

Chapter 162 - A Mesar for Your Thoughts

Her emerald eyes widened as if he had insulted her entire family line, and dead cat for good measure.

Don't look at me like that, you're the weird one for remembering me. It's been almost four years.

"Wait. You *truly* don't remember my name?" She scrunched her brows, her voice lined with genuine surprise.

Did she think I was making fun of her? A bit conceited, but people did call her little princess... Oh, I do remember a name then, should I tell her?

"Why would I lie?" Kai shrugged. The information hovered at the edge of his mind, just out of reach. He might recall it if he focused, but why go through the effort when this was much funnier. "Are you so famous that people recognize you in the streets?"

"Yes, I—" The blushing spread from her neck to the tip of her ears. "I'm Valela Hightide," she stiffly offered her hand.

Okay, maybe I'm doing it a little on purpose.

He'd like to blame his exhaustion and hunger, but he just couldn't resist poking holes in her standoffish demeanor. She was the same proud girl he had met during the selection in Sylspring. An odd and imperious queen inquiring about a peasant.

Kai accepted the shake, her palm surprisingly cold. "Well, *Valela*, it was nice meeting you again. I hope you're doing great, but, as I was saying, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

“I have questions.” The little princess stated, as if that explained everything.

“Me too, tons of them. Like, why do we exist? Why do people on this hill always look down their noses? Why is everything here three times more expensive but only half better?” He turned to go. “Unfortunately, I don’t think there is a law that forces me to listen to you.”

“Wait!”

“Why?” Kai raised a brow in challenge, concealing his amusement. “Are you going to call back your little bodyguard if I don’t?” Nothing like a sprinkle of reverse psychology to ensure she didn’t involve someone else.

“Adrian is just a friend, and I can—.” The affronted look was back. Valela shut her mouth as if to prevent the words from escaping, hands tightened into little fists.

A pulse of mana broke through the enchantments in her dress. The adult poise was gone, leaving behind a flustered girl about to stomp her feet and throw a tantrum. As she was about to burst, her mana retreated.

Such a pity.

Within a single breath, Valela regained her stately mask. “I’m going to pay you to answer my questions.” Her voice hardly betrayed any emotion.

Oh... she wants to buy me? Flynn will forgive me, this story is worth gold.

Kai scratched his head with a pensive look, debating the matter. “Okay, one silver per question.” Higharbor was an expensive city, and the competition for alchemy goods was fierce.

“One s— That’s ridiculous.” She collected her tone. “It will take you a minute.”

“Well, that’s my price. You don’t have to agree if you don’t want to.”

Kai gave her the once-over. The delicate embroidery of her cream silk dress must have taken countless hours of work of a skilled artisan, not to speak of the gold hair clip, or the flower pendant with three emerald petals matching her eyes. “I’m sure you can afford it.”

I’d feel guilty if her clothes weren’t worth more than I’ve ever earned my whole life.

Valela pulled out a little squid-shaped purse from a fold in her dress. It had a round head with googly eyes and ten tiny tentacles. Her face dared him to say anything.

“It’s very cute.”

“Thanks.” She checked the contents of the squid without letting him peek inside. “I accept your deal. Know that breaking a contract *is* punishable by law, you can’t lie.”

I’ve done my homework.

According to the Republic’s tedious legal code, verbal agreements weren’t binding without a third party acting as a ‘reputable witness’. And he also remembered the lesson his mother had taught him as a toddler: laws were applied arbitrarily depending on the standing of the people involved.

Does she know, or is she making it up to scare me?

Whatever the law said, he didn’t like his chances if Valela pursued the matter. In the best-case scenario, he’d be put through the scrutiny he had spent the last year avoiding. It was her way of guaranteeing he didn’t lie, he hoped.

Too late to turn back now. I dug my own grave and jumped inside with both feet.

“Okay, but payment first,” Kai put his palm up. The least he could do was ensure he didn’t get scammed. After an indignant glare for doubting her honesty, the little princess smacked a silver coin in his hand.

“Thank you for your patronage, my lady, what would you like to know?” He grinned at her. “Alas, I lead a pretty boring life.”

Valela opened her mouth before closing it again, her eyes wandering on the swordsman that overlooked the square. It confirmed she had insisted on stopping him as a matter of pride rather than any deep interest.

“What are you doing here?” she finally asked.

Really?

It was such a generic question. On the top of his head, Kai could come up with half a dozen responses that were *technically* true and revealed nothing of importance. That was without using Improvisation.

I’m talking with you? Taking a stroll? Being pestered by an insistent girl?

The first rule to successfully make fun of other people was to know their boundaries, and when to stop. She wouldn’t appreciate it if he played with semantics.

Well, I can’t tell her I was running away from a series of strange coincidences.

“Assuming you mean here, in Higharbor,” he waited for her nod. “I wanted to gain more experience traveling before I sailed past the archipelago. The capital held the most opportunities and information.”

That was the truth, maybe not the *whole* of it. For a second, Kai worried she would argue or call him a liar.

“You want to go to the mainland?” she quietly contemplated.

“Yes, when I’m fourteen. And that’s another question.” Kai put his palm out with a grin.

Instead of protesting, Valela pressed her lips together and took out another silver from her little squid. “Did you earn enough to buy an enchanted shirt and live in Higharbor by yourself or did someone help you?”

There was no second blunder, she carefully worded the following questions to maximize the information. The fat squid dished out an endless sequence of shiny coins without slimming down—more than it could reasonably contain.

It must be a spatial item. I didn’t know they made them so cute and small.

Spatial runes were notoriously fickle to inscribe. Only a master enchanter could make them work on such a small object, and there was none in the archipelago to his knowledge.

It must be a rich people thing.

The amount of money she could throw to satisfy her idle curiosity was humbling, and a little depressing. She asked what he’s been about since they last met and more about his beliefs. Despite making his answers sound as monotone and bland as possible, her interest was only rising.

Why did I have to run into her?

“Would you consider working for the Republic?”

“I would consider it,” Kai said curtly. He’d rather stay vague and not give her funny ideas to recruit him.

To his surprise, Valela made no attempt to press the matter. She gave him a single absent nod as if that was all the information she required. “Have you received no help apart from your teachers’ instructions to train your skills?”

“Yeah.” Kai had the impression this wasn’t the first time she asked him. “I mean, they gave me free access to mana herbs to practice Alchemy and a few alchemical potions.”

Valela perked up, “What kind of potions? And this counts as part of the previous question, your answer wasn’t complete.”

He gave her a long judging look till she surrendered another coin with a scoff. The rich were always such misers. “They gave me healing remedies for the wounds I got during training, tonics to make me recover faster and to keep me going for longer.”

Spirits, she must think they beat me up.

“Oh,” the little princess was disappointed by his answer and paused her string of questions. If Yatei had any mercy, she was bored of their game.

With the purse I found earlier, I made more silvers tonight than in the past three months. Who knew having a stalker was this profitable?

“Have your teachers left for good?” When Valela made up her mind, her words took him by surprise.

The night breeze caressed his skin, sending shivers down his back. “How do you know about that?”

A hint of smugness pierced through Valela’s flat smile. “That’s not how this game works. You’re the one who needs to answer.”

Kai gritted his teeth, she knew a suspicious lot about him. This wasn’t something she could chance upon with a simple inquiry.

If I walked away now it would be more suspicious, and she’s confirming what she already knows.

“Yes. They left and are not planning to come back.”

“Do you know their real identities?”

“No.” *Nothing apart from vague suspicions.* His tone made clear that was all she was going to get.

“Okay, final question, what’s your real grade?” She observed him closely to read his reaction. “You had already reached Orange last time I met you, I can’t believe you’ve not enhanced your race at least once.”

“That’s personal information.”

“We’ve made a deal,” she pointed at the coin in his hand. “You get my money and I get your answer. I’ve already paid you.”

Kai threw back her silver. "I never said I would answer *all* your questions, and a verbal agreement deal isn't binding without a witness."

Her cheek flushed at being called out. She *did* know what she was doing. "It's an honor contract to keep your word between respectable citizens."

Is that even a thing, or is she making shit up?

"I'll pay you five silver mesars for this answer." She tried to bribe him, her fingers had already fished out the coins from her purse.

"Still no, I think we're done. It was *interesting* meeting you."

"Ten?" Valela shook the poor squid dry, one coin skipped on the square paving, but her attention was on him. "I've got eighteen, and not like your grade is such a big secret anyway. I can tell you I'm Orange ★★★."

Kai halted his steps. "That must be public information if you're as famous as you say." If she was determined to investigate him, there was little he could do to stop her. She certainly had the money to spare, and contacts in the Republic. If that happened this would turn into a mess.

What's with this fucking night and my Luck, I bet I would have found her outside my door tomorrow if I ran away.

"I'll tell you if you answer a question of mine." People can't fight the tides, just ride the waves. His grade wasn't as important without knowing *when* he achieved it.

She hesitated an instant. "Deal, I'll answer as long as it's not a secret about someone else."

“Okay, but you go first.” It was a risk, but when would he get access to inside information again? He had hoped to lay low and ignore the Republic till he left for the mainland. That didn’t seem likely to happen now. Valela couldn’t have gotten the information by herself, and if she knew about him, who else?

Dammit, is this encounter part of tonight's coincidences?

“How do you know so much about me and where does your information come from? How many people know?” If exposure was inevitable, he would take the initiative.

Valela pursed her lips. “That’s three questions.”

“I can reword them into one if you have the time to waste. And it’s only fair I know since it’s about me.”

Her internal debate was longer this time, but the conclusion didn’t change. “After we talked last time, I asked around to confirm your story. There weren’t so many people who reached Orange at your age outside Higharbor.”

I knew she was a stalker!

“Well... then I read a report a while ago, it mentioned your teachers had left. They were important people on the continent.”

“You’ve read a report about *me*?” Kai felt the blood drain from his face, this was worse than he thought. Then a realization hit him. “Was it from the Republic?”

“Yes, well.” Valela stared at her feet. “It’s nothing unusual really, you’d be surprised by the number of people who they have a file on. Yours wasn’t even particularly accurate. I thought you were still in Sylspring, which was why I was surprised to meet you here.”

Was he under surveillance right now? He forced his breathing to slow to not hyperventilate. "How many people read it?" Kai pushed the word out of his mouth in a strangled tone.

"I— I don't know, not many. Adrian wanted to show me the central archive, and I recognized your name by chance. It didn't look like anyone had checked it since it was put there. It was a terribly boring read and I skimmed through most of it."

Kai had never been more glad to be called *boring* in his life. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought, though he had severely underestimated the reach of the Republic.

"Your grade?" Valela asked with a soft voice. "I won't tell anyone else if you want to keep it private."

"It's the same one you have, I just had my enhancement and I'd be grateful if you didn't share it. Now I need to go." Kai hurried back to the inner city.

Stupid artifact and stupid night.

Could he trust her? If she believed half of what she said about propriety and honor, she might keep his secret, if only to safeguard her pride.

Pieces of their previous conversation in Sylspring floated in his mind. She had promised to keep his privacy then, and no one came to bother him. Well, except Zerith perhaps. Was he the one who wrote the report about him?

Fuck!

Whatever the little princess chose to do, it didn't change that the Republic was keeping tabs on him.

Better knowing than not, I guess...

The brisk walk through the upper city helped cool his mind and panic. Kai reached *Ring Road* and made his way home. The rapid back and forth had been closer to an interrogation than a friendly conversation.

Let's be rational. What's the worst that could happen?

If the governor learned of his grade and profession, he might be forced to sign a shitty contract he had wanted to avoid it. Or it could only turn into a minor inconvenience. He had bet on worse odds.

What he needed to avoid at any cost was revealing his spatial ring and the stupid silver disk that landed him in this situation. Both were worth more than anything else he possessed put together. The chances they would let him keep them were below none.

What a headache.

Flynn found him not far from their house. "I was coming to look for you. Are you okay?"

"Yes, did our house burn down?"

"No, the accidents were following you, but there is something you should see." He underlined with a meaningful look and refused to elaborate until they were back in their house.

"I found this inside one of the pieces of your puzzles." Flynn offered him a folded piece of paper with a wry smile. "If it makes you feel better, it was quite well hidden."

