Chapter 102 - Priceless

Kai took a seat across from Virya. A small table with a tray of crunchy biscuits between them. Knowing better than to try to guess what was on her mind, he waited for her to start the conversation.

The lady of the estate looked even more otherworldly under the moonlight. It was hard to relax with her gaze on him, but he was used to it. Acting casually, he helped himself to one of the biscuits.

Dora was welcoming from the start. She was easy to like, and they had only gotten closer after all the long afternoons spent in the garden or over a cauldron.

Elijah had been a harder challenge. The beginning had been rough to say the least. The man was harsh, cold and with ridiculously high demands. While Kai wouldn't say they were best buddies, they had warmed up to each other and reached a mutual understanding. He knew behind all the snark, the butler wanted him to succeed.

Only Virya remained a mystery. She was always there in the background, observing silently—and more often than not—ignoring him.

Her lessons had grown more whimsical and unpredictable over the years. Random notions of politics, geography, philosophy and magic theory. Personal questions about his goals and beliefs. How to approach a dwarf in a tavern, and what to say if you meet a siren at sea so they don't sink your ship.

Kai was quite sure some of those had been an elaborate prank. It was hard to tell with Virya. He had grown used to her quirks through experience, but he didn't have the faintest clue of what was going on in her mind.

Her burning eyes continued to bury into his soul. Finally, she broke the stare with a chuckle.

"You've grown up, Kai." Her white teeth shone in the night. "It's a wonder how many things people let slip when you just stare at them. I can sense barely a hint of nervousness from you. Do you remember how terrified you were when we first met?"
Kai looked away, embarrassed, "That was because I wasn't used to the mana density and to your presence."
"You were so young and clueless, coming to my door with preposterous requests. There was a time when the line of nobles asking to tutor their children stretched three kingdoms."
"Well, you never teach me much," he pointed out.
"I taught you more than most could ever hope for," she bit on a biscuit with a crunch. "Though you're right. I took you in, so you'd be a distraction for Elijah. A cute lost puppy to keep him busy and away from pointless brooding."
Is she trying to provoke a reaction?
"You're not disappointed or annoyed?" Virya observed him closely.
"Why should I? We both got what we wanted, and I think I got the better end of the deal."
"That you certainly did," Virya laughed. "Contrary to common sense, I've discovered how some people grow more foolish with age. I'm glad we haven't wasted our time with you."
Happy not to be a disappointment.

unsaid in the air, a thought insistently tugging at his mind to be acknowledged.
Looking up at Virya proved his suspicion had been correct.
"You're leaving," he said, almost a whisper.
"We are."
The words slowly sank with all their implications. He had known they weren't going to stay here forever, but the news still took him by surprise. Somehow, he had never thought this day would arrive. The estate and his teachers had been a constant in his life for so long.
The news left only one question.
"What about me?"
"It depends. What do you want to do?"
"Can I come with you?"
"You can. Though I must warn you, things will be very different from what you're used to here."
His brain stumbled along, confused. He hadn't expected to be given a choice. "Where are you going?"

Kai hesitated, before nodding. Dora and Elijah had behaved strangely since he came back. None of them clearly stated anything, but he could put together the hints. The truth hung

"Unless you choose to come, it's better if you don't know. And if you choose to come, you'll have to stay till things are resolved." Kai didn't bother to ask what things she was referring to. If she hadn't told him, it meant she didn't wish him to know. Does she expect me to make a choice with so little information? Or does she think I'll refuse? Kai focused on what he did know. No doubt this was related to why they came to hide in the archipelago in the first place. And since they weren't from the Republic, they likely weren't headed there. Visualizing the continent, there were many kingdoms to consider. Moreover, the maps he saw didn't go far beyond the borders of the Merian Republic. Was that why I couldn't find a complete map? Did Virya hide the books from her library? It was very likely. If he had been given access to her full collection, it wouldn't have been hard to guess where they were from. "Do you think I should come?" Kai asked bluntly. Even putting together all the bits and pieces, there wasn't much to go off. Virya had the full picture and she never skirted off direct questions. "I think people should make their own choices. It's your life." "But what's your advice?" Virya leaned back in her chair looking up at the moons, her eyes wandering the starry sky.

"If you come with us, your life will undergo some drastic changes, not all of them to your liking. But there is no doubt that you'll grow far faster than if you were to remain. There will also be a concrete possibility that you'd get killed if things were to go wrong."

Her gaze moved back to him. "If you remain... I imagine you know the answer better than me. There is no right or wrong decision. It depends on what you want."

Kai furrowed his brows. Virya always stated things as they were. She wasn't one to exaggerate or minimize the danger, but the threat of death did little to dissuade him. There were few places safer than under his teachers' watch, apart from the archipelago perhaps.

Leaving everything he knew behind for an uncertain future. The call of adventure.

It isn't really a choice, is it?

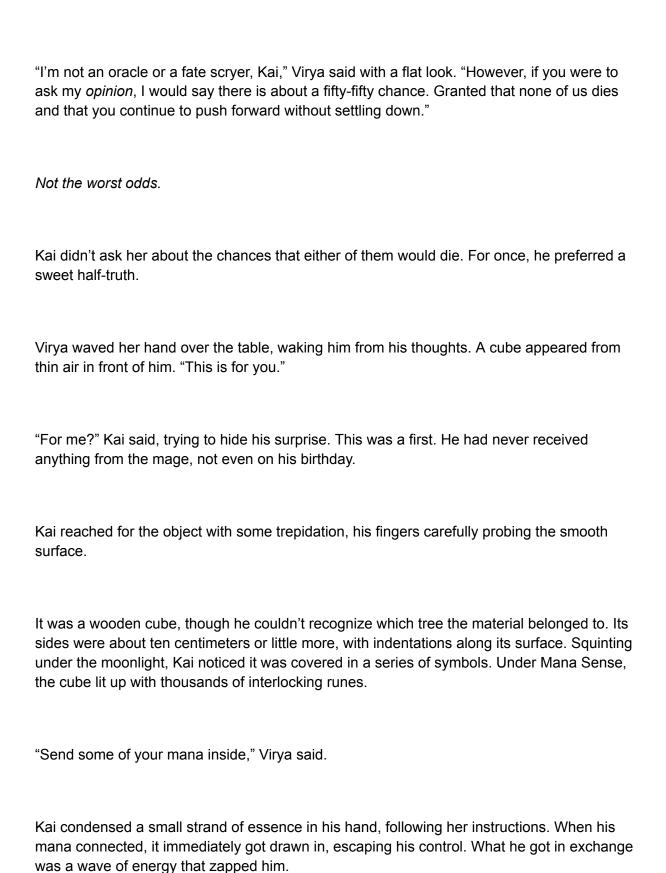
For a moment, it had been nice to imagine sailing towards uncharted seas, but this wasn't a dream where choices had consequences that evaporated when he woke up. The unknown is exciting—and a good way to get himself killed.

I'm going to plan my adventure step by step when the time comes.

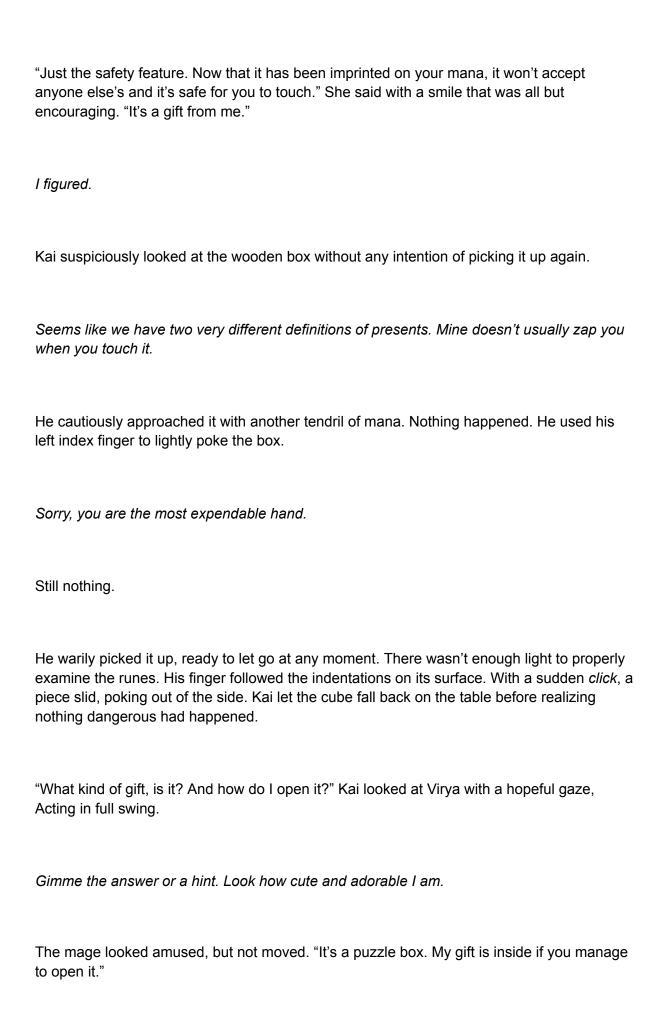
More importantly, going with them would mean leaving his family behind, for good. There would be no coming back from that. The next time they'd meet, if ever, they'd be like strangers. That wasn't something he was willing even to consider.

Mom will be happy I'm coming home early.

"Will I see you again if I stay?" he asked.

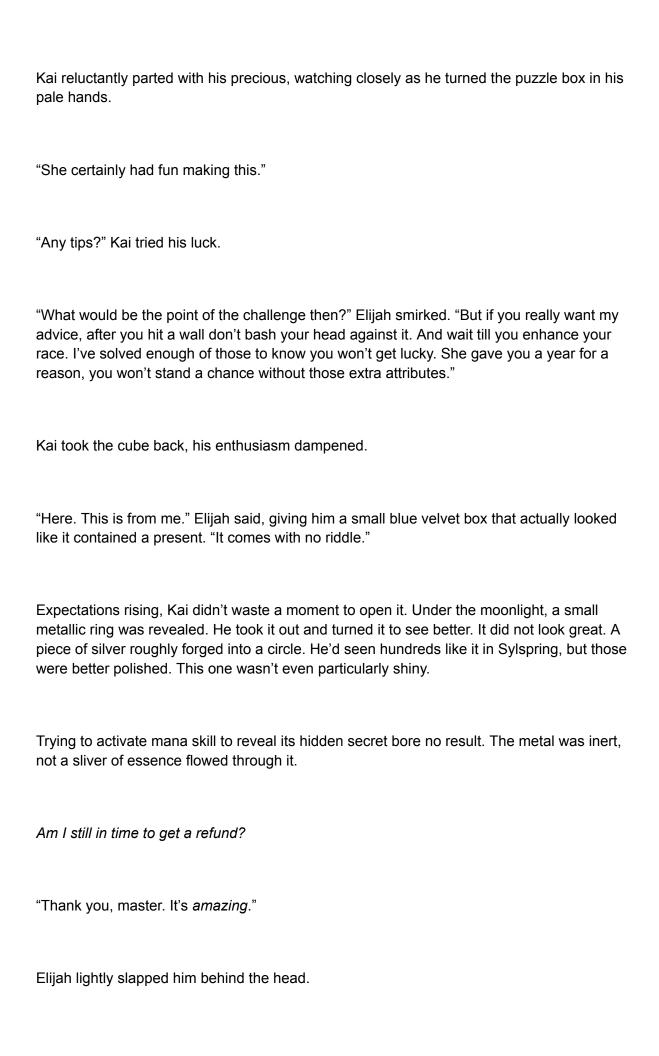


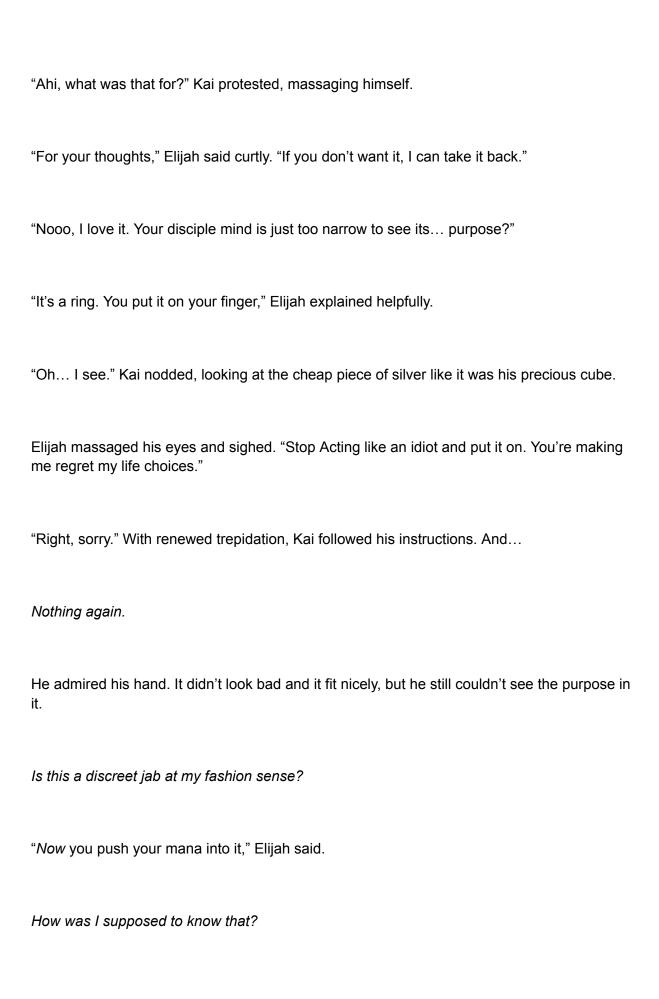
"Dammit!" He dropped the cube on the table. "What was that?"

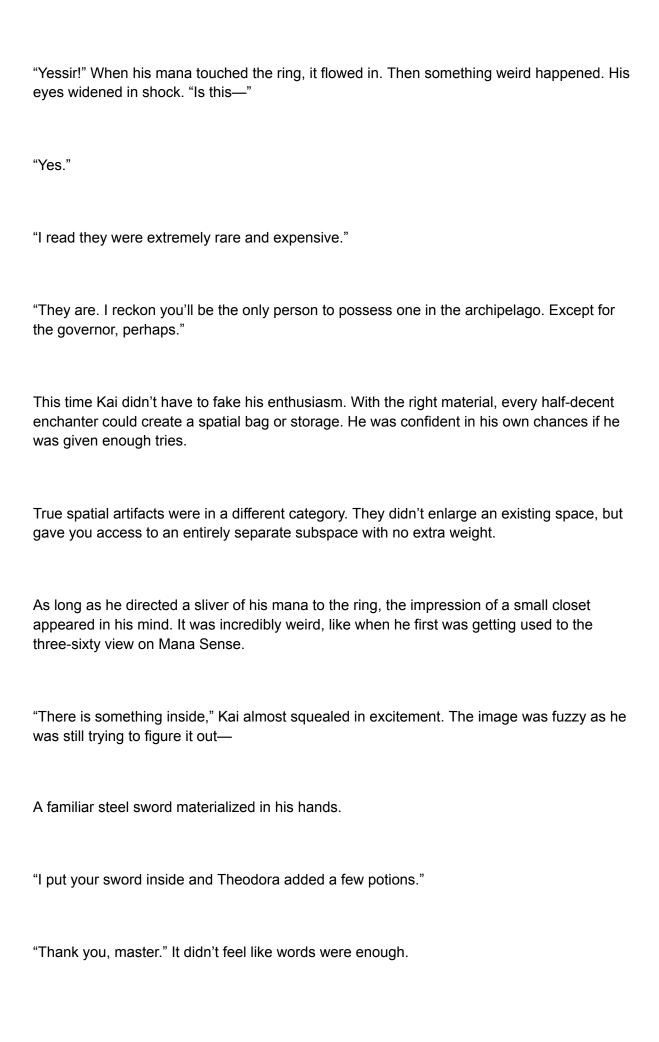














"Soon."
"I know you can't tell me where you are going. But will it be dangerous?"
Elijah looked thoughtful. "A few heads are going to roll. Hopefully not mine. Now go to sleep, you can play with your new toys in the morning."
Kai headed towards his house. When he turned to look back, Elijah was gone.