Teaser order:

1. Welcome Address
2. History of Khen-Rho Rings
3. Fundamentals of Khen-Rho 1-2
4. Meanwhile at the K.B.E.C.
5. Fundamentals of Khen-Rho 3-4
6. The A.I.S.L.E. program

Welcome Address

The murmur of a large crowd of students in a courtyard can be heard, before it is interrupted by the loud, booming voice of headmaster Kraon addressing the crowd, amplified by a PA system..

“Welcome, students! I am Nazuret Kraon, founder and headmaster of Nasriaten Academy. I see it as a great privilege to be the first one to welcome you all here, at the very beginning of your journey towards becoming some of the very best educated members of our global community. It fills me with joy to see the eagerness to learn in each and every one of your faces.

But while learning is of course the most explicit offer of our school, it is here where you have the great opportunity to build bonds that will last a lifetime, transcending cultural divides and borders. Don’t ever underestimate the value of such bonds. Neither for your own sake, nor for the future of this whole continent.

Having so many of you here today, choosing to take these first steps with our institution, whether your origins lie in Kastina or the Rhonum League, or even places further, gives me great pride and hope that our mission will continue to succeed in its goals. Now… I’d like to take this opportunity to thank and introduce to you some of the people who have contributed and continue to contribute to this mission, starting with…”

History of Khen-Rho Rings

Teacher:
“...and the last one on the list is… Tohauza Zaegon.”

Zaegon:
“Here!”

Teacher:
“Alright, good, that means at least no one else is missing. Now let me be clear once again that Dashgilen’s behavior is not to be replicated! Skipping class is not something that will gain you any favor at this academy, not even if it’s ‘just the first week’.” *sigh*

“In any case… let's get started with the course shall we? I’m sure even most of the non-Rhonumites among you have at least already heard about the most famous tools of the users of Khen-Rho. But let’s get our bases covered for a start anyhow. The most basic function of Khen-Rho rings as they are known today is to hold the zo-rouka, which provide the source of the power a user needs for their craft.

The modern versions of these rings are often marvels of engineering, crafted by masters in their field from the most fitting materials and with techniques perfected over the centuries, ensuring the zo-rouka’s power can be focused in the most optimal way for the task at hand, while achieving maximum safety and durability. Using Khen-Rho puts strain on all entities involved after all, and the last thing you’d want is a ring shattering while it is being used to perform a delicate procedure!

In the earliest days of the craft however, these rings were not sturdy, portable, metal devices, but simply crude drawings painted on the ground, requiring much more focus and skill to wield and make sure the generated energy does not break out from its designated contained space. In this course we’ll be talking about the journey between these two ends of the timeline. What were the most important innovations? Who were the historical figures discovering these breakthroughs? And what were the respective impacts on the different Rhonumite societies? Well, most of you will at least already know the story of where it all began...”

Meanwhile at the K.B.E.C.

Office ambience can be heard, as footsteps approach and someone knocks on a wall.

K.B.E.C. Agent: “Miss Bilisht! Good that I’m catching you here. Do you have a moment?”

Bilisht: *chuckles* “Well, it IS my office after all, isn’t it? And yes, go ahead.”

Agent: “Alright, well, I’m here to tell you that the board is finished reviewing your complaints about the latest inspection reports on Nasriaten academy, and they agreed that there seem to be some rather… shallowly substantiated assessments.”

Bilisht: “Oh, ‘complaints’ sounds a bit harsh, doesn’t it? I was merely bringing up some suggestions for process improvements! Reviewing processes is our job after all, isn’t it?”

Agent: “I guess that’s true… Anyway, the board also was of the impression that since you are the one who brought up these suggestions, and you seem to show a particular interest in that academy, you might want to take a look at it yourself.”

Bilisht: “Meaning…?”

Agent: “A decision has been made to reassign you as the academic inspector for Nasriaten academy for this year.”

Bilisht: “Oh!” *chuckle* “Well, I wouldn’t say that my interest lies with any specific school… but if the board thinks that’s where they need me, then that’s where I’ll go!”

Agent: “Alright then… I’ll leave you to your work again. I’m sure you’ll have some new stuff to prepare. Take care.”

Bilisht: “Thanks! Bye!”

footsteps can be heard leaving

Bilisht: *long relieved sigh*

The A.I.S.L.E. Program

Murmuring from a small number of students in a classroom can be heard. They seem curious about what is going on.
A loud flap of wings can be heard from outside, before the door gets flung open rather loudly. Footsteps as Tazho enters the room.
Tazho: “Gooood morning, students! Are you excited? Well let me tell you: **I** am **DEFINITELY** excited to be the one welcoming you all into your first class in the A.I.S.L.E. program! You can already be proud of yourselves! The school doesn’t exactly accept just anyone into this most prestigious of curriculums! I can’t wait to see you all…” *ahem* “...but before I run away with all of that I’m sure you have a bunch of questions! Let me just read you this little pamphlet and you’ll know everything you need to get started! Hrm…

‘The Alternative Independent Student Leadership Experience is a prestigious program for up and coming pioneers of excellence to develop an enduring foundation in the pursuit of exemplary performance in the various departments of professional mastery and social directive with steadfast intent and absolute resolution, aspiring to…’ uhm… you know what? I’ll just give you my own pep talk after all! By joining this program you’ve signed up to learn how to become a force to be reckoned with! Someone who’s able to fight to the best of their ability, and to defend this world from anything that might be threatening it!” *pause after this triumphant epic announcement*

”Uhm… threatening it in terms of lack of proper leadership that is, yes. You’re here to be the next generation of leaders ready to ensure a long future of peace and cooperation between all of our nations.”

silence in the classroom, interrupted by a single cough

“Aaaaalright then… let’s get started, shall we?”

Lore Page Excerpts

Fundamentals of Khen-Rho: Khen-Rho in Nature (Al)

Classroom murmurs. As Al clears her throat loudly, the murmurs start to quiet down.

Al: “From the language of the people of Rhonum, Khen-Rho - also called Rho-da Khen - is translated into Kolzni as "the breath of god". It is believed to be the vital cosmic energy that Rho used to breathe life into the world. An indeterminate energy field that seems to have no physical form, and yet permeates itself in and around all things.

One of the defining qualities of Khen-Rho is its ability to exist just outside of the laws of physics, and recodify how they work. Most of the time, the world at large is left to its own devices, but there are a few key areas where it makes itself known. The most obvious manifestation comes in the form of our Scrambled Phenotype. As a new life develops, the ambient chaos of the breath warps and toys with the genetic foundation of the future lifeform, giving it a distinct and unique blueprint. However, like all physical forces, it seems to obey certain rules.

Khen-Rho will shy away from messing with certain components of the individual. Specifically the traits that would make it impossible to survive and thrive. A child may be born who can live in water due to the presence of gills, but a child that NEEDS to be in water to survive is extremely rare, as that would likely result in their swift demise.

We however aren't the only ones who experience phenotypical variety. Animals do as well, though in much subtler ways. The one universal constant across all life forms, is that the brain seems to be largely unaffected by Khen-Rho except to ensure it can operate in whatever body type and scale it happens to be housed in.”

Fundamentals of Khen-Rho: Nebu-Khen (Oz)

Oz: “Another important aspect of Khen-Rho is its potential to interact with sentient life. Normally, said interactions involve deliberate tools and rituals that allow people to harness its power. But there are some instances in which some people will exhibit Khen-Rho abilities without the need for such tools.

When an individual is put in a situation where their survival hinges on a miracle, especially during early childhood, there is a slight possibility that one will actually happen, and that that person will gain a single supernatural ability that will get them out of trouble. If someone fell from a building they might gain the ability to fly, or cap their terminal velocity to a safe margin so they can't be hurt by the fall, or become really bouncy or goopy so they can absorb the impact. These powers are known as Crutches, or Nebu-Khen (more or less translated as “assisted breathing” in Kolzni), a single tool that became available to someone to help them through a rough situation, not unlike an actual crutch. This does mean that in the vast majority of cases, Nebu-Khen are defensive, such as my personal ability of cloaking and creating illusions. So, while some may end up having other, more destructive uses - like Professor Tazho's wings - their primary function will always be geared towards self-preservation.

They also aren't exclusive to life-threatening situations; children experiencing prolonged trauma may also gain a Nebu-Khen. In cases such as a deep sense of dysphoria, where a child feels like they were born wrong or incomplete, nebu-Khen may just give them that extra feature that allows them to achieve some semblance of stability or wholeness before their situations really go south.

One caveat is that Nebu-Khen cannot be forced on people because it is neither consistent nor predictable. If someone were to throw a hundred children out of a plane, maybe one or two would develop one, and even then there is no way to predict or control what the crutch would be. Attempting to farm children with super powers, or putting oneself in danger to try and get one is not only unethical, but futile.”

Harnessed Khen-Rho

Unlike forces such as gravity, magnetism, thermo-dynamics and the like, Khen-Rho is a force that can be directly tapped into to affect all the others— at a cost. As Khen-Rho is the source of all life, life itself is the price to pay to access it.

Because of this, Rhonum's early practicioners were uncommon, with most Khen-Rho being performed by high priests through ritual sacrifice, at times of great and immediate needs, such as protecting villages from imminent natural disasters. Brutal attitudes developed as demand for magical intervention meshed with the realization that captured enemies served just as well as willing and voluntary sacrifices.

For reasons that academics have not discerned, sacrificing animals, even ones with observed higher functioning brains, doesn't seem to cause anything to happen.

Later scholars would discover that when vast amounts of power are unneeded, an offering of blood was often enough to perform smaller tasks. Further discoveries and advancements on what they were able to do and what tools would help them maximize their options at a lesser cost meant that Khen-Rho users became more common, and extended outside of the priest class.

Fundamentals of Khen-Rho: Capabilities and Limitations (Kheil)

Kheil: “The mechanics of Khen-Rho, while magical, are distinctly based on physics and not wishfulness. People harnessing it can use it to alter temperature, redirect light rays or disable gravity, but not to talk with animals, brew a love potion or travel through time!

Notably, it is restricted by the same rules as natural Khen-Rho in that directly affecting someone's mind, their sense of self, their memories, etc, is out of the question. This isn't to say that the brain can't be affected by physical forces being applied to it via Khen-Rho, but it does mean anyone short of a highly qualified brain surgeon shouldn’t be poking around in there.

Khen-Rho is also limited as an energy source due to its inefficiency. With a colossal entropy quotient, using Khen-rho requires a ton of energy, even for relatively innocuous tasks. Thankfully, that is all largely accounted for by its fuel source, but while it is very convenient, the practice isn't exactly known for preventing diminishing returns. The amount of energy necessary for the theoretical goal of rearranging the molecular structure of an element to turn it into another element is comparable to that of conventional nuclear fusion.

Additionally, Khen-rho instances respond to only single commands at a time rather than serve multiple purposes. Someone may thaw a packet of frozen food OR chop up veggies, but not both at the same time. Such a goal would require either task switching, or using different rings, one for each job.

Of course, sufficiently competent users may find ways of accomplishing things in a way that appears as though they're multi-tasking, but in reality they're just taking a less obvious route to achieve the same ends.”

Fundamentals of Khen-Rho: Command and Mastery (Al)

Al: “A big component of Khen-Rho ability comes from how well the user is able to keep focused and exercise their will on the energy present, but that alone isn't a catch-all solution to every situation. There is no such thing as a Khen-Rho master, only a master of what they can specifically do with it. A person's ability to achieve their goals through Khen-Rho is directly tied to their understanding of their goals and how to achieve them.

For instance, in order to freeze water, it isn't enough to try and will coldness into the water. The user needs to be familiar with the idea that cold is the absence of heat and therefore in order to freeze something, they must remove heat, not add cold. As such, a deeper academic understanding of thermodynamics will allow a practitioner much more reliable results.

In a more practical setting, a sculptor, intimately knowledgeable about the nature of clay, will be able to push and pull moisture around to harden or soften different areas of their project. But someone who just knows that clay is muddy water, will more than likely mangle the entire thing by blinking in its general direction. Needless to say, non-surgeons should not be trusted to try and mend broken bones or repair muscular tissue. Khen-Rho is not an individual's ticket to success, it is a tool that enhances the mastery that is already there.

It should go without saying that practice of the craft isn't exactly accessible, nor is it intuitive. Even someone who is particularly well trained can easily bring disaster on themselves just by making an incorrect assumption while trying to tell the energy what to do, **Kheil**.”

Kheil: “Hey!”

Al: “General proficiency with Khen-Rho can be described as a phantom limb reaching out to wrestle the laws of physics into doing something they normally wouldn't. And like physical muscles, the more they are used, the stronger they get. Frequent, well practiced users will find that at a certain point, their figurative phantom limb allows them to "pick up" their rings telekinetically. It's considered a bit of a flex, since it requires practice and dexterity on par with dedicated athletes. The really skilled can hover two rings simultaneously, and people hovering three are considered nothing short of prodigies, as they are exceptionally rare.

Hovering a ring does have a down side, however. Rings are slaves to the last person to physically exercise their will on them, meaning they cannot be telekinetically stolen. But it does mean that if a foe were to snatch a ring out of the air, the ring now becomes theirs.

While most people find awe in the performance of hovering rings, there is a much rarer skill that, while not as visually impressive, is much more difficult. Among those who have devoted their lives to the study of Khen-Rho like monks and gurus, there are some who have such a deep understanding of their craft that they can give commands to a zo-ruoka well before it even reaches the socket of a ring. This allows even an untrained individual to perform a given task without the presence of a professional.”

Kastina’s Perspective

Thanks to having originated in a different continent entirely, Kastina as a country has a vastly different appreciation for Khen-Rho than the thirty seven nations of the Rhonum League. This is due to a number of reasons, not the least of which is that while Rhonum stumbled upon Khen-Rho early in their history, Kastina happened to have landed nonsupernatural scientific advances that were pursued in place of Khen-Rho. That, coupled with Kastina having a history of frequent existential threats, forced them to develop a lot of social issues that became ingrained into the culture -- in particular, an attitude of disdain against Khen-Rho as a primitive, barbaric alternative to their own sleek, superior technologies.

Many in Kastina take ethical issues with what has become normal to their counterpart. They're not fans of a system that stockpiles power through a tax of its own people's blood. How does this benefit the citizens in exchange? And what kind of backwards thinker agrees to sacrifice a person to stop an avalanche when they could raise an ionized plasma force field anyway?

The Kastinian stigma notably does not apply to Nebu-Khen, which the nation has attempted to study (with little success). In addition to not relying on the taking of people's blood, there is a persisting, elitist belief that the survival of hardship required to have produced a crutch implies the individual pulled themselves up through grit and determination, which fits well into the narrative of traditional Kastinian values. Kastina and Rhonum's philosophies are not inherently incompatible, but between millenia of cultural traditions, standard-fare government corruption, and at least a few centuries' worth of on and off wars, finding that common ground has proved difficult.

Zeikauko or Rogteo-Nem (Oz)

While we may not look it, we are all part of the same biological species, whether you refer to us as Zeikauko or Rogteo-Nem, depending on what language you speak between Kolzni or Tepnem-Rho, respectively.

The scrambled phenotype happens due to naturally occurring interference of ambient Khen-Rho in the world messing around with fetal development. As such, genetic inheritance doesn't play as much of a role because a lot of a person's phenotype is determined by a magical lottery that gives way for preternatural variety in our species.

There is such a thing as an average variety, in that the majority of people will still conform to a bipedal structure with two arms and a head, featuring mammal-like anatomy, somewhere between 4 and 8 feet in height; with maybe a third of children being born who extensively break away from that model.

In most cases, Khen-Rho will not intrude upon an individual's ability to survive and thrive as a lifeform. Which means there is a certain level of consistency to be found across the anatomies of multiple people. Essential features such as the ability to breathe, sense, locomote, reproduce, consume food and expel waste can be safely expected to recur across the masses, but they may not always subscribe to the same criteria. Rarely will a child be born without one of these vital traits resulting in death, or an extremely unfortunate existence.

Separation from other Species (AI)

Due to the mechanics of Khen-Rho, other species are more unified and easily recognizable as a collective. The key component believed to affect a species' variety potential is attributed to precocial vs altricial development.

Precocial species, the ones that are born and within hours operate as fully functional members of the species, force the ambient Khen-Rho to obey more rules so as to preserve the young's survivability.

Altricial species, the ones that are born and must learn to exist over a much longer period of time while relying on the adults for survival, have fewer inherent rules in their development and the Khen is free to play in the sandbox.

It stands to reason that our species is one of the most altricial, and thus has the most variety to offer.

For people it is relatively easy to tell themselves apart from other species by noting qualities like their ability to communicate with each other, even if they speak different languages, where trying to communicate with an animal ends up being futile for most part.

Clothing and Tailoring (Kheil)

There is never a shortage of tailors in the world. Due to the vast variety of bodies that exist, custom tailoring is an extremely lucrative career path for just about anyone who is willing to take up the job. Many take pride in being able to provide stylish and fashionable clothes for clients that go way out of the "average" bipedal model. In a lot of cases, clothing is likely to be more of a status symbol than anything else.

However, by necessity, our cultures have very nonchalant standards of decency when it comes to clothing or lack thereof, and if an individual just finds it impractical or uncomfortable to try and clothe themselves, it is unlikely anyone would bat an eye at it.

In essence, clothes serve a limited number of purposes:
1) Protection from the environment.
2) Showing social status.
3) Concealing or accentuating features others will find attractive.

(Of course that’s something you’d want me to tack onto this stupid report, DAD!)

Thotzev Teaser

Thotzev: “Charity One to Command. We are approaching the target’s suspected hiding place. No notable incidents so far.”

Command: “Roger that, Charity One. Intelligence still indicates that they are unaware of any threat. Keep a low profile and survey the area. Should they try to flee you have permission to engage at your own discretion.”

Thotzev: “Understood. Charity One out.”

…

Thotzev: “Command, this is Charity One. We have identified the targets and surrounded their hideout. No resistance encountered so far. They seem to be alone and unaware.”

Command: “Roger, Charity One. Tell your team to keep an eye out for possible accomplices in the area. Then go and execute Rho’s will.”

Thotzev: “It will be done.”

Thotzev: “Alright, you heard them. Cover me while I bring down the hammer.”

Others: “Roger.”

Thotzev: *Starts running, jumps and screams.*

Sounds of magic blasting, walls exploding, chaotic destruction sounds and screams.