

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.

“You know why I’ve called you tonight?”

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 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?”

“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.

"I'm not an oracle or a fate scryer, Kai," Virya said with a flat look. "However, if you were to ask my *opinion*, I would say there is about a fifty-fifty chance. Granted that none of us dies and that you continue to push forward without settling down."

Not the worst odds.

Kai didn't ask her about the chances that either of them would die. For once, he preferred a sweet half-truth.

Virya waved her hand over the table, waking him from his thoughts. A cube appeared from thin air in front of him. "This is for you."

"For me?" Kai said, trying to hide his surprise. This was a first. He had never received anything from the mage, not even on his birthday.

Kai reached for the object with some trepidation, his fingers carefully probing the smooth surface.

It was a wooden cube, though he couldn't recognize which tree the material belonged to. Its sides were about ten centimeters or little more, with indentations along its surface. Squinting under the moonlight, Kai noticed it was covered in a series of symbols. Under Mana Sense, the cube lit up with thousands of interlocking runes.

"Send some of your mana inside," Virya said.

Kai condensed a small strand of essence in his hand, following her instructions. When his mana connected, it immediately got drawn in, escaping his control. What he got in exchange was a wave of energy that zapped him.

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

“Just the safety feature. Now that it has been imprinted on your mana, it won’t accept anyone else’s and it’s safe for you to touch.” She said with a smile that was all but encouraging. “It’s a gift from me.”

I figured.

Kai suspiciously looked at the wooden box without any intention of picking it up again.

Seems like we have two very different definitions of presents. Mine doesn’t usually zap you when you touch it.

He cautiously approached it with another tendril of mana. Nothing happened. He used his left index finger to lightly poke the box.

Sorry, you are the most expendable hand.

Still nothing.

He warily picked it up, ready to let go at any moment. There wasn’t enough light to properly examine the runes. His finger followed the indentations on its surface. With a sudden *click*, a piece slid, poking out of the side. Kai let the cube fall back on the table before realizing nothing dangerous had happened.

“What kind of gift, is it? And how do I open it?” Kai looked at Virya with a hopeful gaze, Acting in full swing.

Gimme the answer or a hint. Look how cute and adorable I am.

The mage looked amused, but not moved. “It’s a puzzle box. My gift is inside if you manage to open it.”

Kai stifled a sigh.

Nothing can ever be easy, can it?

“A small hint? How does it work? Where do I start?”

“Figuring that out is part of the challenge.” Virya’s amusement grew. “There were actually *two* reasons I took you in. You already know the first. And the second was to see how far a human born at the bottom of Red could go. Which is why I forbade Elijah and Dora from giving you any external help you don’t earn yourself.”

What the fuck!

“That’s not fair—”

“*However*, since we’re parting ways, I thought we’d make an exception this once.” Virya gave him a meaningful glance. “I thought you weren’t foolish. Was I mistaken?”

Kai bit his tongue, “No. Thank you for your gift.” He grabbed the cube. “I’m extremely grateful.”

“I thought so. The object hidden inside is beyond rare. You’d have no hope of buying it even if you had the money. It will be extremely useful to you.”

Kai clutched the wooden cube, caressing its polished surface like a lover. He didn’t know why he suddenly liked his gift much more.

My precious.

“And it’s *mine* if I open it?” he asked.

“Yes. But—”

Of course, there’s a but.

“—you need to solve all the puzzles within a year, otherwise the cube will shut down permanently. The same will happen if somebody else tries to forcefully open it. Were the security features not enough to dissuade them.”

There is truly no free meal.

“I won’t fail.”

“It’s good to be confident, but you’ll need more than that. If you manage the task, you’ll have earned your reward. If you fail, someone will come to take it back when your time is over. This is all. I look forward to seeing what happens.” Virya turned back to her book.

Knowing the lady had declared the conversation over, Kai headed to his house. He needed a better light to examine the puzzle box. His fingers impatiently fiddled with the sliding sections.

“Kai.” The shadows coalesced into the figure of a man. Elijah stood before his door, barring his way with an inscrutable expression.

His lips curved slightly when he saw the cube in his hands. “She really gave you one of those. Let me see.”

Kai reluctantly parted with his precious, watching closely as he turned the puzzle box in his pale hands.

“She certainly had fun making this.”

“Any tips?” Kai tried his luck.

“What would be the point of the challenge then?” Elijah smirked. “But if you really want my advice, after you hit a wall don’t bash your head against it. And wait till you enhance your race. I’ve solved enough of those to know you won’t get lucky. She gave you a year for a reason, you won’t stand a chance without those extra attributes.”

Kai took the cube back, his enthusiasm dampened.

“Here. This is from me.” Elijah said, giving him a small blue velvet box that actually looked like it contained a present. “It comes with no riddle.”

Expectations rising, Kai didn’t waste a moment to open it. Under the moonlight, a small metallic ring was revealed. He took it out and turned it to see better. It did not look great. A piece of silver roughly forged into a circle. He’d seen hundreds like it in Sylspring, but those were better polished. This one wasn’t even particularly shiny.

Trying to activate mana skill to reveal its hidden secret bore no result. The metal was inert, not a sliver of essence flowed through it.

Am I still in time to get a refund?

“Thank you, master. It’s *amazing*.”

Elijah lightly slapped him behind the head.

“Ahi, what was that for?” Kai protested, massaging himself.

“For your thoughts,” Elijah said curtly. “If you don’t want it, I can take it back.”

“Nooo, I love it. Your disciple mind is just too narrow to see its... purpose?”

“It’s a ring. You put it on your finger,” Elijah explained helpfully.

“Oh... I see.” Kai nodded, looking at the cheap piece of silver like it was his precious cube.

Elijah massaged his eyes and sighed. “Stop Acting like an idiot and put it on. You’re making me regret my life choices.”

“Right, sorry.” With renewed trepidation, Kai followed his instructions. And...

Nothing again.

He admired his hand. It didn’t look bad and it fit nicely, but he still couldn’t see the purpose in it.

Is this a discreet jab at my fashion sense?

“Now you push your mana into it,” Elijah said.

How was I supposed to know that?

“Yessir!” When his mana touched the ring, it flowed in. Then something weird happened. His eyes widened in shock. “Is this—”

“Yes.”

“I read they were extremely rare and expensive.”

“They are. I reckon you’ll be the only person to possess one in the archipelago. Except for the governor, perhaps.”

This time Kai didn’t have to fake his enthusiasm. With the right material, every half-decent enchanter could create a spatial bag or storage. He was confident in his own chances if he was given enough tries.

True spatial artifacts were in a different category. They didn’t enlarge an existing space, but gave you access to an entirely separate subspace with no extra weight.

As long as he directed a sliver of his mana to the ring, the impression of a small closet appeared in his mind. It was incredibly weird, like when he first was getting used to the three-sixty view on Mana Sense.

“There is something inside,” Kai almost squealed in excitement. The image was fuzzy as he was still trying to figure it out—

A familiar steel sword materialized in his hands.

“I put your sword inside and Theodora added a few potions.”

“Thank you, master.” It didn’t feel like words were enough.

Without thinking whether he'd survive the consequences, Kai gave Elijah a hug. "Thank you, for the ring and for everything else."

It felt like trying to embrace a trunk, if the tree was made of metal wires. A few seconds later the man relaxed his muscles, making the hug a bit less uncomfortable.

"You've been an acceptable disciple. One day you might even be *good* if you don't slack off."

"I promise I won't."

"Good. *Now* let me go."

"Oh... okay." Kai stepped back, suddenly feeling awkward. His gaze wandered to his ring again. "Why does it look so..." Even now, the metal looked like common silver under Mana Sense. "Oh, it's a disguise!"

"Yes. It should avoid getting you killed, as long as you don't do anything stupid." Elijah said stiffly. "You can take it off, but you won't be able to make a new one, so don't."

Kai nodded, putting the sword and the cube into the ring. He looked in wonder as the objects disappeared from his hands.

"Try to avoid making that face too."

"Yes, master," Kai stared at his feet. "When do you leave?"

Virya made clear that, even if all went for the best, it would be some time before their paths might cross again.

“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.