

Chapter 251 - Unexpected Guests

When Lou asked if sailing hundreds of miles across the archipelago would grant them enough time to hear his story, the question hadn't been rhetorical. They sat in the cramped cabin, the ship gently rocking towards their destination beneath them. It was the only place warded from eavesdropping.

Kai almost regretted deciding to talk about anything aside from Zervathi. His all-clear had opened the floodgates to an endless deluge of questions. He had spoken for hours till his throat hurt—quite an accomplishment given his grade.

From the geography of the Sanctuary to how Blood Crawlers hunted and what he had eaten to survive, there wasn't a topic Lou wasn't interested in. After the Vastaire affair, the bulky boy had worked exclusively for Valela and his oath was modified to avoid conflict of interest. So he wouldn't need to share private information with anyone else.

Hmm, she was clearly interested in the Sanctuary. Why didn't she just ask me more...

Kai was ever more curious about the oath between Valela's family and the governor, but he had seen Lou cough blood for the briefest mention and didn't want to put him in that position again.

"Sorry I let myself get carried away." The overgrown teenager's lost gaze refocused on him with an embarrassed smile. "It's all so fascinating. I can't believe the entrance to the Hidden Sanctuary had always been in our archipelago."

I guess that's one way to put it when you're not the one being chased by a hungry wyvern.

Kai stretched his legs over the floor. Recounting his experiences in such clinical details made his experiences appear more abstract and distant. He quite liked that. "What about you? Have you joined the guards?"

"The guards...?" Lou looked down at his blue uniform, sporting the hawk of the Republic on his chest. "Oh, no. This was just to pick you up."

"What about the twins and Ana? Do they know I'm alive?" He couldn't leave the archipelago without meeting them.

"They don't know yet." Lou's forehead creased with deep furrows, looking gloomy.

"Did something happen to them...?"

Lou shook his head. "They're doing well. At least they were, last they wrote to me."

"Wait, where are they now?" Kai asked, already fearing the answer.

“Uli and Oli decided to join the army not long after you disappeared. Ana followed them in the mage support units.” The burly boy grabbed his short hair as if he wanted to rip it out.

What?

“You *can't* be serious.” He vainly waited for the laugh of a bad joke, but the cabin was silent. For once, the scenarios in his mind hadn't been bleak enough. “Why would they enlist?”

From his vexed look, Lou must have long wondered the same. “They signed while I was away on a job. They said they wanted to see the world and grow their professions.” He gave him a sour smile. “They're on the mainland, stationed near a mountain pass on the northern border and complaining about the cold.”

Spirits, I'm going to strangle them. Is it... my fault?

“Did they enlist because they thought I died?” Kai choked on the words. If his disappearance had pushed them towards the foolish decision, he would never forgive himself.

“It's not your fault.” Lou's steel gaze didn't admit objections. “They would have done it either way. You know the appeal of the continent. Once you learn about it, the islands feel too small. I had hoped they would settle for a journey, but they let themselves get roped into the benefits of enlisting by a recruiter.”

Dammit.

Kai rubbed his temples. It was the same thing he planned to do—minus the army part. And it wasn't exactly shocking that the twins had done something reckless. “Can I write them a letter to let them know I'm alive?”

“I don't think that's a good idea.” Lou shook his head. “Someone might be monitoring my correspondence. Even if I write a coded message, there is always a risk. And if the twins show Ana, I don't know who she might tell. It's probably best that they don't know for now...”

“Hmm... if you think it's safer.”

“I'm sorry, Mat. I don't like it either.”

Kai cock an eyebrow at the name choice.

“You'll eventually slip up if we use a different name in private,” Lou said. “Or if someone is eavesdropping when you don't expect.”

“You do have a point.”

It's just strange hearing that name again.

“*Mat*, I know it all looked easy, but we were extremely lucky to find this cover story. We won’t get another chance. Now that you’re officially Matthew, you should be careful about contacting people from your past identity.”

I wouldn’t say any of this seemed particularly easy, though I see your point...

Flynn had several channels to contact his family for him, so that wouldn't be an issue. Getting in touch with Reishi was more complicated. People were already surprised he was friends with a merfolk merchant and took notice of it.

We’ll find an excuse, I’m still an alchemist.

“So, is my identity done already? I thought there was still an open case.”

“That’s just a formality. Once we get to Higharbor, Valela can pull strings to ensure the process goes smoothly.” Lou drummed his fingers on the coversheets of his cot. “She won’t tell you, but she took a big risk helping you. If the Republic finds out you’re alive, there will be no way to hide her involvement.”

“Right...” In the haste of the last couple days, Kai didn’t get time to consider the favor he asked of her.

Why didn’t she tell me, or use it to haggle in the sponsorship deal...

Lou studied him with a serious, pensive face. “To the risk of stating the obvious, you should lay low till everyone has forgotten about Matthew’s *curious* origins.”

“I will.” Since they were on topic, there was something else bugging him. “Why did you point out my grade to those enforcers? I know it’s necessary for my official ID, but they didn’t need to know.” He could have gladly avoided the enforcers' insistent attention.

“There are many reasons.” Lou scratched his stubble. “By revealing it then, they only saw you as a naive boy and a potential goldmine. They would have gotten more suspicious later if it looked like we were trying to hide it. Also, the governor won’t be able to pressure you into a deal fearing that you’ll run to the military.”

Guess you thought this through. Or was it Valela?

“Does the governor know already?” He was the ever-looming presence responsible for messing up his life and causing his dad’s death—albeit indirectly. Once he would have given an arm to stab the bastard, now he would settle for not hearing him mentioned ever again.

“Not yet, but his wife always catches onto rumors quite fast, especially in Higharbor.”

“Well, as long as I don’t have to meet either of them. Thank you for coming to get me, though you could have given a clearer sign why you were instead of your frozen face.”

“You never know who’s watching.” Lou pursed his lips and avoided his gaze. “And maybe I was a *little* mad at you for not contacting me.”

Kai paused and then sighed, “That’s fair.”

“No, it was petty of me. You’ve already gone through enough”

Not you too.

He wasn’t looking for more pity. The past was behind him. He was *fine*. “Just because I almost died in that place, it doesn’t mean I can’t be blamed for anything. I can have a thousand excuses and still be an asshole.”

“Mhmm...” Lou watched him with a strangely amused look.

“What? I said it’s fine.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but in the end, you were always a bit self-absorbed. Now look at you, all grown up.” He gave him a half grin.

When did they talk about me?

“Thanks... I’ll go stretch my legs.” With his ears heating up, Kai left the stifling cabin.

Damn him.

The salty night air buffeted his face when he stepped on the deck, the sky a vault of stars and pale moon slivers. A cluster of flickering flecks lit the coast a few miles on his right, some nameless town off the coast of Yanlun.

A group of sailors laughed, playing dice and paying him little attention. Kai leaned on the railing against his apprehension. Watching the dark waters cut by the prow of the ship, he caught a glimpse of silver sending shivers down his spine. An orange marine beast was swimming along the vessel.

Calm down. Not everything wants to kill you out here.

The whispers told him the fishy was only playing and had no intention of attacking. And even if the ship were to sink right now, he could easily kill it and make it to shore.

Kai evened his breathing.

One more day and they’d be back in Higharbor. After getting his papers in order, there was nothing else holding him in the archipelago. As ready as he was ever going to be. His mind fizzed with excitement.

The open ocean wouldn’t be on the mainland, and the nightmares were fading too. It had been almost a week since the last.

Almost there.

* * *

They stood before one of Valela's many properties in a quiet district of the inner city; two floors of bricks and stone, a small inner garden and a basalt shingle roof.

Should I invest in real estate? Is inflation even a thing with gold coins?

Flynn welcomed them by the door, staring straight at Lou with a toothy grin. "I told you he was alive. Pay up."

Wait...

"You bet on whether I was alive?" Kai stared at both.

"No," Lou grumbled.

"Yes, we did." Flynn vehemently nodded, barring his way inside. "Seven silver and a beer. You told me to look at the facts and that I was clinging to false hope!"

"We were both drunk, I just agreed to shut you up."

Flynn's grin widened. "But you did, where's my money?"

They actually did it... Should I be offended or flattered? Both?

He regarded them both with a judging gaze, though only one of them lowered his head, face painted in a brighter shade.

Once Lou realized Flynn wasn't going to drop it, he scowled and rummaged through his pockets for three silver coins. "This is all I have on me."

"Hmm... more than half short, but I'll amend your debt if you say *I* was right and *you* wrong."

Lou gritted his teeth. "No."

"No...?" Flynn looked to be enjoying each moment of his discomfort. "C'mon, there is no shame in telling the truth. You were the one to tell me that."

"I—" Lou pressed his lips together, probably debating whether to punch his way inside. "You were right, and I was wrong, happy? Now, move."

"Please, come in." Flynn waved them inside with a theatrical bow.

Kai stopped in the doorway, gesturing to the silver mesars still in his hand. “I deserve at least half that for making you win.”

“You’re shameless, to rob me of my hard-earned money.” Flynn stared at him open-mouthed before drying a false tear. “I’m so proud of you, but I won’t give you more than a third.”

“Hmm... Deal.” He pocketed the coin—a memento of Lou’s embarrassment.

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Hidden in the unassuming house, days passed quickly between figuring out the exact extent of Mat’s abilities, reviewing his backstory and learning to brew a slew of potions the traditional way.

As Valela had promised, his case also proceeded smoothly. No one came to arrest or question him. The *biggest* hassle had been attending the court to show he indeed existed and an audit to verify his grade.

Just like that, Matthew Reece Veernon was born—he decided to keep both last names since Cyrus had never registered him. He marveled at the special piece of paper, something so small had given him so many headaches.

It’s done. I’m ready to go.

No type of check or control could blow his cover, his identity would be listed in all the official records and be no less real than anyone else he met on the streets.

He had even sent a message to Reishi but decided they’d make their first contact on the mainland to avoid suspicious connections to his past identity. Flynn had already found a vessel for the continent, leaving in seven days.

It’s really happening.

The last thing Mat needed to do was sign the contract for Valela to sponsor him.

“Hi, I’m here to see Valela Hightide.” He timidly looked at the men guarding the princess’ estate in the upper city.

Already alerted of his arrival, a maid led him inside the property. Mana became denser, and the air smelled fresher. Kai didn’t need to strain himself to gawk at the curated gardens, marble statues and fountains flowing into crystal ponds with colorful fishes.

The complex extended through a significant chunk of the hillside as if space was no concern. Sheltered patios and pebble pathways connected elegant buildings through the gardens. He had no idea how much of his fortune this would cost.

They must have bought the land when it was worth less than a tenth of the current price. Lucky bastards.

Valela's family had been rich and powerful even before the current governor took power, but he hadn't truly grasped what that meant before.

"This way." The maid stood by the side of an inner courtyard without meeting his gaze. "The missy is waiting for you."

Kai stepped into the flowered garden with a swaying willow in the center. The branches had been sculpted in a wave to make space for a table in its shade. Valela was already waiting there, dressed in simple white gown, reading a leather-bound tome.

"Ehm..." he cleared his throat.

A folder of documents lay on the table beside a tray of pastries. Today wasn't for them to chat freely, there were too many eyes and ears in the house. The terms of the contract had long been agreed, but they had to keep up appearances.

"Matthew." She put down the book with a warm smile. "It's nice to see you again. Please sit. I hope your stay in Higharbor has been..."

Kai awkwardly responded to the shower of pleasantries. Lou had run him through the meeting to avoid any faux pas, now it was like performing a stage play with no visible audience.

"Here's the contract we talked about. I look forward to working with you." Valela combed a lock behind her ear and offered him seven thin sheets of neatly written paper. "Please, take your time reading before signing it."

He had gone through the clauses of the deal so many times he knew them by heart. A single glance was enough to confirm everything was in order, still, he meticulously went through each line again. Mainly she offered funds to pursue Alchemy in exchange for hiring him at favorable rates.

Let's close this play.

His quill was already touching the paper beside Valela's cursive signature when a maid hurried into the garden, heaving for breath. The young woman leaned to whisper into her mistress' ear with no regard for etiquette.

The princess paled. "How did she— She's coming here right now?"

"Yes, miss." The maid nodded. "I came here as fast as I could. Nalia is delaying her, but Lady Cressida said she was here to see you. What do you wish me to do?"

"You did well, Celea." Valela bit her lip. "Gain as much time as you can and bring her here. Also, prepare some refreshments for three."

“Yes, miss.” Celea hurried away.

“What’s going on?” Kai blurted out once the maid was out of earshot. “Who’s Lady Cressida? Should I leave?”

“She’s the governor, Eryyn’s wife, and no. If we try to avoid her, she’ll just take it as a challenge and find a more intrusive way to get what she wants. It’s no coincidence she arrived while you were here.”

“Wait, she’s the nosy wife?”

Well, at least it’s not the governor, I guess.

“Never say that aloud outside a warded room,” Valela whispered with a glare. “There is no time to explain. Just sign the contract and be careful what you say. She’ll notice any slip— She’s here.” The princess smiled over his shoulder.