terse voice carried across the hall. “Tell me, how do you weave your spell when you displace an object? The exact steps.”

“Well...”

How did one rip and bend an element they couldn’t see or perceive?

Lacking the language to describe his intuitive understanding, Kai fumbled through the explanation as best he could. He avoided Earth concepts as best he could. Aside from that, there was little point in feigning ignorance in a subject he never formally studied.

He only had vague notions of how gravity bent space. In the past month, he’d scoured his mind, cataloguing any memory from his old physics classes. Even with his Mind and skills, recovering details across years and lifetimes was far from easy.

“Once I had all the pieces in mind, I released the spell.” Kai concluded his explanation. He couldn’t check their faces, but his ears hadn’t caught any laughs from his fellow students. So it couldn’t have gone *too* bad.

The dean’s expression betrayed no judgment throughout, Astarelle’s betrayed too much to say what any of it meant.

“Undoubtedly a curious approach, Mister Veernon.” He tilted his head in thought. “I wish we had time to delve into spatial theory, but I’ll have to leave that to Professor Asterelle. Tell me if I misunderstood in simplifying. You split the cast into two actions: the target disappearing, then reappearing. Two steps. And no travel in between, correct?”

“Uh, yes.”

“That’s better than some, but still inefficient. Remember, you’re warping space. With instant displacement, the entrance and exit are one and the same. You’re not just moving an object quickly. If just for an instant, you’re connecting two points in space to slip an object through. ”

That... I see how that could make sense.

Without a notebook, Kai constructed a mnemonic chain to save the feedback as the dean continued. A single movement would be faster and more efficient, but also harder to hold all the details. Space Magic wasn't forgiving of mistakes. Splitting spells in steps made them easier to cast.

"Knowing is the first step. And the easiest. For proper casting, you must also believe and understand the laws of reality. But let's not rush. I'd like to see your basic weaves."

It wasn't long before another presence nudged at his thoughts. Hobbes had chimed in with his opinion—apparently embarrassed by the fragments bleeding through their bond.

Despite the dubious motives, the dean explained each exercise without technical terms. Static dimensional quivers amounted to blinking a cube in place—or nudging it in and out of the superficial dimensional veil. Lots of words for a very simple spell. Localized stretches and folds followed, where he had to lengthen or shorten the space between two points.

Midway through a cast, a presence intruded on his thoughts. Disdain and pity gushed through his mind. Hobbes had come to give his opinion, embarrassed by the snippets he'd seen.

Hey, it wasn't that bad. Yeah, I know... but cut me some slack. I've never tried this stuff. I—Alright, alright... fine.

Taking advantage of his theatrical focus, he reached back through the bond. It happened in a blink: their thoughts connected. Undefined sensations, memories and feelings flooded him. A fleeting brush. A louder thread. Then, Kai just knew. He couldn't explain how or why, but he intuitively grasped how to fold along a line of cubes.

Uhm... okay, you were right. That is stupidly simple.

Under the dean's scrutiny, he completed the cast as clumsily as he could, enduring Hobbes' scoffing all the while.

I told you why I hold back. No... no. It's not just because I'm a weak and helpless human. Even if you're strong, you can always be caught unprepared. But your foes can't account for what they don't know. Uh... yes... indeed, if we learned to blink like you, it'd solve many problems. I— Urgh! You don't need to snoop if the testing offends you.

Despite his vocal disdain, Hobbes hung out in his head, adding his scathing harassment to the silly exercises and his pitiful execution. Occasionally, he even offered suggestions.

All of it, Kai recorded with his skill. His mind split between the despotic familiar in his head and the Blue mage guiding him through the training cantrips.

How many more are there?

He learned several blink variations and ways to fold space he'd never considered. None of the exercises were difficult, only new and unfamiliar. That was also what made them fun. The mnemonic folder swelled with ideas and possibilities. His singular focus on refining his blinks had blinded him to a slew of other applications.

Even if the exercises were basic, the Guide rewarded novelty and experimentation. He'd already heard his skill chime. And more than once.

Is this how the other students trained Space Magic? Damn unfair. It would have saved me months if I had some guidance.

The scratching of quills reassured him that his peers were still there, quietly observing. The special guest lecturer likely made them stay on their best behavior.

Kai returned to the last test presented: a chained displacement. Simply put, he had to weave multiple blinks into one spell, each separated by a slight delay. It did sound intriguing.

This will take a couple minutes of faux focus... It doesn't sound very hard. What do you think, buddy?

"I think we should end it here," Professor Asterelle intervened in the lull. "I have enough to place him. Mister Veernon must be almost tapped out. I'd like him to remain sharp for the rest of the lecture." She briefly glanced at the dean. "My other students would deeply appreciate it if you shared your insight on their skills."

"Of course, it would be my pleasure," the dean said, with a satisfied lilt. "Mister Veernon has indeed cast a great deal. He must have spent hours gathering motes before the lesson. Exemplary dedication."

Uh... isn't that normal?

Kai took the praise with humble grace. Looking between the two, he got the inkling their glance shared more than was said.

"Indeed. Good work, Matthew." Astarelle deposited a large crystal cube on the desk. It rested on an enchanted metal base. From the iridescent flickers inside, its purpose was obvious: a giant mana battery. "Feel free to recharge what you need to before returning to your seat, dearie. It's one of the benefits of this course."

The difficulty of sourcing attuned essence was among the reasons Space Warpers were so rare. Even with Raelion's dense mana, he'd need ten times longer to refill his pool without Astral Pathway.

"Thank you, professor. But I still have some reserves." He tugged out the Wellspring Amulet pressed beneath his shirt. It was a pain to recharge, but right now he just wanted to leave the dais and think. "With your leave."

At worst, I'll look like I'm trying too hard to make a good impression.

"Hmm... If that's your preference. The spring remains always available at all times during lectures." With a complicit wink, Asterelle smoothed her gown and stood to address the hall.

Without waiting, Kai made his retreat.

Alright, I survive—

"One moment, Mister Veernon." The dean caught him at the edge of the dais. "Weighing how much of their skills to show is the prerogative of any student. Though you may want to work on your acting. And no amount of focused squinting matters if your mana flows that smoothly."

Kai knew better than to deny and showed no reaction. "Thank you for the advice, Dean Astares."

"You're very welcome. I hope you'll learn a lot from *Fundamentals* of Space Magic."

"I— I will. With your leave." He hurried up the rows of desks.

Fundamentals, huh...

This class might include first to fourth-year students, but it must not be the most advanced Space course Raelion offered.

Weird glances followed him back to his seat.

What are they staring at?

Sinking into his chair, Kai couldn't hold it in. "What is it?"

"Are you truly asking?" Rob studied him for a long moment. "You displaced the cube in *your* hand without a chant. I've never seen a second-year crazy enough to try that. Let alone a first."

"Yeah... but it was my own hand. It's much easier that close." Kai frowned, unsure how to interpret his roommate's looks. This was less than what Jolene had demanded to sponsor him in this class.

Why didn't she tell me?