

Chapter 155 - Cursed Night

The pastel light of three moons peeked through the bed of clouds. Pale red, blue, and a sharp violet from the Lost Sister wandering the skies above.

Kai made a non-committal sound under the twins' hopeful gazes. "We can meet by the northern beach." They had never been good at taking *no* for an answer. If tonight was anything to go by, seven years had done little to improve them on that front.

He had no objection to another meeting, a few hours were hardly enough to make up for years lost, though he wasn't going to blindly agree to anything. It'd be hard to keep his grade and skills a secret if they trained together.

What should he reveal to them, what could he afford to? Would they be able to keep his skills to themselves or would they run to tell the Republic?

His mind was too sleepy to consider all the possibilities. After they had welcomed him back with open arms, part of him wanted to tell them everything that had happened to him. It would be nice to have somebody he didn't have to hide from, or fake who he was. Just like when they were children, though his secrets weren't as heavy then.

Time never goes backward, only forward... Was it Dora or Elijah?

Either way, the meaning was clear, no matter how deeply he wished for something, it didn't make it a reality. They weren't four innocent ducklings anymore, and he wasn't that naive. He needed to consider the consequences before he revealed anything.

Dora had reprimanded him too many times for his recklessness to forget. If he dove headfirst, sooner or later he would splatter himself against a rock.

I'll figure it out in the morning.

"Great, tomorrow it is. I can't wait to see how far you've progressed," Oli grinned, helping Ana along who waved at him with a drowsy smile.

Wait, that's not what I...

"See you tomorrow then. We can discuss the plans for our trip. I can't wait," Uli added, excitedly hopping after them.

In the time Kai took to come up with a response, they had already reached their dormitories. Their enthusiastic whispers faded into the night.

Damn fool, should have known that if I give them a hand they'll take my arm, and legs too for good measure.

“I’ll talk to them, the twins always get carried away,” Lou chuckled with a sympathetic look. “It doesn’t have to be tomorrow, we can arrange when you prefer.”

Kai hadn’t realized the boy remained beside him until he spoke. The hulking teenager could be surprisingly unassuming for someone of his size. Maybe it was the same quiet kid of his memories in a much bigger package.

“Thank you, I might need some more time,” Kai nodded with gratitude. “I mean, seeing you was great, and I *want* to meet again, but I have other commitments too.” Improvisation kept him from stumbling over his words.

I’m definitely too tired.

Before Flynn brought him news of his friends’ arrival, he had already spent the whole day working on the cube and brewing potions. He couldn’t wait to fall on his fluffy bed and hug his pillow.

Lou’s amused expression didn’t change, though Kai could somehow detect a question in his gaze. Perhaps for how the light reflected in his observant eyes, or it was simply the dark playing tricks on his exhausted mind.

Most of his days were occupied by his work on the cube. Saying he had to solve a mind-wrenching, multi-layer puzzle fabricated by an ancient, evil witch might not be the wisest idea. They didn’t need to know *everything*.

“I’ve told you I’m a bit of an alchemist. I’ve got a contract with a merchant to deliver potions each week. I can meet with you, I just need to figure out my schedule.”

Good, half-truths always work the best.

A dark frown covered Lou’s face, his cold anger sent shivers down Kai’s back. “Do you have the document? If you didn’t understand what you were agreeing to, I can help you get it nullified. There are laws to protect minors from being trapped in a contract.”

Taken aback by the shift, Kai needed a long moment to make sense of the words. “No, no, I wasn’t tricked into signing anything. It’s a fair contract, Reishi is just... *very* passionate about making us earn more.”

Is this Karma for lying? Sorry Reishi, I shouldn’t have made it seem like I worked for you all day. Even if you’d probably love that...

“Oh, I— I thought—” The dangerous air evaporated into an embarrassed silence, Lou stared awkwardly at his feet. “Are you sure he’s not taking advantage of you? You can tell me if you need help.”

“Reishi’s a friend,” Kai assured him. “He could have haggled a much better contract for himself if he wanted.”

“You’re friends with the *merchant* who employs you?”

“...Yes?” Kai wasn’t sure he understood the undertone this time.

Is that weird?

Was it odd for a boy not yet twelve to hang out with a merchant? Maybe. He wasn’t used to being judged by normal standards, and Reishi wasn’t that much older than himself.

Normality is overrated.

“It’s a long story,” Kai glanced at the moons above to highlight how late it was. Better if he shut his mouth before he dug his grave any deeper. “I need to get home. I’ll stop by as soon as I can or send someone to let you know.”

“I’ll accompany you,” Lou followed beside him.

“Thank you, but there is no need. I can find my way home.”

“I can’t let you walk back alone in the middle of the night,” Lou spoke with the same tone of finality he used with the twins. “Higharbor is a large city and it’s easy to get lost. What’s your address? Not every area is safe at this hour.”

Kai vainly looked for a way out, there were few things he found more irritating than being babysat. But the look on Lou's face didn’t contemplate any argument, he wasn’t going to allow him to cross the city alone, no room for compromise.

Shit! Flynn must have seen me chat with them and gone back home hours ago.

Defeated, Kai hung his head low. “It’s this way.”

Another lie came back to kick his ass, how awfully poetic.

Standing at the peak of Orange with a profession, he didn’t need protection. If there was a threat he couldn’t handle himself, Lou’s presence would make little difference, no matter how many muscles the teenager got. And the eventuality of meeting any danger was highly unlikely with Mana Sense and Hallowed Intuition, not to mention his Favor.

“You live pretty far,” Lou took the lead, looming protectively over him. “You could have waited until the next day to come visit or sent us a letter.”

Kai barely managed to stop a glare. Unless he revealed his grade and abilities, the only option was to endure in silence.

When they were five children in Whiteshore, Kai had been the de facto leader of their group, regardless of any age difference. Chatting with them deluded him that their dynamic would stay the same. How foolish. They had both changed, and Lou had gone to fill the vacuum Kai had left behind.

It was so much nicer when I was in charge. Now he must see me like a kid in need of protection. Just great.

Cold crystal lamplights lit the paved road out of the government district. Kai sensed three pairs of eyes pass over him, no one ever lingered more than seconds. Even the patrol of enforcers crossed them with just a friendly wave. Clearly, walking with a boy who wore the uniform of the scholarship program had its advantages.

The Republic might not restrict access to this neighborhood, but they were also unlikely to enjoy having people who didn't belong wandering around in the middle of the night. The suspicion would have at least gotten him questioned—likely more than once.

The number of lights sharply decreased when they stepped into the outer city. Small areas of shadow formed between each crystal when the clouds obscured the moons. Kai relaxed nonetheless, glad to have moved to a neutral place in the city.

Suddenly his stomach grumbled, the sound unmistakable in the quiet of night. Darkness managed to hide his flushed embarrassment. He had indeed skipped dinner to get here when he got the news.

“When was the last time you ate?” Lou looked down at him, suspicious. An unsaid threat in the air.

Spirits, not another one.

“I had dinner early,” he lied without regret. Unfortunately, his tummy had other plans, loudly complaining again.

“Did you really...?” His tone was flat, but the skepticism couldn't be more glaring.

Damn, what's wrong with this cursed night?

“I'm going to eat a midnight snack when I get home. When I heard you were in the city, I was impatient to meet you. So I came immediately.” If lies betrayed him, he was able to wield the truth just as well.

What do you say to that? Eh?

Silence stretched before Lou's answered. “I missed you too. I— I'm sorry, I should have come looking for you sooner.” His voice faltered. “I thought it would be easier after I got my profession, but I shouldn't have waited...”

Okay, now I feel terrible. He's winning without even trying. How is that fair?

“I should be the one to apologize.” Kai thanked Improvisation again for keeping his words clear. “I was the one who promised to come visit you, and then took *seven* years to do it.”

Their footsteps were the only sound on the paved streets of Higharbor, echoing in the night. There were no taverns in this residential area. Lou's chuckles broke the quiet.

"What?"

"I don't think anyone remembers that promise apart from you," Lou's grin flashed in the night. "You always loved to take responsibility for everything, so ahead of us even if you were younger. I'm sorry I let you carry the burden by yourself while I waited by the side."

You truly want to destroy my cold dead heart tonight. You were just a kid.

"Let's just say we're even then," Kai magnanimously conceded. "Are you sure Ana doesn't remember either?"

"Yes. Well, maybe she does, but I can assure you she didn't expect you to find us first. We had made plans to travel to Greenside after graduating from the program."

"Really?" By some miracle, his voice didn't crack, but he couldn't hide his disbelief. All he could do was stare at the paved road and continue to put one foot before the other.

"Yep, the group couldn't be complete without you."

"Huh..." Kai didn't trust himself to say more. They were almost at the edge of the inner city, where a column of light rose from the Ring Road.

Lou grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to meet his gaze. Firm and gentle, he cast a shadow over him. "Did you think we had forgotten about you?"

Kai let his eyes wander, but Lou's towering frame was cumbersome, making it hard to avoid him. The hulking teenager had no intention of moving without an answer. He had always been good at patiently waiting. Perhaps better than him.

Fine, I'll do it. You got pretty bossy without me.

Kai stopped delaying the inevitable, two observant green eyes looked down at him. The squared face with an early patchy beard was so unlike his memories, but the eyes were the same. Thoughtful, worried, never betraying what was going on beneath the surface.

What am I supposed to say? Yes? Probably yes?

"Isn't that normal? To forget people, I mean. We were children, I wouldn't have faulted you if you had moved on." Kai cursed himself the moment the words left his mouth. Was that truly the best he could manage?

Lou's impassive expression was breached by a faint smile. "When were any of us ever normal? That was why we met in the first place, I never really fit in with any group, but with

you, it was easy.” He chuckled and pulled him in for a hug. “No, we didn’t forget you. We wouldn’t be able to even if we tried, you were pretty... *memorable*.”

The height difference was obvious, especially when he began patting his head. An adult reassuring a kid that everything was fine. Despite Kai’s instinctive dislike for the treatment, his irritation flowed away.

I’ll let it slide just this once...

How could he be mad at someone who said shit like that? It was so incredibly unfair. Seven years, and they remembered him, and planned to go look for him. What could he say to that?

Guess I was a pretty amazing teacher, wasn’t I?

Kai tried to pat Lou in the same way, his short arms couldn’t quite reach the giant’s head. So unfair. “You can let me go now.”

“Just a moment.”

“You’re just gloating on the fact you’ve grown faster than me.”

“Maybe,” Lou chuckled, squeezing him tighter. “You’re just so small. I don’t know why you were always bigger in my imagination.”

Damn, jerk. I have yet to go through puberty. You were supposed to be the kind one.

“If you try to pick me up, I’m going to punch you,” Kai threatened with a smile, anticipating his thoughts. “And I don’t mean in the shoulder or your stomach. The higher you are, the bigger the tumble when you fall.”

The stupidly big teenager appeared to consider the proposal for a second before freeing him. He gave him a final condescending pat on the head, *grinning*. His amused look didn’t last long when Kai kicked him in the shin.

Lou let out a satisfying cry that seemed more of surprise than pain, hopping on one leg while he held his hands on the other.

And people say violence doesn’t help, I already feel much better.

“Don’t scream, people are trying to sleep.” Kai gave him a reproachful look, pointing at the building around them.

“I know that,” Lou whispered furiously through gritted teeth. “Why did you kick me!”

“You know why, and you deserved that.” He took a step back to get out of reach. Maybe he should have thought twice, but it felt so right in the moment. “What are you going to do now, big boy? Hit your small powerless friend?”

When it was clear Lou had no intention to retaliate, Kai headed down the street. "Let's get home. You can crash on my couch if you don't want to walk back."

"Did you have to hit me so hard?" Lou limped after him with a sulk. Closer to the boy he was than the responsible adult.

If it's wrong, why does it feel so good?

Kai shrugged. "You'd have avoided it if I kicked you any slower. Really, it's your own fault if you think about it."

"How do you know I'd have avoided it?" Lou caught up with him, favoring the unharmed leg.

"That's what I do, Lou. I know things." Kai slowed down and helped him along. "And Ana couldn't stop singing your praises all night."

All hail Improvisation!

Sometimes his mouth was faster than his brain. Despite his bulk, Lou was light on his feet, he could roughly assess his attributes. Though it was more an instinctive feeling from the fights he had experienced helped by Inspect.

Spirits willing, the boy wouldn't suspect a thing.