

Chapter 381 - The Virtue of Stubbornness

The bell chime cut off the scribbling of two hundred hands.

"Seems for today our time is up," Professor Asmondous lowered his gaze to the textbook of Arcane Physiology & Phenomena. "Finish reading chapters seven to ten on your own. Xe'thok's Twelve Theorems on the Interactions of Essence and Beasts are fundamental for this course. You may pick any two of them for your essays. Mind your handwriting. I won't grade anything I can't read. Questions will have to wait until next class." Ignoring the raised hands, he swept toward the door behind the dais. "I have urgent matters to attend to."

Kai followed the ruddy man, watching the door shut behind him, and lowered his arm.

Alright.

Across the Opal Hall, intent focus turned to idle chatter as students began filing out. Another lecture done. Two more blocks today. Fifteen minutes to the next class.

Kai half-stood, bent over his desk. He rifled through his textbook and notes, scribbling ideas on how he might tackle the essay. Mnemonic Mastery couldn't yet save his every stray thought.

"Wait, I'm coming!" A student strode behind him, bumping his chair. The seat dug into the back of his knees and jolted his writing arm, drawing a blotchy arc over his neat paragraphs.

"Hey!" Kai threw a glare at the culprit's back. The teen didn't turn, laughing with his friends, leaving with no word of apology.

Asshole.

He swallowed his thoughts of retribution, lips pressed in a thin line. Not worth the time. The ink was already seeping into the page. Before the paper absorbed it completely, he tugged at it with Water Magic. The second year that showed him the trick made it look so easy; it took careful control not to rip the fibers. Oily flecks of pigment slowly drifted/lifted off the page. The result looked... a little less hideous. At least, he'd stopped the blotch from reaching the page below.

Switching to his dad's enchanted pen, he redrew the letters. Way more convenient than quills, but his professor of runes said they were better training for engraving.

I'll need to organize the notes tonight anyway.

The light projection above the lecturer's dais was fading. His eyes flashed to check he hadn't missed anything. Everything noted, he closed his books and tried to store them away.

The leather covers remained in his hand.

Huh... what...

It took him a moment to realize why: his ring was full.

He immediately stopped trying to squeeze in more, afraid to cause the slightest wear. Color-coded notebooks, texts, loose papers and supplies crammed each corner inside. How did he not notice? And when had his artifact gotten so messy?

He *always* kept a little empty space for emergencies.

Keeping up with the new classes had left little space for other thoughts. Kai rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm. No matter. Just more tasks for the weekend list. He also needed to buy more notebooks.

Memo 28: Inventory & tidy up ring.

Memo 29: Browse the Wing Aurea for notebooks not at usurious prices. The combat courses could share one. Elemental magic too.

...

Memo 30: Catch up on sleep.

With the mnemonic reminders fixed, he stuffed his books into his satchel and moved to leave the Opal Hall. Eleven minutes to the next class. Two days until the weekend. He just needed to get used to the new courses.

His steps echoed on the marble hallways. While most of Winter Intake got culled in the Trials, the gap with Fall Intake had shortened, but not filled. Rather than the rushed frenzy of the first two months, it was the demands and expectations that had grown the most.

Flynn had publicly offered to take care of the team for Mixed Combat. He trusted him on that. With the score system based on Mid-Term Trials' rankings, they had little room to choose.

Professors dove into topics without waiting. Elemental practice and homework essays piled on. It would get better. Once he learned to juggle his courses and fell into the routine, things *would* get better. They *had* to. He had plenty of room to optimize. Routes between classes, study time, skill practice, sleep.

Features veiled in shadow, he descended two levels to exit in the academy's central cluster. Spring air blowing through soaring buildings, cooling his rush. Mana flared through his veins, jolting his mind awake and pushing back his tiredness.

Next lecture... right, Pearl Hall. Words of Power. Huh...

His first class had been... less than ideal.

The course only provided an Ēldūm dictionary that he couldn't read and no textbook. Most people referred to it as simply the Language since the name itself carried power, whether written or spoken. He didn't mind relying solely on Professor Almelune's dry explanation and

his notes. Especially when she often asked for questions, only... all his attempts to speak up went ignored.

Probably a misunderstanding.

All professors had their eccentricities.

Stepping into the shadow of the Caelus Tower, he slid past the students milling on the marble steps. A group of third-years choked the elevator queue. Too antsy to wait, he went for the stairs. Then he remembered that Pearl Hall stood on the ninth floor on the second flight.

Great, well... I'm optimizing physical training.

His calves burned when he stepped into the arched hallway above. On his right, wide windows offered a panoramic of Raelion, shimmering lakes nestled among rolling hills, paved trails meandering through lush gardens. With no time to appreciate the view, he hurried on. Two turns right and one left. He stopped before a set of carved double doors, a list of questions in hand—Professors always preferred written words.

~~Memo 13: Prepare questions and clarifications for Words of Power.~~

He'd kept it to two pages.

Students filled the seats inside, sharing notes with quiet voices. Ten rows below, Professor Almelune occupied her desk. Her dainty fingers held up a tome inlaid with mana gems, high nose and pale eyes focused on the pages.

I'll ask later... No one likes being interrupted while reading.

No misunderstandings today.

He took the last free spot near the front and unwound his veil. The familiar tingle of Shadow mana slid off, leaving him exposed. No one glanced his way. His face wasn't *that* widespread.

Students stood in greeting at the chime of the bell.

Professor Almelune finished the page, set golden bookmarks and waved them down. "Greetings, and be seated. I hope you've all studied the forty-nine most common syllabic blocks. And memorized the required nouns. If you have questions, now's the time to speak before we move on."

Kai's hand sprang up. Second row, no cloaking—perfectly visible. He narrowly kept from waving his list and maintained a patient demeanor.

Her gaze moved over him, motioning to a flame-haired boy on his right, who rifled through the dictionary. "I'm Tamel of House Bloomlight. I had a question about the nouns on page eight..."

Professor Almelune tersely nodded. "The correct pronunciation is Avèr, meaning fire. Rather than Avēr, meaning climbers. Ēldūm is a tonal language. Using the wrong pitch can completely change the meaning of a word and its sentence. I shall not remind you what would happen if you make such a mistake during casting. There is a reason why the academy discourages personal improvisation until the adept course. Other questions?"

Word passed to a girl with hair the colors of wilting grass. "Delinda of House Remelli. I've already learned a fifth of the nouns here." She tapped her copy of the textbook and spoke with a slightly nasal tone. "How do I progress my skills after I memorize every page?"

Professor Almelune smiled without warmth. "That book only contains a fraction. The Language possesses a myriad of words and permutations to describe all shades of creation. Some say millions. It's debated if anyone has ever fully mastered it. Correct pronunciation is only the first step. Only through deep understanding and practice can one truly bring out its power. Control the spell with intention and not let the spell control you."

Three more students asked questions, none of them him.

"That's enough." Professor Almelune cocked her head toward the tomes open on her desk. "Today, we shall discuss how the Merian Republic solidified the alphabet and principal syllabic components. Understanding the history of the Language is as fundamental as proper pronunciation to grasp its power. Ēldūm is more than mere speech; it's a living thing. Always changing and *growing*."

She raised a pale hand. "Aketh ke illum flehe..." The soft chant settled over the hall. A star of pulsing light hovered above her palm. "Each mage who speaks words of power leaves their mark. Even the impact of an archmage throughout their lives is barely perceptible, to say nothing of apprentices. Still, even the most infinitesimal traces accumulate over centuries, expanding and deepening the Language.

"That's part of the reason why not every word is equal in strength, scope and flexibility. Some names are more dangerous to speak, or even write. Naturally, none of those are given to you."

Kai slowly dropped his arm. More hands lowered behind him, so he wasn't the only one.

Guess she can't answer everybody...

Taking notes left no space for self-mulling. The lecture leaned toward theory over practical demonstrations. He could follow each individual point, though he felt he was still missing context: nouns he'd never heard, concepts he'd never studied and scholars he had never read. His mind whizzed to puzzle out the pieces, stitching the fragments of understanding over the widening gap.

Professor Almalune accepted more questions than most courses. More hands were raised. Students picked, others ignored.

The cycle repeated.

His cramping arm remained up throughout, always waiting, never called. He wasn't alone. When other students gave up, he persisted. During his first class, he sat in the far back; his current seat left no room for misunderstandings.

What's her problem? She's deliberately ignoring me.

Everyone in the hall had noticed by now, though no one commented. A little awkwardness wouldn't deter him. Professor Valdibal singled him out in front of the whole class of Combat Magic. The few glances now washed off him. Truly, Professor Almalune seemed the only one willfully blind to him.

Whatever petty game she played, he wasn't going to make it easier for her.

"Alright, students. We have about a quarter hour left. Set aside your papers and choose one or more chants to practice." She blithely motioned to the light projection. Seven spells for seven of the most common elements. "These are designed for safety. I'd still advise picking a scarce affinity in your pool. You can't channel mana you don't have. Anchor your intent and aim your focus. Call for me if anyone gets stuck. I'll check on all of you in a moment."

And I thought Flynn was dead to any sense of shame.

His left arm hurt. Unwilling to give her the satisfaction of switching to the right, he put down his quill and turned his attention to the exercises. The pronunciation had been translated into Merian characters. They looked fairly basic even to his threadbare knowledge.

Let's try Fire.

He worked his stiff jaw from keeping a politely neutral expression. Hand still raised, he tried the sounds in his mouth. He'd studied all the squiggly accents and meant to get them right.

No one had explained exactly how the casting worked. Even among the novices, they assumed students possessed some familiarity with chanting.

How hard can it be...?

A litany of stilted chanting pervaded the hall, exclamations of success and embarrassed huffs. He wouldn't let a snooty professor ruin this experience for him.

Keeping his senses and ears open for both, Kai sectioned his mana, aimed his intent above his palm and spoke. "Avèr isēli ke āveeli nār ta'èrth." The words made his mouth tingle as he carefully enunciated each sound.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Did I say it wrong—

An unseen force tugged at the fiery motes in his arm. Fire essence sluggishly whirled according to his intent. It was him moving them, yet not him. An odd sensation—not entirely pleasant. Forewarned, he resisted the urge to wrestle back control against the spell and stayed relaxed.

Kai couldn't help gawking as an orange flame flickered to life above his open hand.

It actually... worked. I chanted a spell!

Pure glee washed his thoughts and curved his lips. The flame swayed with his focus, nearly burning his palm before his mana ran out.

Uhm... I might need a little practice. It's not super efficient.

Ding

New skill learned! Ēldūm (lv1) - Enhances the ability to speak Words of Power and shape the world around you. Channel essence through pitch, rhythm and cadence. Power through knowledge and understanding.

Well, thank you.

Swept in the euphoria of learning new magic, Kai forgot his tiredness and vexation. He even almost lowered his arm. *Almost*. Chanting required no hands, and a man should stick to his principles.

He siphoned more Fire mana from his Wellspring Amulet. A new flame blossomed before his reserves ran dry, and he moved onto his other elements. He took three attempts to nail the pronunciation of the Air cantrip. Earth and Water came easier, flowing smoother and *stronger*.

Uhm, the efficiency is still terrible. I guess that's normal with no skills.

A notification blinked.

Ding

New skill learned! Chanting (lv1) - Improves your ability to shape mana in structured spells through spoken incantations. Increased control over your words, rhythm, pitch and pronunciation.

Thanks, bud. At least someone here appreciates me.

Chances were he wouldn't learn either skill, but he still enjoyed having his efforts recognized.

Focused on his casting, he forgot his surroundings until the hour chimed.

"If there are no more questions, this concludes today's lecture." Professor Almalune smiled primly, storing her tomes with an elegant wave of her hand. "Master these spells before the next class. I expect you to learn the correct incantation even if you do not possess the affinity."

Donning the proper manner and expression, Kai dashed to intercept the professor. His satchel caught a desk and bounced on his back in his rush.

No one can accuse me of not giving an honest try.

"Excuse me, professor." He held the list of written questions over his notebook as he bowed. "May I ask a question? Specifically, I had a few doubts regarding the historical context when the Merian Republic officially endorsed the Language." His smile didn't falter under her displeased stare and fluctuating aura.

"Questions should be asked during class. You are?"

"Matthew Veernon, professor."

"No House or sponsor...?"

"No, professor." Kai lifted the list he spent an hour drawing. "But I was wondering if you could clear—"

"You may ask the next class," she sniffed. "Grasping the deeper meanings of Ēldūm isn't for all minds. If you lack the basic education to follow my lectures and chants, I'd suggest enrolling in a course more suited to your level. Raelion isn't a place for everyone."

Kai blinked.

Alright...

When he gathered his wits, she had already spun away.

Honestly, her bias for choosing students had been pretty obvious after the first few presented themselves. So obvious, blatant, stupid and petty that, in fact, he thought he must be wrong—a misunderstanding brewed by his exhaustion.

Elitist asshole.

Kai shrugged and strode off. One more lecture. Fifteen minutes to reach the Topaz Hall.

Whatever.

The existence of patrician bigots was hardly a revelation. If anything, he was mildly surprised he'd only encountered one such professor—at least, among those who openly showed it.

At least, there was no chance of being ignored in his next lecture: Applications of Earth Magic. Time he had a chat with Jolene.