

Chapter 291 - Raelion

"Miss Hightide." Professor Hulmus called from the base of the amphitheater room, his slow drawl carried by the sound arrays. He didn't lift his wrinkled face, busy scribbling on his soul tome as the students filed out of the hall. "I'd like a word if you please."

Valela froze halfway through putting her crystal prism in the spatial bag. Had he noticed her reading reports of possible cultist activity during class? He never seemed to care if students listened as long as they remained quiet, and she had already read the section about mana synergies and repulsions they discussed.

"What did you do?" Sat with both elbows on the polished desk, Calyssa cupped her doll face with an expression of utter shock. Her purple eyes lit with amusement. "The moons must be falling if Miss Perfect got in trouble."

"Stop it." Rena rebuked her without breaking her patrician demeanor. "I'm sure it's nothing, Val. Professor Hulmus is light with discipline."

"Yeah, till he tears you to shreds at the final exams." Calyssa mimicked ripping an arm from an invisible doll. "But you shouldn't worry. You are one of his favorites."

"He doesn't play favorites."

"Of *course* not." Calyssa twirled a golden lock around her manicured fingers. "He just likes you more than most."

"He would like you too if you'd study for his class."

"*Mhe!* Who needs *Essence Theory* anyway? You'll share your notes with me, right Val?" Calyssa fluttered her eyelashes with a bashful smile that made foolish boys stutter.

"Get over yourself." Rena raised her eyes in exasperation and turned toward Valela. "Do you want me to accompany you?"

"I... No, it's fine." Valela hid her nervousness with Poise. It was probably nothing. Her last test scores had fallen slightly, but she still placed in the upper tenth of her year. Pure academics were the last bastion of her pride after the entrance exam curtailed her naive dreams.

Keeping a professor waiting won't help.

"I'll catch up to you in the study hall." She straightened the silver rim of her uniform and headed down the stairs toward the lecturer's dais.

"...her place." A duo of stragglers giggled with schadenfreude as she passed.

Valela ignored the glances and sarcastic remarks—that usually worked best. Raelion gathered scions from the most ancient and influential families across the Merian Republic. In spite of her extensive preparations, she failed to anticipate the pettiness of these supposed brightest.

Down the last step, she waited for permission to approach the massive oonan timber desk. The wood had been roughly cut without any polish or engraving, enchantments would lessen the raw mana pulsing inside the steel gray grain. There was always some new student who attempted to lift it on a dare—always with the same result.

Sat in a high-backed chair behind the table, Professor Hulmus' thin frame and soft-spoken manners were the opposite of imposing. He looked like a stiff breeze could trip him, and some people whispered he had gnomish blood. It was easy to forget every lecturer at Raelion had reached Green, and if Calyssa were to be believed, Hulmus had taken the position over two centuries ago.

"Miss Hightide." He continued scribbling on his soul tome with a gilded quill that scratched on the conjured paper. "Lately, you've been distracted during my lessons."

It wasn't a question, not that she could deny it. Seven weeks had already passed since she had last heard from Kai, and her research didn't soothe her worries.

He must be fine.

Valela moved closer, her collarbone reaching the edge of the desk. "I'm sorry, professor. I've had a lot on my mind. It won't repeat." She dipped her head in formal acknowledgment and nearly jolted when she found a pair of sharp gray eyes staring back at her.

"I see great potential in you, Miss Hightide. It would be a pity to see it wasted," Professor Hulmus studied her behind two bushy eyebrows. Several wrinkles formed on his forehead. "Finding pupils with both talent and hard work has proven rarer than I would like."

Valela blinked, not used to receiving compliments. "I'll do better in the next exam."

"Mhmm... Indeed, Essence Theory is the cornerstone upon which all magic is built," he murmured, somehow giving the distinct impression she had given the wrong answer. His bony fingers traced the gold filigree of his soul tome before the book disappeared in a blue shimmer.

"As you should be well aware, the Moon's Trials have been confirmed again for this year." His mouth scrunched up in scholarly disapproval. "I thought we were beyond such *crude* means of evaluation after how disastrous the last went... But alas... my proposal of a written test was outvoted by the college."

Valela perked her ears. Aside from the fact the trials were happening, no one seemed to know anything about them—not even Calyssa's rumor machine.

Professor Hulmus tucked back a tuft of white hair with a tired gesture. “Turbulent times are ahead, Miss Hightide.” His keen gaze turned muddy, though he still spoke in a slow deliberate manner. “The dean has been tasked to forge the next generation and he means to accomplish that regardless of the costs. I would advise you to spend less worrying about distant conspiracies and more on practicing your skills. Yes, I know what you’ve been up to. Nothing moves inside the library without my knowledge.”

Bloody curses! I should have known the clerk would spill it.

“I didn’t mean to hide...” Valela fidgeted with the latch of her bag, professors didn’t always like perfect composure.

“Private research shows good initiative and curiosity. Qualities I always try to encourage in my pupils. Despite what my appearance suggests, I’ve been a student too once. *Long ago.*” He chuckled with a rueful smile. “I know the allure of forbidden topics better than most, but you must mind your priorities and not get lost in some treasure hunt.”

Spirits, I wish it was just that.

Valela lowered her gaze in penance, glad he didn’t know everything.

“Do you realize the privilege of frequenting these hallowed halls?” He gestured to the emptying amphitheater, looming over her from his chair. “Each acceptance cycle, tens of thousands of promising youths test to enter Raelion. Of those, only a fraction of a fraction get accepted. This might very well be the most important chance of your life.”

“I understand, professor.” Her peers never forgot to remind her how *lucky* she was to have been accepted, usually when she scored a test higher than them.

“Excellent.” Professor Hulmus gave a curt nod, suddenly holding a brown folder in his knobby hands. “This should be the information you were looking for.”

Valela gaped with no effort. “Is that...”

She had spent many sleepless nights failing to figure out what was happening in Limgrell. All she had had to go off was a vaguely worded quest and the few tidbits Kai provided on the suspected cult. The Hall of Seekers proved no help despite her numerous requests to review the matter; and the reports from the Republic’s Archives were only a little better when she could get her hands on them.

There had been an unusual number of incidents across the Republic: entire villages wiped out without a trace, ships missing at sea, key officials suddenly dying and several abductions. All the investigations quickly found an obvious culprit or never made any progress.

She couldn’t prove the same cult was behind them, nor did she believe it. The more she looked into it the more she wondered if she had gone mad.

“I personally transcribed the scrolls. It made for an *interesting* read.” Professor Hulmus offered her the folder without releasing his grip. “I expect that once your curiosity is sated, you’ll focus on your studies. I always had a fascination for history myself, but it’s not worth compromising your future.”

Valela bobbed her head like a bird pecking at seeds. “I will.”

With the rough paper of the envelope in her hands, she itched to immediately devour the contents. It took a sizable effort to casually hold it at her side without staring at it.

“I’ll look forward to reading your essay about mana gems formation next week, Miss Hightide.” Storing his books away, Professor Hulmus hopped off his chair. He disappeared behind the imposing desk and then ambled toward the faculty’s room on his stubby legs.

“Thank you, professor,” Valela spoke up once she had her wits back.

Hulmus waved at her without turning.

The concentric rows of tables of the amphitheater were empty of students. She had walked halfway to the doors at the top when she sneaked a peek at the papers, afraid to raise her hopes.

Limgrell and the masked pirates had run into a dead-end, so she had looked at the historical records of similar activities. It had been a long shot. Heretical cults and secret societies were oddly common on the mainland. By their nature, there was little known about their inner workings; the bulk of information regarded how they were discovered and destroyed—at least in the archives she could access.

This...

A handful of minutes later, Valela tucked the crumpled folder back into her spatial bag, her hands not as firm as she would like. There was no point worrying on unproven assumptions. She had barely taken a step into the vaulted hallway when two people barred her path.

“So, what was it? You’ve taken a while in there.” Calyssa said, vibrating with excitement. “What kind of reprimand did you get? Any demerits? Punishments?”

Rena had an apologetic look that said she had tried to stop her. “It was probably just a warning.”

“No, Helmus doesn’t do those.”

Looking between her closest classmates, Valela shook her head with a lighter mood. They meant well, even if sometimes they were a handful. “You didn’t need to wait for me.”

“And lose the latest gossip?” Calyssa grabbed her golden hair, sounding horrified.

Rena elbowed her friend. “We wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Of course,” Calyssa vehemently nodded. “We were also *deeply* concerned about your wellbeing. Oh, I almost forgot!” Her face switched from fretful to giddy in a blink. “You’ll never guess what Narion did during spell practice. Melipha told me Professor Valdibald ripped his hair out. That’ll cheer you up.”

“I’m fine, Lys. Thank you for waiting for me.” Valela said, knowing she wouldn’t be able to take another step till she spilled what happened. “The professor heard about a topic I’ve been researching and wanted to give me some extra material. I lost track of time going through it.”

“See, I was right.” Rena crossed her lithe arms with a vindicated air. “I told you she wasn’t in trouble.”

“So, no punishments...? Not even a tiny one?” Calyssa pouted. “I actually thought you had done something *fun* for once... Guess wordy papers are more your thing.”

Valela took the chance to break through their blockade. “If you don’t like wordy papers, I imagine you won’t need my notes.” She hid a smile and strode toward the lift at the end of the hallway. The main array thrummed beneath her feet, lighting the floor marbling with chains of blue runes.

“Wait!” Calyssa scampered on the stone platform, hugging her arm. “I also love dusty papers! You wouldn’t be so cruel to deny me my passion, right Val?”

“She should.” Rena gilded inside for last, gesturing to the waiting attendant to activate the lift for the fifth floor. “If she keeps bailing you out, she enables your bad habits.”

“And what’s the harm in that?”

“Raelion is the most renowned academy in the Republic. We’re here to learn the foundations for our profession paths.” She gestured toward the lecture hall they had left. The metallic door shut with a chime, and the lift began to smoothly ascend. “You’ll have problems if you only learn half of it.”

”No, it just means I’ll have to find people to do the boring half for me.” Calyssa combed her hair in the mirror as another chime announced their destination. “Honestly, it doesn’t sound that hard.”

Her logic is flawless.

If someone could make such a ludicrous plan work, it was probably her. Initially, Valela disliked her attitude, then she realized she was simply honing a different set of skills. Lys could often put twice as much energy into avoiding a task she found boring than it would take to complete it.

How would it have been to grow up in the capital? Perhaps it’s normal there.

Exiting the lift, the wide glass windows of the left showed a view of the vast gardens and marble buildings around Raelion. The colossal trees and everblooming fields of flowers always caught Valela's breath. They could only be maintained thanks to the naturally high-mana density—in addition to an army of gardeners and arrays.

Despite being built in a yellow-3 area, a child could run through the fields and woods without fear of encountering any beasts within the premises. Her Poise hadn't stopped her from gawking when she first stepped off the airship.

"Val, I think that one is here for you." Calyssa's voice pulled her away from the scenery.

Valela turned to see a woman in the blue and silver livery of the House of Mirrors waiting by the entrance of the cafeteria. Her heart skipped a beat, letting the worries she had locked in her mind flood free.

Don't jump to conclusions.

"Miss Hightide." The messenger gave a short bow and held out a letter in a gloved hand. "Your emergency contact has entered one of our branches and asked to contact you. Do you wish to make a connection or reschedule for another date?"

Valela broke the wax seal and mana netting of the letter, there were only two words inside, and she only needed the first: *Matthew*. "I'll come immediately."

He's okay. I must tell him—

"You're going to skip your meal." Rena pressed her lips in disapproval. "Can't it wait for later?"

"No one should—" Calyssa's expression lit in realization "Oh, it must be that guy!"

"Who?" Rena furrowed her sharp brows before getting an uncharacteristic glint of mischief in her dark eyes. "You mean *that* guy. The one she's been worrying about for weeks."

"Yes, her mysterious *friend*." They shared a knowing glance. Calyssa giggled. "I hope he's handsome at least. He must be. Otherwise you wouldn't be losing sleep over him."

"There is nothing between us. He's just an acquaintance I contracted back home." Valela could feel her traitorous cheeks heating up and turned toward the House's messenger. "I'd like to go now." Without giving her friends another chance to tease her, she hurried toward the lift ahead of the woman in livery, familiar with the fastest route.

"You might want to fix your hair," Calyssa yelled after her.

A hand rose to her hazel locks before Valela could stop it; a bout of laughter burst behind her. She would never hear the end of it, but for now, she had other priorities.

Why has he taken so long to reach out? And I haven't heard from Niel either.

All that mattered was that they were safe, away from Limgrell. She strode out of the lift on the ground floor, just slow enough to not look like she was running. The branch of the House of Mirrors was positioned close to the dormitory to allow easy access.

The messenger panted when she stepped on the onyx floor of the facility and headed for the front desk, summoning letter in hand. "I'd like to reach my contact."

"Miss Hightide." The receptionist smiled recognizing her, and typed on the polished slab behind the counter. "The nineteenth chamber has been prepared for your connection. Your contact has insisted on paying for the service. May I interest you in any of our refreshments?"

"Perhaps later. Thank you." Her heart drummed in her chest. She followed a clerk who walked too slowly, reaching the room at the far end of a corridor.

A half-mage stood inside in front of the jagged floating mirror. "I've established the connection. I imagine you know how this works, miss."

"I'm familiar," Valela said tersely.

The door closed, sealing her alone in the chamber. She breathed to calm her nerves and tapped the rippling silver surface.