

## Chapter 384 - The Line

A prickling on his chest jolted Kai from his dreams. Tipping on the edge of wakefulness, the bond made him instinctively aware of the situation.

*Dammit, Hobbes! Watch your paws. I was sleeping so nicely.*

Thin remorse rang through the bond, watered down with mischief and wry amusement.

His hand moved to rub his chest, still drowsy. Hobbes' claws had pierced the fabric of his shirt to poke him. More itchy than painful. His shirt would need some mending. Thankfully, it wasn't one of those woven with enchantments.

He wiped his sleepy eyes with the heel of his palm. Bleary, he caught just a glimpse of silver before the little terrorist blinked away.

*You can't run from me forever! I shall have my revenge!*

Threats and admonishments flowed through the bond. From the sunlight outside the windows, he'd napped for about an hour. The throbbing in his head had eased only slightly. His mouth stretched in a wide yawn. Maybe he should return to sleep—

*Huh...*

Kai blinked, pulled himself up on his elbows, and turned a few degrees right to spy beyond the backrest of the couch. About two meters back, emerald eyes stared wide on a flushing face.

"Hi." He rasped, voice hoarse from sleep.

"Hi."

They stared at each other with mirrored surprise.

Valela stepped further back.

Aware of his disheveled state, Kai wiped his chin with his sleeve and straightened.

He had not been drooling or snoring, right? *Right?*

Before he could do more, she regained her voice.

"I got a note you wanted to meet. Flynn and Rain let me in when I got here. I barely got a word in before they left," Valela spoke without pauses. "I swear I didn't know you were sleeping there. Sorry I disturbed. I should leave no—"

“Wait!” Kai blurted and cleared his throat. “I mean, you don’t need to leave for my sake. Unless you want to, of course.” His eyes swept the empty room, dotted with stray clothes, school supplies and used glasses in the sink. He *had* planned to tidy up during the weekend, and simply hadn’t found the time yet.

*I told Rob not to leave his stuff around.*

He wrenched his gaze away not to call attention to the mess. “Sorry, my brain’s still waking. You can stay. Classes have been kicking me, but I’d like to catch up on your week.”

Valela lingered, one foot toward the door, eyes flitting between. “Are you sure? It looks like you could use the rest. I shouldn’t have woken you.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s clearly a prank of theirs. I’ll deal with them later.” He smiled—more names for his list of vengeance. First, he must salvage the situation. His fingers ran to tame his head of tousled hair. No time for strategizing. “Uhm, take a seat wherever you want. Sorry, I’m being a terrible host.”

Valela huffed. “Truly horrendous. Almost like you were peacefully sleeping and not expecting guests.” A teasing smile danced on her lips.

“Some would say that.” Standing up, Kai kicked his boots under the couch and smirked. “But that’s no reason for discourtesy. Do you want anything? I think we only have water and tea to drink. But Rain always stores plenty of snacks. I can’t promise they’ll be good, but they’ll be memorable.”

“Hmm, if you want me to.” Valela took seat at the table, somehow making each movement seem graceful. “What do you have?”

“What’s the fun if you know what you eat? Pick a color, and I’ll find you something. Anything but golden yellow. Rain really doesn’t like that shade.”

“Okay... mhm, I’ll test my Luck if you do the same. Do you have aquamarine?”

“Sure, challenge accepted.” Kai buried his head in the pantry, glad for the chance to collect himself. Colorful fruits and boxes of older snacks stood neatly on each shelf. Busying himself, he cast a cloaked stream to covertly scrub the sink. “So... new semester and new courses. How did your week go? The professors don’t pull punches. Much of it must be new for you too?”

Lately, they’d only crossed paths in shared classes or the library, studying their own books without chatting much.

“It’s been a busy week. Still less than for you. I have seven electives, but only four are totally new. Most students from Fall Intake already started some courses before the Trials.”

“They did?” Kai set down a tray of assorted snacks and sat. “Each time I think I’ve closed the gal, I find out more, well... It’s like I can never catch up. Until next year, at least .”

“You’re doing more than fine, but every other student is also learning and moving ahead.” The corner of her lip lifted a little. “If *only* someone had warned you against enrolling in Winter.”

“Yeah.” He gave a wistful sigh. “If only I had met someone so wise.”

Once past the awkward start, the conversation flowed smoothly. Laughter pushed back his exhaustion. A rainbow of sweets, tarts and fruits blanketed the table. Their snacking turned into daring each other to try the strangest treats in Rain’s collection.

Some time later, Hobbes sauntered on the kitchen counter, wisely out of reach, a salmon jerky hanging from his mouth.

*Is that Yellow grade? Where did you get it?*

A smug swish of his tail was the only answer as his Majesty settled to devour the treat with pleased nibbles.

Kai sensed the threads of a conspiracy, but resisted the impulse to pull at them. Instead, he inspected the berry Valela had picked for him, round shaped like a cherry tomato with a shiny coppery peel.

“This one. Are you sure? It looks yummy.”

“Sure, your luck is ridiculous anyway.” She watched him with an innocent gleam. “And this was your next pick, wasn’t it?”

*Damn.*

“I was among several I was eyeing, yes.”

“Tell me how it tastes, then. Unless you want to admit defeat?”

“Nah, I’m still hungry.” Kai snorted. Rain didn’t purposefully buy terrible snacks, but he had a questionable palate when it came to brightly colored snacks. The copper berry gave him an off vibe.

*Can’t quit the game now.*

Face scrunched in an exaggerated grimace, he threw the berry in his mouth and bit down. The spicy pulp exploded on his taste buds with searing pain. A damned, mana-infused chilly pepper! Heat spread from his neck and soaked him in sweat. Yet, nothing showed on his face. He cocked his head as if savoring it and not fighting back the tears.

“So?” Valela leaned in, a furrow in her brow. “How is it?”

Kai hummed and raised a hand to buy time, washing his mouth with icy water. Spirits bless Water Magic. "As I said. Yummy." His voice came tight and low, but he didn't cough. "They have a pleasant aftertaste... fresh." He reached for another, then halted and offered her the painted box. "Sorry. Do you want to try one too?"

"Hmm, I think I'm full."

He gave a half shrug. "It's your loss." Eating another whole berry, he froze the mana-pepper and fake-chewed before swallowing.

Valela studied him, lips pursed. "What is it like?"

"Mmm, hard to describe. A unique taste." He made a pleased sound. "And what's the fun if I tell you? Try one for yourself."

"I am not falling for that."

"Alright. More for me."

She watched him swallow two more before curiosity bested her. "Give me one."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

He reluctantly parted with the box—only two remaining. "Here you go, princess. Do you need a knife?"

"Don't start with that nickname." She threw him a dirty look, inspecting the shiny berry. "You know how people are about titles here. I can eat it whole."

"Okay, okay. I'll find a better nickname." He rifled through the bags on the table. It took all his effort to keep a straight face as she chomped on the pepper.

Her eyes immediately widened, heat flushed her face, cheeks puffed up. "That's... *not* a berry," she wheezed and fanned herself.

Kai couldn't hold back his laughter. "You might be right. A unique taste, though." He passed her a dry cracker and a glass of water. To her credit, she only coughed twice before mastering herself.

"Thanks." She angrily munched on the cracker and dabbed her tears on a napkin. "That was... awful... I knew you were lying!"

"If you knew, why did you fall for it?"

Valela drank to primly ignore the question. "How could you eat four of them without water and still look fine?"

Kai smirked and straightened, resting his elbow on the table. "Why? Don't I look tough enough to manage that much?"

She held his gaze, then abruptly looked away and mumbled under her breath. "That's not important. You haven't really told me about your week. How're you doing, *truly*?" Her expression smoothed in keen interest.

"It's—" Kai bit his cheek and stopped himself from muttering *fine*. "It's been... a lot. I can follow fine in class. But I still miss the fundamentals in many subjects, and professors dish out assignments as if theirs is the only class that matters." He righted his slumped shoulders. Skill strain pounded his head. "Still, I kept up with all my courses. I'll be good after another nap. Just need to plan my time better and hold on until I get used to the new workload."

Valela nodded without betraying her thoughts. "Don't beat yourself up if it takes a while. Nearly every student at Raelion has had tutors for a decade, or more. Commoners included. No one can catch up on a lifetime of education in a couple months. Honestly, it's extraordinary you can follow any lecture at all. Let alone ace your tests."

"Uhm, thank you." Her earnest sincerity made it impossible to dismiss the compliments as mere niceties for his own ego. He made an effort not to fidget. "But I did have a tutor. How many hours did you spend teaching me in the library? I'd have never done as well without you."

"You're exaggerating." She tucked a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. "We were studying together. I just helped you a bit with mana theory."

"And Guide's theory, Merian history, the geography of the seven provinces and territories—"

"Alright! I've shared a couple tips. If looking at my notes were enough to learn the subject, Lys would ace every paper exam. And trust me, she doesn't."

"Well, I never denied being a genius." He smirked and held up the pose. "I can sign your textbooks if you want."

She barked a laugh. "I'll pass. Who would want their books vandalized?"

"Several people, apparently."

"I suppose among thousands of first years, deluded people are a mathematical certainty."

"Alas..." He dramatically sagged in his chair. "The burdens of being a genius. I'm besieged by sycophants."

"Right... you do look exhausted, though." A hint of concern slipped into her tone as she turned more serious. "Your rumored brilliance won't matter if you burn yourself out. I heard you took nine electives. That's *a lot*. No one can go on without proper rest."

"I know. It's just..."

"Too many interesting courses to choose from?"

"Yes. There's just so much I have to learn."

"I know the temptation, but you'll go farther if you pace yourself. Are you certain you can keep up with all the courses?"

"Yes, I'll... I'll be fine. I just need to get accustomed to the new rhythm. I can hold out for a few weeks."

"I've seen you accomplish enough crazy feats to believe it. But you already spent two months catching up on the basics courses. Then you've spent the break busy with your Elijah. When did you last rest longer than a couple hours?"

"I did..." Kai opened his mouth but came up empty. "I'm sure there was. And it's not like being busy is a bad thing."

"It's not, but it does have a price. At the risk of sounding rote: this isn't a sprint, it's a marathon. When was the last time you hung out with someone outside of class?"

"We met a few times this week."

"And how many of those did not include studying or training together?"

"Uhm, well..." Kai bit his cheek. When was the last time he'd sought out any of his friends for something not related to training? His stomach knotted. "I may not have been the best friend lately."

"Mat— Kai, I'm not bringing this up to make you feel bad. Just be mindful you don't wring yourself dry." Valela gazed at the budding oak branches past the window, eyes far off. "I know the feeling... that no matter how much you do, you're never doing enough. And if only you could push yourself one step more..."

"You?" Kai tried to hide his surprise, rubbing the back of his neck. "Of everyone I know, you always seem to have the next move figured out."

Her lips curved into a rueful smile as her fingers absently curled around a lock of hair. "I do, and I don't. I must reach Green and make connections to become governor of the archipelago. That's why I enrolled at Raelion. Despite the contracts and promises, a thousand things could go wrong. What's the line that will make the difference? Take one more course, attend one more tea party, practice just one more hour? Where is it enough?" Valela chewed her lower lip before meeting his gaze, poised once more. "But you *do* need to set a limit. Stretching yourself too thin only ensures you'll crumble before the finish line."

"Hmm." Kai looked for a quip or wise remark, but came up empty. Her responsibilities had hung around her since before their first meeting, though he'd never realized how they affected her. "That sounds like a lot to shoulder."

*Damn, is that really the best you can come up with?*

Valela's smile melted the somber veil. "I won't deny that. There were times it felt overwhelming. But it's also good to have a clear sense of purpose." Her eyes studied him intently. "Why do *you* push yourself so hard? It's been a single week, and you're too exhausted to go swimming with your friends on your day off."

"I... yeah. After seeing my master again, I couldn't stop thinking about how to gain that kind of strength..." Kai set to arrange the snacks on the table, thinking. Did he need a reason to want to improve? Maybe not. But his drive also surpassed what most people would judge *healthy*.

*When did it start?*

When they murdered his dad in front of him? When he barely managed to save Ele from the pirates' raid? When he'd been bossed around by Captain Seryne and gotten trapped in the Hidden Sanctuary? Almost a year later, his mind still shied away from those memories. After all his growth and skills, he'd still been helpless when the Praetor showed up in the Lake of Myst.

*Fucking cultists.*

Journeying through the Republic to Raelion just hammered home his meager power.

Kai stared at his hands. "It's like the professors said, if you live long enough, things are bound to go wrong sooner or later. I want to be prepared when that happens." He sipped from his water, throat suddenly parched. "Back in the archipelago, it felt like other people dictated my whole life. And when my dad..." He swallowed the words with another gulp of water, the glass slick in his hand. The flood of old memories reignited his anger as if not a day had passed. "I was never powerful enough to do *anything*. And I'm still not. Each time I can just stitch up the pieces after everything goes to shit."

"Is it strange if I say it was the same for me?" She reached across the table and gently squeezed his arm. "I was born in Higharbor, but I still couldn't decide anything for myself." Her hand brushed the side of her stomach gingerly. "It wasn't until I met Lys and Rena that I started to feel like I was truly living. They have their flaws, but that's what makes them *them*. Having friends around makes the days lighter, and the hard parts easier to carry. Even when they make me lose my mind or drag me into one of their silly schemes. Those are probably the moments I'll remember the most fondly." She wrung her hands together. "What I mean is, you can't keep putting off living until tomorrow. If you don't hold onto your relationships, they might not be there for you to protect later."

"I think... I think I get what you mean." He relaxed his stiff muscles, days of pondering coalescing into a decision. With a determined effort, he continued. "You're also right that the

best growth is a steady grind. I don't know. I might have bitten off more than I can chew. It's not like I'm going to make Green this week or the next." He chuckled awkwardly. "Not even if I kill myself with training."

A breath escaped his lips. "I'll probably drop at least one of the courses."

"Are you sure?" Her expression tightened with concern, eyes searching his face. "I didn't mean to force you."

"I know. But it's for the best. It'll be more manageable."

Could he successfully follow four mandatory and nine elective classes? Maybe. Each level in Mnemonic Mastery and Swift Learner *did* make it easier. But even then, *should* he? Was it worth pursuing his skills with single-minded focus, shoving aside all his friends and relationships?

*Sometimes I wonder how they put up with me.*

"Mrow." Sprawled on the kitchen counter with his leg up in the air, Hobbes stopped grooming his royal bottom to sniff at him. A comforting warmth trickled through their bond in response to his thoughts.

*Thank you, buddy. Of course, it's their honor to attend you. I'm glad to be along for the ride.*

"Do you know what you're going to drop?" Valela's eyes shifted between him and his familiar with an amused look.

"I have an idea, but I'd take a second opinion." Kai put aside the snacks and took a copy of his schedule from his ring. Not wanting to influence her, he listened to her thoughts before sharing his own. "I agree... that's what makes most sense. The reward doesn't balance the investment."

Without counting his five elemental classes, that left four options. He also didn't really want to abandon his combat courses, which left just two; one of them led by an obnoxious professor—Words of Power

Chanting his first spell in Ēldúm had been a rush. The Language could let him more easily access his minor affinities, or bring forth niche elemental aspects as learning aids, like how he'd studied Spatial Shift to improve his freehand blinks. Yet... how long would that take? The Fire cantrip he'd managed in class was terribly inefficient, worse than his own free casting. If he needed a whole sentence to light a simple flame, how would he begin to tackle something as complex as Space?

"It's the most rational choice," Kai muttered. Freeing one skill slot was just the initial investment. He'd need to train for months before any real return.

"Sounds like you hate it though." Valela peered at him. "You don't need to feel forced to do it."

“No, I’m doing it,” Kai reaffirmed. How had she ended up being the one arguing to keep his electives? Had he fallen for a trap?

Seeing her clear eyes and open face, he shook his head. Nah, she was just trying to be fair.

“It’s the best choice.” Though he hated giving in to Professor Verelune, harming himself out of stubborn pride was doubly foolish.

*Dammit. Jolene’s gonna gloat so much.*