

Chapter 92 - Secrets

Kai paused, the attention of his teachers on him. Acting took over, making his nervousness and hesitation melt away—on the outside.

Virya sat at the head of the table, Elijah on her right. With only one more place set for dinner, Kai took a seat on her left.

A flowery scent filled the air. A subtle smell, sweet and dry, unlike any plant he tended in the garden. He didn't take long to identify the culprit: the candles.

Is Virya one of those scented candle fanatics?

He hadn't often been allowed inside, except for the library, but he had noticed a few colorful wax sticks around the mansion. Drowned amidst all the eccentric and exotic decorations, he never paid them much attention. The rare times he walked the halls at night, the rooms were lit with mana-fueled crystals.

"You wanted to see me?" Kai asked.

"It's time we have a chat." Virya nodded. "But not before eating. I don't want to let the food go cold." Her focus was taken by the silver serving tray. Lobsters, crabs and shrimps were neatly arranged on wide salad leaves. A booklet rested beside her plate.

Should have expected it...

Without another choice, Kai tried to ignore his nervousness and do the same. There were nine different pieces of silverware by his plate.

Oh, great.

Stealing glances at his two teachers, Kai served himself a big crab with gravy and began eating. He had breakfast with Virya enough times to know she didn't care much about table manners. Elijah was quite the opposite and gave him a warning glance from across the table.

Virya ate with her casual grace, each movement the steps of a ballet dancer. She continued leisurely eating, as if they were not dining at the same table. It was maddening how nonchalant she acted after setting up this mysterious charade. Still, her lack of interest wasn't a terrible thing. It was reassuring to know she wouldn't care even if he floundered.

Kai had never seen Elijah eat before. He had to begrudgingly admit Elijah's actions carried a dignified air. Contrary to the mage, the man's manners felt like a deliberate and conscious choice.

Using Acting to stealthily copy them, the awkward meal passed painfully slow. The light tapping and creak of forks and knives against the plates were the only sounds in the hall. Mostly they were caused by him—as in every single time. No matter how he tried, he didn't possess his teachers' supernatural graces and dexterity.

The only saving grace was Dora's delicious food. It kept his mind too busy to construct catastrophic scenarios where he ended up being sacrificed to some eldritch entity.

The crab legs' tenderness made his mind fly to happier places. Elijah's critical eye wavered somewhat after he showed he was making an effort, and not purposely stuffing his mouth to annoy him like usual.

Dora came to bring the dessert, giving him an encouraging smile and an abundant slice of fruit cake. Unfortunately, all things, good or bad, had to come to an end.

"Was the dinner to your liking, child?" Virya said, sipping from a chalice.

“Yes,” Kai answered stiffly.

“You can relax. That’s just her sense of humor.” Elijah said, surprising them both.

The mage threw him a displeased look. Kai stared dumbfounded. “Why did you invite me here exactly?”

“For a conversation long overdue,” Virya’s piercing orange eyes nailed him. “I must admit, I didn’t give you a high chance of lasting long initially. And yet, here we are. It’s time we make a decision or cut it off.”

Can’t follow. Is it that fun to speak in riddles?

Her words were vaguely ominous, Kai would have felt intimidated if Elijah hadn’t actually rolled back his eyes.

Did I see that right?

“Perhaps we should start with your question.” Virya pulled back on the theatrics, relaxed in her chair. “Can spells be woven through words and why didn’t we teach you? Is that correct, Kai?”

He nodded. That was the initial question that prompted Dora to act weird and led him to this dinner. For the life of him, Kai couldn’t see how things connected.

“What do you know about magic?” Virya asked. “More specifically, what you know about the different ways to channel mana and cast a spell?”

Kai’s thumping heart slowed down. Lessons and tests were a familiar challenge. He could deal with this.

“Well, there are many ways: through Mana Manipulation and specific elemental skills, with runes, profession skills and, I assume, also through speech. Do I need to get into the details?”

“That’s quite enough. Commonly, magic casting is divided into three categories.” Virya counted on her fingers. “Freeform magic using general skills, specific casts through profession skills, and *languages of power*. This last group includes different kinds of language, be they written, spoken or through specific chains of gestures.”

Kai rearranged the knowledge in his mind. It wasn’t anything new, even if he had never heard it this way. “Is Runes a written language of power?”

“It is,” Virya confirmed. “When drawn correctly, runes have an inherent ability to channel mana and create different effects. In the same way, if you pronounce the right words, you can cast a spell.”

All the pieces had been there, but he didn’t want to take into consideration that there was another method of casting that his efforts at free casting appear worthless. Why had they not taught him this? An accusation was boiling inside of him, he stopped it before it could rise to the surface.

“What’s the drawback?” Kai asked, leaning forward, his tone louder than intended.

There has to be something.

Elijah coughed, sending an icy look his way. Kai flopped back down, squeezing Acting to give him a more respectable demeanor.

Virya let a pause hang between them. “As you’ve experienced with Runes, practice is often harder than it appears. Using a spoken language of power, each inflection and accent in your pronunciation must be perfect to obtain the desired result. And that is taking for granted you have the right words and grammar.”

Kai listened, castigated. It didn't sound simple, but not too difficult either. Easier than drawing runes, for sure.

"That's only the most obvious obstacle. There is another flaw inherent to all languages of power. Care to take a guess?"

With two years of experience, Kai broke down the problem. Virya didn't do rhetorical questions. If she asked, he had the means to answer.

The only language of power I know is Runes. And if it's a universal flaw, it must be present there too.

He had spent long hours mulling over magical theory and had already formed many conjectures. It was only a matter of pulling the right one from his mind. He couldn't say anything about languages, but there was a clear flaw with runes.

"Compared to freeform magic, runes are simple in their effects. It takes me a thought to bend water in any shape I want or even write in the sand, but I'd have no idea where to start if I had to do the same with runes."

"If you were to see the main array of my estate, you'd never call them *simple*," Virya smiled. "The word you were looking for is *flexibility*. Runes and other languages of power all lack it. Using freeform magic, a proper mage can translate complicated concepts and intentions into a spell. To achieve what took a single thought with words and runes might take hours. If you manage at all.

"When you use words of power you yield burden *and* control of the cast to the language. It will do exactly as you say or write. If you commit a mistake with a runic inscription, usually it just fizzles out. But chanted spells use your mana to take effect. If you fail to specify an upper limit and your cast takes more mana than you possess... I don't think I need to tell you how that could end extremely badly."

Agonizing death by mana starvation, yay!

Kai felt relieved. For a moment he feared his training with freeform magic would have been for nothing. Spoken magic sounded like a death trap.

“Can’t I master a few simple spells and use those?” He asked. But if he mastered the right words for a fireball or a pressurized water jet—depending on how affinities entered in the picture—he’d be set. It would be predictable, but also convenient.

“You should try speaking multiple obscure lines while someone is charging at you swinging an axe.” Virya laughed. “Even if they gave you enough time, which is a colossal if, mistakes happen easily under pressure. They don’t even need to make you mess up, just interrupting the casting halfway through could make you go up in flames.

Kai wasn’t a veteran soldier, but each fight he was in had been extremely frenetic. Even as an opening, it might be a problem if his target realized and interrupted him.

“The only place offensive chanting is used is in the military with an army watching your back. Unless you want to enlist...” Virya paused just enough for him to vehemently shake his head. “Freeform magic is the superior method.”

“I see all these drawbacks,” Kai said diplomatically. “But why has nobody ever told me this way of casting existed?”

This time it was Elijah who answered. “Because you’d have pestered us to teach you anyway, and we can’t.”

Yep, I probably would.

Kai looked between them. “You don’t know how to cast spells with words?” Incredulity in his voice. His view of the world was getting shattered. In his mind, the residents of the estate

were basically omniscient. They were all-powerful, all-knowing beings, Virya above all. He couldn't fathom how there could be something she didn't know.

"That's why it's important we chose our words correctly," Virya gave a look at Elijah, making the butler slightly blush. With his pale skin, it was hard to miss.

"Naturally, we *can* chant spells," she continued. "However, teaching those to you would be irresponsible and foolish."

Kai frowned, deeply confused, a common occurrence when dealing with Virya.

"Why? I can promise to never use them without your permission."

Are they afraid I'll mess around and blow myself up?

Virya sighed. "That's not the problem. Words of power can be dangerous, but so is any other form of magic if used improperly. And even if you master them, the danger you would face by using it is not worth the risk. For both of us."

"Is spoken magic forbidden?" Kai asked, puzzled. It didn't make sense, he had seen Valela use it in front of everyone.

"Depends on the language. They are called *languages* of power because there are many of them. Our runes are the same as the Merian Republic uses, the spoken language words are not. Yes, Kai, we are not from the Republic."

"None of us is." Elijah specified.

Kai opened his mouth, no words came out. From how she spoke of the Republic it had almost been a given that Virya was from another place. Elijah and Dora not so much.

“Are you wanted by the Republic?” Kai blurted out, realizing too late how saying that out loud might not be the brightest idea.

“The feud about different languages of power is a problem within the orders of mages. For us, the danger would be giving away our origin and attracting unwanted attention. For a young novice such as you, chances are you’d be treated like a spy, tortured for information and made to disappear.” Virya stated flatly.

“The reason we came here is due to a more personal... disagreement.” She continued as if she hadn’t just described his possible demise. “Elijah will tell you as much as he believes appropriate.”

Virya picked up her booklet and left, leaving them alone.

Really?

This was far from the first time that she cut a conversation, but those were usually about some random lessons, not such a serious topic.

The butler sighed. “Come on, ask your questions.”

Kai took a moment to gather his thoughts. After the discovery of charmed spells, they either kicked him out or it was inevitable he would discover they weren’t from around here unless.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Kai said.

A hint of surprise flashed in the butler’s expression. “It’s nothing. Since I took you as an apprentice, I plan to do it properly.”

"I promise I won't speak a word of this to anyone," Kai swore.

"I'm sure of that," a chilling smile flashed on Elijah's face. "I imagine there is no need to tell you what would happen if you did."

A cold aura washed over him. Kai gulped.

"So, we'll talk about this today, and never again. Ask your questions if you have any." Elijah dared him.

Something tells me the right answer is none. The less I know the safer I'll be.

"Why don't you tell me what you want?" Kai said, cursing his own curiosity. This was the best compromise he could make.

"Not a complete fool, but close," Elijah said. "There isn't much you should know."

For a moment he thought the man would leave it at that and close the conversation. Part of his brain was already crying tears of blood for wasting his chance to get some answers.

"I am the reason we came here," The man said, a dark look on his face. "Virya and Theodora could have stayed behind and continued on with their lives, but they chose to help me escape."

Elijah was looking at him, his mind was far away. "That's all you need to know. Don't ever mention this again."

Kai was left alone in the large hall. The flickering candles around him lit the remains of their dinner.

“It went well.”

Kai jolted in his seat as Dora made her entrance. “You were listening?”

“Oh, no.” The alchemist said with a guilty face. “I would never eavesdrop on *Lady Virya*. Anyway, dear. I knew Elly would trust you. You know, it’s been hard for him since we were forced to run. He must really like you.”

He gave her a skeptical look.

I don't want to know how he treats those he doesn't like.

Kai helped Dora clear the table, chatting idly. Where were they from? Why did they have to run away? What was Elijah's role in this? The temptation to ask her poked at his thoughts.

With a determined thought, Kai made himself accept he'd never talk about this again. He owed at least this much.