

Chapter 379 - Is It Me or Them?

Lifting his satchel into his lap, Kai ruffled inside for a book to take notes on. The barest trickle of mana flowed to sharpen his senses. Muffled whispers and stolen glances all confirmed Rob's words.

Are my Space skills really that good?

If only he'd gotten *one* lesson, he would have gained a frame of reference. Why had Jolene not warned him? Whether it was deception or simple miscommunication, he would need to have a word with his advisor. But first, he had to minimize the damage.

Thank Yatei, I undersold my skills.

With a notebook and his dad's pen in his fingers, Kai set down his satchel and cracked open a clean page. "I bet plenty of students here can do better than me." He gestured to the young woman two rows below. "Like her."

Rob softly snorted, though his burnished yellow eyes never stopped examining him. "Jill is a fourth year. No other first and second year can cast a displacement spell that well. And probably just a few in the third."

Uhm... They can't be that bad, can they? Maybe they just joined the course this year for fun.

Kai shrugged, genuinely unconcerned by his feat. "Short-range blinks are the one thing I'm good at." Downplaying himself too much would look suspicious—better to redirect. "And the most skilled students are probably in the advanced class."

"The advanced— How do you even know—" Rob clamped down his rising voice, mouth shut. He leaned on the desk, feigning attention to the class as he whispered. "How did you learn? That's not something you learn in a day."

"I didn't. Same as with every skill. It was lots and lots of practice. A mage showed me the blink trick when I was a kid. And I always wanted to replicate it. Kind of like a hobby. I slowly got better."

True, he hadn't made much progress until he got trapped in the Hidden Sanctuary, but the best lies always build on a foundation of truth. The more he said, the greater the chance he'd betray himself.

"Mister Markol, Miss Sonelle, Miss Varsh. Come here." At the bottom of Onyx Hall, Professor Asterelle moved to the row of seats circling the lecturer's platform. "The dean is only here to offer advice. Show us what you worked on during break."

Jill briskly moved to join two other fourth-years in the class. They bowed to the dean with perfect form. Their backs straightened, and their chests puffed up upon receiving the barest look of acknowledgement.

Astarelle arranged a series of tools along the desks of the first row: wooden polyhedra, beads and enchanted contraptions of metal and crystals.

Kai ignored his roommate's flitting glances and focused on their presentation. The dean's motives remained a mystery, but he hadn't seemed to care about him hiding his skills either way. If nothing else, the man offered an excellent excuse to keep quiet and take notes.

Guess it could have gone worse. The main issue will be other students. At least while I'm enrolled, I should be safe from outsiders taking an interest...

Below, the technical talk of spatial spells and concepts made no more sense than arcane chanting. His pen raced over the page. Finally, they started casting. The technical details might sound gibberish to him, but he could observe the effects.

A bead of blown glass rolled over a spiraling rail. Iridescent hues shimmered on metal, the air rippled as if heated by fire, pulled by spatial forces. Crossing the first half, the bead smoothly tripled its motion. It zipped along the rails at a speed that should have normally sent it flying before abruptly slowing on the last track.

Asterelle leaned in and adjusted her lenses. "An exemplary application of stretching and folding, Miss Varsh. Your casting speed and precision have noticeably improved."

Despite hardly moving, Jill was clearly beaming.

"An almost seamless transition." The dean nodded. The bead blinked into his hand. He held it up to show a tiny crack on the fluted glass, making the girl's expression dim. "I'd focus on the spatial layering. Even opposite aspects have a point of conjunction..."

From Jill's bobbing head and gleaming gaze, the obscure technical jargon made sense to her. Exchanging a few quiet words, she prepared for another cast. Her hands rose, brows knitted in focus. Two motes of silvery light fizzled to life above her palms.

Huh, what... it almost looks like...

Kai gaped upon realizing what he was seeing—a portal. Well, a micro-sized one. The passage might fit a cotton thread, but it was still a portal. Dean Astares gave it a thoughtful nod. When the twinkling motes collapsed seconds later, Jill's smile didn't falter. Being able to hold a stable connection for any length of time was impressive. She took the feedback with a graceful bow and stepped back.

Where would I even start?

The next student was already preparing his spell. At the go-ahead, he performed a *linear spatial distortion*. His index traced a glittering line, slicing through a steel bar. The cut alternated jagged shavings and smooth metal. Despite his imperfect control, his posture lifted with the tips he got.

Kai scribbled more notes, narrowing Mana Observer on each spell.

Professor Asterelle produced the tools for their demonstration. After his classmates in forest green, a dozen third-years in burnished yellow followed. The murmurs stirred by his blinking trick faded at the prospect of receiving personal guidance.

Unlike his own test, most students cast a single spell before returning to their seats. When executed properly, Space could be entirely invisible to mundane senses.

Dean Astares shared a word of advice with each of them. His terse expression and tone never wavered, though his answers became more and more brief as he moved through the class.

Urgh, I get it.

Kai felt a strange kinship. Iridescent motes swam in his vision from prolonged focus. He pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. Had his expectations been too high? Were people showing their worst cantrips for better advice? His head drowned with new spell ideas, and the fourth years *were* impressive. Some of the third years, too.

Still... kinda disappointing.

With a few months of dedicated efforts, he could probably copy even the best demonstrations, and that's because they'd applied Space Magic in directions he'd never thought to try. Among the second-years, a couple seemed not to have even advanced their skill to Yellow.

How are they that bad? Unless... are they also hiding their abilities?

Sensing a presence, Kai looked up to see his roommate head for his turn. "Good Luck. If you want, later I'll give you tips on blin—sorry, *spatial displacement*."

"I don't need it." Rob flashed a grin. "The luck, I mean. The tips, I'll take."

Kai matched his smile. "The first session is free. Then I'm sure we can find some arrangement. Lots of chores to do around the house."

"Hey, that's not—"

"Look!" His eyes slightly widened, and he lifted his chin to gesture down. "It's almost your turn. You don't want to make Dean Astares wait."

Whipping his head to the queue below, Rob turned back to throw him a dirty look. "Funny."

"I know. Go make the first-years proud." Kai stretched his legs, set to watch the last demonstration.

All four students in burgundy—including him—showed spells that matched the second years.

The good ones probably get moved to the advanced class.

His roommate went last, casting an odd spatial bubble-shield. Whatever it did, he was one of the few to earn a nod from the dean.

As Rob sauntered back to his seat, Professor Astarelle raised her voice. "I hope you've all gained useful insight to ponder. For now, please thank Dean Astares for taking the time to help your learning."

The class stood with an almost synchronized clacking of heels, voices echoing the proper forms.

"It's my duty and pleasure to aid capable young minds. I look forward to your performance at the Moon Trials." The dean swept his gaze across the hall, then disappeared in a pale gleam. The fading flash looked more choreographic than accidental.

Kai let out a breath. His shoulders uncoiled as if the air pressure had gotten a fraction lighter. He was far from the only one to notice.

Sighs and murmurs crossed the hall. Students buzzed with conversation about the dean, the advice they'd received and levels they'd earned.

Minutes later, Professor Astarelle stood to resume the lesson. "Alright, alright, dearies. Settle down. We still have an hour together. Since you're like jittery fae sprites, I'll save the lecture on spatial theory for next class. Let's engrave the runes while the ideas are fresh and start practicing. Jillian, Almen and Teressia, gather the groups. All the spell mediums should be in the cabinets. *Remember* to observe basic precautions. Space Magic isn't a forgiving discipline." She wiggled the hand missing the ring and pinky fingers, then rested it on the crystal cube, thrumming with iridescent mana. "The Spring will remain. Do mind your younger peers if you need to refill your pool."

With habitual ease, twenty-nine students shuffled toward the names called. The groups split by years with few exceptions, mingling with the closest ones.

Kai stored his notebook. He looked around, satchel slung over his shoulder, unsure of where to go.

"No need to be nervous." Rob clapped his back as he slipped behind him to exit the row of desks. "Our professor may seem a *little* airheaded, but she's surprisingly reliable." He motioned past the gathering students, where Professor Asterelle was already heading his way. "I'll see you later. You owe me some tips."

"Yeah..."

He's not going to let this go, is he?

Kai halted at the end of the row, shifting his weight as the professor spoke with a tall student nearby. It felt strange. In his time at Raelion, it was always students who approached their teachers. Before he could decide how to handle the unfamiliar reversal, Astarelle waved him over.

“Sit already, dear. No need to stand for formalities with me. You should be proud of your testing. Truly splendid. Your fundamentals have a few gaps, but nothing steady practice and study can’t fix. Oh... right! Before I forget.” She set down two thick books, both bearing golden lettering on dark purple covers and crisp white pages. “These are your texts for the course. The academy *insists* I tell you not to lend or copy them. Report immediately to the office at the Aula Ordinis if you lose either. And I believe that’s everything.”

She swatted a lilac curl back with an exasperated sniff. “We might have more Space Warpners if people weren’t so paranoid about sharing even the most basic knowledge in the field. Alas, no one asks me to make the rules.”

“It’s truly a shame.” Kai nodded, thrown off by her manners. He took the textbook: *Basic Theorems of Spatial Theory by Annala De’Merundi*, and *Fundamentals of Space Magic by Cassius Romero Astares*. How long had he waited to get his hands on any concrete information? “Thank you, professor.”

“You’re such a dear. Study them well. These form the foundation of the course. As for supplemental texts, you may ask me directly. You’ll need access to the restricted section or the vaults,” she winked. “Do not look so worried. First-years don’t usually join this late, but I’m confident you’ll do just fine. Now, I have a few questions for you. Practical tests reveal a lot, but not everything. With Dean Astares present, we didn’t have time to delve into your spellcasting process.”

“Of course.” Kai kept his expression open—a student with *nothing* to hide.

They went over each exercise he’d cast, hopping between topics in no clear order, trading questions and answers.

“Alright. That makes sense....” The quill in her hands swayed as she finished noting. “Lastly, I’ve seen your casting skills. But how deep is your knowledge in spatial theory?”

Non-existent.

“A little spotty,” Kai said. “My teacher believed in a more *practical* approach.”

“Hmm, I see. How... *unorthodox*. He must have possessed a deep reserve of Space mana for you to use. Though I’ve heard of stranger tales.” She twirled a curl around her quill. “Well, this should suffice for now. I’m eager to see you in this class. I’m sure you’d like to join your peers too. For today, feel free to practice or simply observe. Any of the fourth-years or myself will be happy to answer your questions.”

Before he could think of a response, she swirled away, checking on the older students and mumbling to herself.

And that passed too.

Kai remained seated. His long-awaited textbooks tugged at his curiosity, but he could check them later too. He wandered over where the groups of students practiced. Watching his older peers cast cantrips and chat, he began to piece together a clearer picture of their skill and the course.

Human beings weren't made to grasp Space. To level the Space Magic, mages needed relentless practice and years of study. Mostly the latter, considering the difficulties of just gathering enough mana to practice away from special locations.

He joined the queue to replenish his reserves with the cube battery. Mimicking those before him, he reached out. His fingertips tingled as they brushed the cold crystal. A sea of iridescent mana flickered inside, the surface easily yielding to his pull.

Space essence flowed up his arm. The conversion rate was slightly faster than Astral Pathway, though it didn't level the profession skill. While it wasn't the flashiest ability, he must admit he'd underestimated the value of having ready access to attuned mana.

That's still not enough to explain how they are so bad. Or... am I the abnormal one?

After watching a second-year student botch a blink spell a dozen times with little progress, the next piece clicked into place. Affinity and talent certainly played a role, but so did his boon: Spatial Attunement. No matter how hard they tried, most people didn't improve by simply bashing their heads against a spell.

Though he could not put his understanding into words, the boon granted him an intuitive grasp of spatial energies.

Even using Spatial Shift as a reference helped me improve a ton. Guess I owe Zervathi a thanks... Well, maybe. Next time I see him. Better not think his name out loud.

Lastly, and the *most* important factor by far: Hobbes.

Besides boosting his affinity, the bond granted him a unique perspective on how to bend Space to his will. That was already before they specialized the skill. If what he'd touched upon during the dean's test was any indication, he was barely scratching the surface.

How could a silly human reach such heights, if not for his companion's vastly superior understanding of Space?

His thought rang loud—definitely not aware of the snooping fluffball. It was a coincidence that a pleased purr echoed back through the bond.

I won't risk getting a big head with him around. Hey, that's a compliment.

Tinkering with spells and bickering with his familiar, minutes flew by until a chime startled him. Around the Onyx Hall, students already cleaned up and gathered their things for their next class. It was over. He had survived his first Space class—more or less unscathed.

I'll count it as a success.

Wishing to evade Rob's pestering, Kai scampered toward the exit. Two weeks of hiding from other students had honed his ability to sneak into the shadows.

Just six more hours of classes... Jolene might have had a point about that schedule. And she definitely owes me an explanation.

He rushed off to grab a quick bite before his next lecture. The dean's ambush had left him more drained than he'd expected. Alas, Raelion didn't slow for anyone. Professors would accept no excuses, no matter how deeply he wished to sprawl on his bed with a cup of steaming tea, and ponder the deluge of new information.

No rest for the wicked.

The hours blurred together, a stop by a cafeteria, then off to locate his next class. He covered pages of notes during Applications of Earth Magic - Adept and Mana Theory - Novice. His mind kept circling back to the Space class. What were the dean's true motives? What of the spell applications of Space Magic?

So many possibilities.

At last, he reached his final class of the day: Mixed Sparring and Battle Strategy - Novice, taught by Professor Bertram. The sun had dipped below the trees as he entered a large domed pavilion. Inside, hundreds of students gathered, their uniforms sporting both gold and black lining.

Spirits, I'm beat. At least, there should be less note-taking here.

After spending most of his days buried in books and mana exercises, he'd wanted a class to maintain a minimum of physical exercise. The professor hadn't arrived yet. He circled the outskirts of the arena. With Shadow veiling his features, he wasn't prepared when two hands poked his back.

"A chip for your thoughts."

"What—" Kai spun around to find two familiar faces, peering at him, both chuckling at his start. "Hey... Why didn't you tell me you'd be here?"

"I thought you knew," Flynn said. "It's a mandatory course for Martial Studies."

"And I didn't want to ruin the surprise," Rain added with a grin. "Also, Flynn told me not to say."