

Chapter 247 - Old Friends

Five men howled a sea shanty as Kai walked by. “Why are we here if we’re not meeting Valela?” He had just managed to set his bags down at the house when Flynn had dragged him back outside. The alleyway smelled of fish guts and unwashed sailors. In its furious rush to expand, Higharbor’s sanitation hadn’t kept pace in the poorer districts.

Will she even help me?

Doubts were creeping in. Amongst everyone he knew, Kai struggled to predict how the princess might have changed. They had parted ways on cordial terms—more than *two* years ago; now he was going to ask her to break the law. That was no small favor, it could jeopardize everything she had worked for if she got—

“Ease up a little.” Flynn threw an arm over his shoulders with a brazenly cheery attitude. “I’ve arranged a meeting with her tomorrow. Try to have some fun in the meantime. If we’d stayed home, you’d just end up torturing yourself with your stupid thoughts.”

Well, he’s not totally wrong...

“I don’t feel like drinking,” Kai grumbled. With his Constitution, he needed to down three pints just to feel slightly tipsy, and the sour taste of ale still hadn’t grown on him. Was it worth it to waste time and money for a far-off good time?

Perhaps it’s better if I never get used to it.

“Stop overthinking.” Flynn squinted at him and shook his head. “It’s written all over your face. You don’t have to drink anything. We just need to pick something up. Remember you need an ID to enter the upper city.”

“Oh...” Kai had forgotten about that pointless bureaucratic nitpick.

“We just need something that can pass a cursory glance. Most guards barely look at it, but it’ll be good to have it at hand if a patrol stops us. You never know when an officer feels like lording their power over you.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we just met Valela below the hills then?”

“Your girl has only gotten more famous while you were gone. People tend to notice her, especially if she leaves her usual circles to meet with a *suspicious* stranger.” Flynn gave him a once over as if that explained everything. “It’s also easier to find a discreet place in the upper city. Rich people like their privacy.”

When did he have time to organize any of this?

“Okay...” This was so far outside of Kai’s area of expertise that he could only trust Flynn knew what he was doing.

Maybe Reishi was right to worry.

The pile of gold and chromium in his ring was useless if he didn’t know how and where to spend it. Kai wasn’t entirely confident he would have found a solution before attracting the wrong type of attention.

“We’re here!” Flynn pointed to an uneven wooden building as if it were some impressive monument. *The Merry Gal* hung in bold letters above the open door.

Kai scratched his neck, trying to hide his lack of enthusiasm. The tavern was indistinguishable from the myriad of pubs they had passed. After a second take, he realized it was supposed to be *Gale*, but the e had peeled off the sign.

Why does this look familiar?

“It looks better inside.” Flynn chuckled. “C’mon, stop with the death stare. I’m not bringing you to a cemetery.”

Kai commanded his lips upward. “I’m smiling.”

“Yeah... I can see. Why don’t you just avoid meeting anyone’s gaze? I don’t want to get kicked out.” Flynn didn’t give him a chance to reply before dragging him inside.

A hodgepodge of smells and sounds assaulted his senses. Kai breathed through his mouth to avoid being overwhelmed. The place was... *not* terrible. Enchanted glass balls hung from the ceiling, filling the hall with a warm light; the floor looked relatively clean, and a pretty girl holding a fourteen-string lute intoned a ballad.

“It’s better than I expected.”

Flynn widened his eyes in shock. “You should be careful with your words. Someone might think you meant that as a compliment.”

“Fine.” Kai let a reluctant grin slip through. “This place is pretty good.”

It still wouldn’t be his first or second choice for a good time, but the lively atmosphere was pleasant. Barmaids wove through the tables to carry orders of food and ale, and by the amount of laughter and singing, customers were enjoying themselves.

“You’re back!” A barmaid with stunning red hair threw her arms around Flynn, attracting more than a few envious looks. “We were beginning to worry that something had happened.”

“Hey, Marly, sorry for disappearing.” Flynn blushed, looking unusually awkward on his feet. “A few things came up and my trip to Sylspring lasted longer than expected. I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Things?” Her gaze landed on Kai with a slight frown. “Have I seen you before?”

Wait! Kai finally understood why he recognized her. *Isn't she that rude barmaid I met when I was wandering the city?*

Flynn clapped his back. “You must be mistaking him for someone else. You know, he just has *that* kind of face. Ohh, I forgot about presentations! Marleen, this is my dear friend Calvin. He’s new to Higharbor, so I’m showing him around. And Calvin, this is Marleen.”

Calvin, really? I told you I hated that name.

“So, I’m just Marleen?” Her cheeks puffed up in mock offense that broke into an amused smile. “Don’t make that face. I’m just joking. It’s good to see you’ve been meeting new people.” She studied Kai with a raised eyebrow. “Though I didn’t know you dated younger guys.”

“I don’t!” Flynn spluttered with a repulsed look. “He’s not that kind of friend. And I would never date a man incapable of smiling and having fun!”

“Hey!” Kai glared, his fists clenched at his sides.

There is no need to be insulting!

“I’m sorry, Calvin, but someone needed to tell you the truth.” Flynn leaned in to whisper to Marleen. “He’s been in love with me ever since we met. Try not to encourage him.”

I’m going to strangle him.

Unfortunately, there were too many witnesses to hide the body. Kai settled for stomping on his foot and casting ice cubes down his shirt. “Stop with your nonsense.”

While the fool squeaked and tried to grab onto the multiplying ice flakes, Kai looked at the barmaid with a tired sigh. “Could we please get a table? He enjoys embarrassing me.”

“Of course. It’s pretty crowded tonight, but we still have a few spots.” Marleen shared a sympathetic nod and led them to a table close to the singer. “Call me when you’re ready to order.” She hesitated before doubling back, watching him with gentle eyes. “Don’t let that moron bully you. You can do much better than him, and I’m not just saying that to make you feel better. Girls will swoon over that face of yours.”

“Uhm, thank you,” Kai mumbled. “I appreciate it.”

"I only speak the truth." She winked and left to serve another customer.

Flynn stumbled to the table, dragged the chair back and slumped in his seat with a surly look. "The ice was a low blow."

"Don't look at me like that, you started this." Kai sat to appreciate the song. "Now, who are we here to meet?"

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"Calvin Smalls?" The guard read the paper ID, his tone laced with amusement rather than suspicion.

"That's the name my parents chose in honor of my great-grandpa." Kai tried to keep a level voice despite his gritted teeth. He should have frozen Flynn solid for pulling this stunt. "Is there a problem, officer?"

"Everything seems to be in order. Remember you must leave the upper city before the eleventh hour unless you have accommodation within its borders. Please have a pleasant stay, Mr. Smalls." The guard waved him through to the paved roads beyond.

Kai hadn't taken ten steps when the first round of snickers started—the man had turned to his colleague and repeated the fake name as if it was the best joke in town. He could only keep walking. Flynn had already arranged for a forger to make the ID before they landed in Higharbor. On one hand, Kai was impressed by such forethought, on the other, it meant this joke had been long premeditated. He could respect that too, though he still wanted revenge.

*I should still have some of those failed potions with mild-ish side effects...*

"You acted wonderfully, Mr. Smalls." The dead-man-walking—also known as Flynn the smugface—stood *tall* over him with a smirk. "Your annoyance was so realistic that those guards didn't consider anything else."

*I could shave his hair tonight, that'll do the trick...*

"What if they remember me because you gave me such a stupid name?" Kai glared. He wanted to punch him, but the upper city was no place to get arrested. His temporary ID would only hold if they didn't check the archives.

"It's fine. Those guards see hundreds of people each day. And trust me, Calvin Smalls is far from the weirdest or funniest name they've heard." Flynn turned a corner towards their mysterious meeting place with Valela. "Anyone who hears it will be too distracted laughing to suspect a thing. You must admit that's actually genius!"

“It’s not even funny.”

“C’mon, you have to admit it’s a *little* funny.” Flynn poked him. Faced with Kai’s stone expression, he toned down his grin a bit. “You know I’m just teasing you, right? It’s only a temporary identity till we get a permanent document.”

“I know. But that’s only *if* Valela helps us. You’ve said you weren’t sure she could or *would*.”

“I just didn’t want to make a promise in someone else’s name. There are always a thousand things that could go wrong. But she definitely will if she’s able to.”

“How do you know?” Kai chewed his cheek. They walked beyond the shops on the main road toward more discreet establishments where the two hills met. “And how did you even meet her?”

“Valela was the one who brought your family the news of your *death*. And she has been sending money and elixirs for Kien’s education.” Flynn’s hand fiddled as if he were twirling a dagger. “I met her when she visited once. We talked a little, I might have mentioned you and that I knew Lou too. A month later, she decided to hire me for some stuff.”

“What kind of *stuff*?”

“I can’t share my clients’ private informations without their permission.”

Kai glanced at him expecting to see a jokey smile—Flynn was dead serious.

*What does he do for work? Something with connecting people...?*

Seeing his inquisitive look, Flynn scrubbed a hand through his hair. “It’s nothing shady. Let’s just say she wanted to know more about the archipelago. With what she’s paid me, you’ll have to ask her for more details.” He abruptly stopped in front of a three-story building.

A climbing shrub with beryl leaves and lilac flowers covered most of the facade, the branches too evenly distributed to be natural. Smaller ornamental flowers were set on the white marble balconies and windows. Each piece of greenery was in full bloom, brimming with vitality and mana that must’ve required constant care.

“She’s here?” Kai stared at the luxurious establishment. Despite several windows, privacy enchantments blocked anyone from peeking inside.

“Yup.” Flynn checked his pocket watch. “C’mon, she likes punctuality.”

The sweet scent of a thousand flowers enveloped them as they crossed the green arch that demarcated the property. They walked up to a sculpted brass door which swung open on its own. A waitress in a sharp black and white suit greeted them inside. “Welcome to the *Jack in the Green*. Do you have a reservation or membership card?”

Flynn took out an emerald paper and offered it to the woman like he had done it every day of his life. "Under Mr. Tally."

The waitress quickly checked the name off a ledger and gave back the card. "Here it is. I apologize for the formality, Mr. Tally. The Wisteria Balcony has already been paid for. I'll send for someone to accompany you immediately." She rang a golden bell.

"There is no need, I know the way." Flynn marched past an opaque glass door and up a flight of marble stairs.

"What is this place?" Kai awkwardly followed. The smell of fresh flowers pervaded every inch of the establishment without feeling overpowering.

Flynn glanced over his shoulder to confirm no one was following them before answering. "Just a very fancy restaurant with a penchant for the privacy of its clients. Though it never hurts to play the part of a high-end snobbish patron." He winked.

*I bet you just enjoy it.*

After one more flight of stairs and a short corridor, a host waited to open an enchanted glass door leading to a wide terrace. A roof of blooming wisteria shielded a table from direct sunlight.

The girl sat in one of only two chairs, leaning against the green edge of the balcony to enjoy the panoramic view of Highharbor sloping below. A flowing dress in the shades of the sea hung on her shoulders covered by a cascade of auburn hair.

Valela pushed a lock behind her ear to regard the newcomers, every gesture carried the elegance deserving of her nickname. "Flynn, you said it was urgent. What—" Her emerald eyes stopped on Kai, turning her blooming smile into an arched frown. "You should have warned me you were bringing someone. Who is he?"

Kai was spelled into silence, his throat dry and choked up. Her help would determine his future, and Flynn hadn't even told her why they were there! He glared at his supposed friend, who had left them both blindsided.

*I can't screw this up.*

"I wanted to introduce you to my friend, Calvin Smalls." Flynn smiled broadly and slapped his back to make him step onto the terrace. "I'll let you two talk. I'm sure you've got a lot of catching up to do."

In less than a blink, the jerk had slipped out of the terrace, leaving them alone.

Kai wanted to curse and run after him, but with Valela present, he couldn't afford to do either.

*I'm going to kill him. No, I'm going to shave his head, and then kill him.*

"That..." The princess joined his glare towards the glass door, pressing her lips into a thin line. "I'm sorry. Do you know what he meant by catchi—" She fell quiet, studying him with an intense stare. "Have we met before?"

"We did." A resigned breath left him. He could only make the most of his predicament. "The last time I cut a hole into your room, and I was also quite a bit shorter."

Her face painted in disbelief, her hands covered her mouth. She slowly moved closer, observing him from different angles as if she expected to find a fault in the illusion. By the time Valela stood a step from him, the truth had settled in. "Kai. You're alive?"

"I told you I had everything in hand. Well, minus the two years to get back to the archipelago. That part wasn't planned." Kai smiled, trying to hide his awkwardness.

*Stop rambling like a fool! You need to make a good impression.*

"You actually got trapped in the hidden realm...?" Her hands rose to either hug or shake him but stopped just short of touching. She pulled back with her cheeks turning red and stared at him from head to toe. "You look good."

"Uh... you do too?" He nodded, unsure what to say.

"Hmm... thanks" Valela stepped back with a twirl of her dress, still looking baffled.

"Sorry for ambushing you," Kai hurried to fill the silence. "I thought Flynn had already told you."

The princess hesitated between him and the table. "He mentioned there was a friend who needed help obtaining an official ID. I didn't think he meant you..." Making up her mind, she pinched him.

"Ahi!" Kai massaged his arm.

"Sorry, I wanted to make sure." She waved to the two chairs, face aflame. "Forgive my manners. Why don't you take a seat so we can talk."