

## Chapter 376 - Retainer

Kai smoothed the grin sparked by the notification into impassive composure as he returned to his place in the ranks. Poorly concealed whispers and glances rained on his senses.

Awe. Envy. Curiosity. Glee. Hostility. And more he didn't care to investigate.

His gaze firmly avoided the attempts to catch his attention, fixing on Professor Valdibald's lecture through the scroll window.

*I finally got it.*

The exact wording varied from person to person, but he recognized the specialization from the library: Elemental Attunement. Recalling the sting of reaching that milestone only to be offered two options he'd disliked still irked him. To think that was the norm for most people—Raelion's students included. Without skill-specific training at Yellow, few earned specializations beyond the basic path.

*I may be a little spoiled, but I can't compare myself to the average if I want to match Elijah.*

The duels with his peers had been instructive that way. He might have walked away with three wins and a draw, but, among all classes, combat magic was *his* field.

Most students had only trained in heavily curated environments, but they had solid foundations. Even Kastor had wielded impressive firepower. Once they learned how to apply it, their combat potential would soar. In a real fight, with professions and enchanted equipment, the outcome would be far less predictable. Not to mention, the Trials' rankings didn't necessarily match the strongest students.

*I can't rest on my laurels if I want to keep my lead. Specializing Body Augmentation is just another step. I should go ahead with it.*

Bloodrush wasn't a bad option, but ignoring damage to his body to squeeze out more power didn't erase his injuries—it merely postponed the burden. Kahali's Retribution already rewarded shed blood. He had no intention of becoming a berserker. Just because he could endure pain, it didn't mean he enjoyed it.

*Should I reread it? Just in case...*

Kai wrenched his eyes away from the elegant script on the window.

*Nope. I don't have decision paralysis. I'm just careful.*

**\*Ding\***

**You've chosen to follow the path of Elemental Attunement. Congratulations, **Body Augmentation (lv50)** can now reach lv75.**

The grin fought to chip his poise.

*Pity I can't test it right now.*

"As Mister Elcarin has so ably demonstrated, making assumptions with incomplete knowledge and biases can carry dire consequences in a fight." Professor Valdibald paced before the ranks like a general addressing his most disappointing platoon. "Presumption has killed more mages than skirmishes in the north over the last forty-four years since the Remarrian War. Accurate intelligence is one of the pillars of warfare. But that's a topic for second years. If you last that long."

*He sure is energetic.*

The speech showed no sign of abating. Despite the unjust stress from unmasking his identity, the spars themselves took no more than half an hour.

Kai settled in with a diligent expression, cloaking his channels as he tried weaving elemental threads in his leg.

Unlike most specializations that brought set changes and intuitive understanding, Elemental Attunement offered neither. The difficulty and potential backlash from channeling the elements through body enhancement were frequently cited as its greatest drawback in the compendiums. But no one complained about its power.

The Guide always balanced gain against hardship.

Having multiple affinities increased both the specialization's potential and the effort required for mastery, since each element behaved differently. With such a steep investment, restricting its use to Elemental Swordsman alone would have been a waste.

Why had he enrolled at Raelion at all, if not to learn?

*So many possibilities... I wish I'd hit Green just to need fewer hours of sleep.*

"I expect to receive your reports by next week," Professor Valdibal said. "Assignments can be turned in to the adjunct instructors before each lecture. You'll discover I'm not shy about awarding both merits *and* demerits. And no, Mister Sovelle. This report does not replace the analysis of the spars. Five demerits for disturbing the class."

A lanky student in the third row went milk pale. Professor Valdibal continued without pause. His oppressive aura cut down on the bubbling complaints.

"Combat Magic may be a practical class, but that does not excuse ignorance of historical and military classics. I'll reiterate the importance of knowledge in duels and war for as long

as you remain my students. Now, start running laps.” He curtly motioned to the grassy field. “As you’ve seen, athletic fitness can greatly aid a fight. Your pursuit of magic doesn’t justify wasting half your attributes. Don’t stop till I say!”

The crowds shuffled with sluggish confusion, though none dared complain out loud. Kai had barely crossed a row when a girl with pink hair stood in his way.

“Greetings.” She smiled a little too brightly, performing an airy courtesy. “I’m Phelilla from House Demoore. Is it true House Blackwoods sponsors or—”

“Huh!” He choked, throwing a frightened glance behind her. More students already headed his way, scowling not to have moved first. “The professor is glaring at us.”

“Pardon, is he—” Phelilla stiffly turned to Valdibal.

Before she caught the lie, Kai darted into the churning students. Bodies and voices pressed on him. He opened his way with elbows and shoves. Emerging from the ranks, he reinforced his cloak of Shadow and began running.

Four red poles delimited the field with a dozen students jogging ahead.

*Mhmm... this feels nostalgic.*

Before he could breathe in relief, gazes pierced his back, strides pounding at his heels.

*Damn annoying.*

He channeled his Shadow mana, abandoning subtly for power, and sprinted to mix with the front runners.

“You are going to crash if you don’t pace yourself.” A stout teen huffed. He had short dark-green hair, almost in a military cut. His sunken gaze remained ahead, seemingly not recognizing him.

Kai hummed in assent and positioned so the bigger guy would shield him from view. Ten breaths later, he seemed to have lost his pursuers.

*At least for now. Is this how Alden feels?*

Those looking to harass him seemed too slow, and the few who matched his pace didn’t seem interested in talking.

“What are you waiting for? A written invitation?” Valdibal bellowed. “Hop, hop. Put those young legs and lungs to use. And watch the markers! The first who cuts the corners will wish they’d been expelled!”

*Yeah, nothing better than a relaxing jog. I almost forgive him for publicly announcing my identity.*

If he had to break his anonymity, besting four elite students must rank among the best approaches. Still, he'd mourn the days of lost peace.

*What's done is done. I'll have to adapt. Hmm... do I actually need to write an analysis of my own fights?*

Kai glanced at Valdibal's straight back and shook his head. If nothing else, it would make for easy merits.

The rest of the class flew by amidst drills that mixed basic fitness exercises with spellcasting. He shadowed his large, silent buddy, united through shared effort without the need for words or names. His would-be stalkers seemed too busy heaving, cursing and sweating to look for him amid the crowd. Their ragged breathing drew a righteous smile to his lips.

The number of students struggling to cast spells on the move was frankly embarrassing. Even those in decent shape must have been skipping cardio.

"...good enough! I said I did twenty repetitions!" A student shouted at an adjunct instructor. "What would you know? Are you questioning my word? "

Valdibal stood beside them in a single breath. "This is not a debate, Mister Cavyll." His voice swallowed the field. "As long as you stand on my grounds, every instructor here represents *my* will and authority. You will respect them as you would me, and you will *not* talk back. This will earn you twenty demerits." His eyes narrowed to freeze a protest before it could take form. "Unless you'd like to make that forty? No? I thought so."

After the commotion settled, the number of complaints sharply decreased.

Sebastian Elcarin rejoined them not much later. White bandages covered his swollen, purpling face, though they did nothing to hide the dark glares he sent his way, charged with more hostility than seemed reasonable. His aura only quelled after Asidora flanked him to exchange a quick word.

*Sorry, man. But you did it on your own. I just punched you once.*

Losing himself in the lull of physical exertion, the silvery chime swept the field too soon. No thinking, just doing. Despite the rough start, Combat Magic turned out to be quite relaxing.

Kai dusted off his jacket, weaving Water and Fire to smooth the creases and burnt smell from the duels. It would need a proper washing, but this should get him through the last classes without reprimands for lacking decorum.

"Mister Veernon. A word with you," Valdibal called as the students staggered out of the field. His severe look sent his lagging stalkers running, then returned to weigh him. "Good work today. Twenty merits for the spars. One's starting circumstances don't determine how far they can rise through work and effort."

*Huh...?*

"Thank you, professor." Kai dipped his head with the perfunctory forms.

*Cheapskate.*

Taking his dismissal, he moved along the stands enclosing the Doursteel Grounds toward the stream of students. He walked quickly, shoulder hunched and head low. His likeness and description would soon spread.

*What a bother. Guess Shadow Magic will get an even bigger workout.*

Avoiding any encounters till Caelus Tower, he took the spiraling marble staircase to the upper floors. His personal issues would not stop or slow the lectures. Things were bound to get more annoying before they got better.

*I should ask Alden for tips. Hmm... actually, he could help a lot.*

It was always easier to convince people of what they already wanted to believe, feeding their misconceptions. Disparate ideas formed into a plan. He'd have to talk with his roommate first.

*That could make most stalkers back off.*

Kai sank into the cold chair in the back row of the Amethyst Hall. Less than a hundred students attended the elective, including several with uniforms lined with silver from Artisan Studies.

Professor Nouvelli strode toward the raised dais, carrying an armful of scrolls and books. His hair was streaked with silver despite looking in his forties.

"Please, be seated." His nasal voice called. He deposited his cargo on the desk and waved them down. "Welcome to Arcane Physiology & Phenomena, the study of the interactions between mana and matter. It's not marked as such, but you should consider this course an introductory. It's a foundation to expand your knowledge or find which specific subjects to deepen.

"We'll cover how essence affects living beings and the environment. What is often referred to as mana anomalies, exotic regions and the unique constitutions of beasts and other creatures. What we *won't* cover here is sapient biology and Guide-related topics," he spoke without pauses. "Don't interrupt the class if you can't follow. Take note and save your questions for the end of the lecture."

Raised hands awkwardly lowered. Light projections glimmered on the white wall behind the professor.

Kai cracked open his book. His quill raced across the page to keep up with Nouvelli's lecture. Arcane Physiology & Phenomena was among the electives he'd considered

dropping, but this was fundamental knowledge he needed if he ever wanted to explore high-mana zones.

By the end of the two hours, his brain was wrung out.

"We're done for today. Read chapters four through six for the next lectures. We'll start from there," Professor Nouvelli said, marching out of the Amethyst Hall with no space for questions.

*Why am I not surprised?*

Kai stored his notebook in his satchel. His thumb and index massaged his eyes to stave off the throbbing headache from overusing Mnemonic Mastery and Split Mind.

*Just one more.*

Perhaps Jolene had a point about the number of electives. Not that he would throw in the towel after the first day. He just needed to get used to the new routine. It would become easier. Hopefully.

A surge of Mana jolted his senses awake. He only had a vague idea of the route to his next class. The sun had dipped below the horizon as he crossed into the Tower Vitae and hurried down the vaulted hallways.

He made it into the hall just at the chime of the bell.

The professor didn't look to be here yet. Students milled about the rows of desks arranged with matte enchanted cauldrons, polished metal tools and glasswares—just about seventy people, mainly from Artisan Studies. Large enchanted cabinets lined the walls and the air smelled of herbs and burnt potions.

Kai fixed his cloak, going to find a seat when he spotted a familiar figure in the corner, the desk beside him strangely free.

"Hey!" He put down his satchel. "You must teach me how you do it!"

Alden looked up from examining his tool. His cold scowl eased upon recognizing him. "Hi. What do you mean?"

"Well... I thought you were kinda famous." He scratched his neck and lowered his voice. "But you're sitting alone. How do you keep people from swarming you?"

"Poison and threats," he said tersely. Nibbles peeked from his collar. His pink tongue flicked with a friendly hiss.

"I..."

"That was a joke." Alden patted beside the chest pocket on his sharply ironed uniform. "I wear an amulet. It makes people less likely to notice me unless I call attention to myself. And a lot of them have already tried and failed in the first semester. Uhm. Were you found out?"

"Professor Valdibal called me in front of the entire Magic Combat class."

"Oh, I'm sorry for that." He offered a sympathetic look. His fingers fiddled with the nobs regulating the cauldron, seemingly without thought.

"In the end, it went okay. Do you have another of those amulets, by chance?"

He hung his head apologetically. "My grandmother commissioned it for me. I could ask her, though."

"Nah, it's fine. I've got a workaround," Kai shrugged. Practicing more Shadow Magic couldn't hurt. "I just have to get through this week. Another fad will catch their attention. I'm not that interesting."

"Mhmm." Alden scanned him up and down, not saying a word.

*What?*

"There is something else." Kai organized his earlier plan in his head.

Having noticed how people held the Great Houses in such reverence and dread, he'd rather ask for permission and avoid any misunderstanding. Alden was accommodating, but he was just a teen boy in a very large family.

"Do you think I could pretend your House is actually sponsoring me? Most rumors already assume it since we completed the Trials together. And it'd reduce the people approaching me. Sorry, is it an offensive request?" he asked. He still didn't understand half of the patrician social norms and taboos.

"It's not offensive given our level of familiarity," Alden said, thoughtfully petting Nibbles, who'd coiled against his neck. "If it's *just* about a sponsorship, you can use the Blackwoods name to imply and let people assume."

"I can?" Kai grinned in relief. "Thank you, I mean it. This will help a *lot*. Do you not like... need your House's permission?"

"Not for this little." His brows furrowed. "Unless... Do you want to turn the rumor true? Sign an actual sponsorship—"

The doors of the hall shut with a *bang*.

"Forgive me for the delay. I had to assist a student who managed to poison herself." Professor Myrlette entered in a flutter of robes and skirts. She had a tall and thin figure, gliding with prim poise. "You'd think by the third year they'd know not to mix Marsalia root

and azure sage without forty-five minutes of boiling in a solution of saturated Earth and Air mana. You'd think, and you'd be wrong. Sit, sit, please."

"Look how many new faces." Her eyes widened to study the class. "Welcome to Herbal Alchemy, novices. Let's not waste more time." She tapped her nails on a crystal cube. Lines of text appeared projected on the wall. "I've prepared a recipe for today. Quenched Dragontears. It's just a simple Spirit tonic to get acquainted with each other and gauge your levels. There is no learning Alchemy without doing. You can learn herbs and properties from the encyclopedias on your own."

She gestured to two students sitting in the front. "Miss Varten, Mister Allenni. Could you hand out the ingredients? One set each. They should have all been stocked in the third cabinet. Any questions? Hmm... yes. You in the second row."

A dark-haired boy straightened to speak. "Professor, can we use our own tools to brew?"

"Only from the journeyman courses onward. For now, you'll have to make do with the standard equipment provided by the academy. I'm grading you, not your tools. Anyone else?"

Despite her gaunt frame, seeming ready to topple with a breeze, Professor Myrlette moved like a whirlwind. Five minutes after she entered, every head stood focused on processing the low-Yellow herbs provided. The tap-tap of cutting knives chopping, and clinking of glassware filled the hall with a musical rhythm.

Kai analyzed the bone-white, tubular stalk of grass. The recipe looked elaborate but doable. Though they felt odd in his hands, he'd already gotten acquainted with the standard tools to pass the basic qualifications.

"What's with those cuts? We're trying to brew a potion, not a funny-smelling salad." Professor Myrlette strode between the tables, offering a pointed suggestion to each student.

Well, almost everyone.

"Excellent technique, Blackwoods. Keep an eye on your companion. We provide each piece of equipment for a reason. Each one is best fit for a purpose."

"Yes, professor," Alden said, his hands extracted the twisting veins of the stalk with an expert ease that looked almost magnetic.

Beside him, Kai felt like a clumsy child. He waited for her to move out of earshot to speak. "Have you brewed this tonic before?"

"Not this one." He gave a glance over at his work. "You're doing well. But you should use the cleft scalpel for the silverbloom stem."

"I see. Like this...?"

“Put more pressure on the tip and try to squeeze the stem lightly. Yes, like that.”

They worked in quiet focus, interspaced by Alden’s terse tips. Kai tried to imitate his technique, but the skill gap couldn’t be bridged in a single session, or even a hundred. Fate and circumstance had given him less time to practice than he’d liked since the affair with the Sanctuary.

*He’d probably still be better. Is that what it means to come from a House of alchemists?*

“How are you in this course?” Kai sighed at last. “You should definitely be taking something more advanced.”

Alden shrugged. “I didn’t take the qualification exams in the first semester. My focus is on my magical studies. I already have tutors at home. Besides, it never hurts to hone your fundamentals.”

“Alright, students. Time’s almost up.” Professor Myrlette clapped. “Bring me your potions. You may keep those successfully brewed. Isn’t that the best part of Alchemy? Drinking your efforts. Do not worry, Mister Astel. Today, I won’t be grading failures. I can smell the burnt from here. Properly scrub your cauldron and tools. You’ll be reusing them. Equipment maintenance is essential. ”

Kai sieved his potion into a vial, a smoky silver liquid that glittered when he shook it, and queued before the raised dais. His potion ended up as just one of thirteen successful brews, and among the better ones, thanks to Alden. The tonic would supposedly encourage Spirit growth—it tasted gross.

*One day done. Many more to go.*

His roommate’s do-not-bother-me aura seemed to shield him too, as they headed back to their dorm. He couldn’t wait for his first Space Magic class tomorrow. Hopefully, he’d get a good professor. How many spatial experts did even Raelion have?