

Chapter 86 - Truth and Lies

“Why are you standing there? Are you waiting for a written invitation to grace us with your presence?” The old fogey waved his hand as if he was summoning a server.

The annoyance at Captain Zerith was rapidly losing ground to a new target. A battle unfolded between his rational self and desire to send them all to hell and storm out of there.

Why did I do this to myself, again? Right, to unravel the governor's schemes...

Choosing to participate in the selection had been impulsive, but he didn't regret it. He had learned a lot of valuable information. Elijah wasn't always going to be there to bail him out of trouble if things went wrong. Sooner or later, he would have to bid the estate goodbye.

That was the reason he asked Virya for an apprenticeship - to gain the power and freedom to navigate the wider world. Maybe one day he could ignore obnoxious individuals, but he wasn't there yet. He could only smile and endure, hoping to avoid further headaches.

“Yes, sir. I apologize for my tardiness. Captain Zerith insisted on showing me the brilliant architecture of the building. I tried to tell him it wasn't necessary, but...” Kai didn't finish the sentence, Acting remorseful. No hesitation in throwing all the blame on Zerith.

If he made clear he had nothing to do with the captain, he might be able to direct the frustrations of the grumpy grandpa on him. They already seemed to have a bit of a feud going on. Being caught in the crossfire wasn't in his plans.

“Zerith be damned, I knew he was doing it on purpose. If he thinks I'll let this slide, he doesn't know who he's dealing with! I was already a third circle mage when he was sucking milk.”

The tirade kept escalating. The bright yellow hat moved off place from all the shaking, showing the bald head underneath. Kai curiously observed the wrinkled mage's face going from a pale red to bright tomato, till it almost reached plum color.

If he has a stroke, will I be charged with murder?

Kai waited silently for the surly mage to return to a more human color. He was starting to get bored, his eardrums hurt from the incessant yells.

“Did your parents drop you on the head? Walk to that line. I hope you have at least Mana Sense at level 10 to make me waste my time.”

Then people say I'm the grumpy one. Does he run on spite and bad manners?

Kai thought after cursing Zerith for several minutes, the man would vent his frustration, but he only seemed more incensed. Snickers came from the back of the room, where all the other kids watched with pity and glee.

A series of white lines had been traced with a white chalk in front of the desk.

Let's get this over with.

Collecting all the motes of patience in his body, Kai walked to the first line. The old fossil raised his hand, mana gathering on it. “Tell me what you see, boy. Be quick, I already wasted enough time with the likes of you.”

If nothing else, it's going to be a good workout for Acting. I should apologize to the butler for all the times I thought he was the most annoying person in the world.

With the most neutral tone he could manage, Kai began to describe the tiny shapes and letters in his mana vision.

The mage grumbled. “At least you got the skill more than a week ago, go back two lines.”

Kai obeyed, and the process repeated. Step by step, he moved farther from the desk. Grumbles turned into glares, as if each time he answered correctly, it was a personal affront. The hard part of the exercise was deciding how much to reveal.

“Painfully mediocre. Is this what they teach children nowadays? Back a line!”

His patience was running thin, together with the growing desire to flex his levels. But the old geezer was so self-deluded, that he would probably never admit he was a genius even if Kai showed a level 100 Mana Sense.

In his annoyance, Kai went beyond what Zerith advised him, showing an ability comparable to a level 40 skill. The satisfaction the old man showed, when Kai grunted he couldn't make anything out, was like a slap in the face.

“Level 30 at best, and I'm being generous. At your age I already—.”

Kai tuned off the ramblings. The mocking whispers of the other kids had turned into stutters of disbelief, eyes wide open in shock and awe. That was a nice stroke to his ego.

“Have you unlocked Mana Manipulation, or did you waste all your time on Mana Sense to achieve these pathetic results?”

Blessed spirits grant me strength. If you could also make him have a stroke, I'd be eternally grateful. I'm sure Captain Zerith can probably write it off as death from natural causes.

An agonizing twenty minutes later, Kai could finally leave that room behind.

He didn't mind showing deference to Virya, Dora, or even Elijah. It still grated against his 21st-century mindset, but they had gained his respect, and he was grateful for their help. Scraping for some old geezer with an overinflated ego had severely tested his limits. It reminded him why he'd avoided the Republic as much as he could. Learning to sail outside his bubble wasn't going to be easy, or pleasant.

With the tests over, streams of kids headed to the main hall to await the predictable result. Excited and nervous in equal parts. He let himself get dragged by his fellow participants, giving vague answers and advice to improve their mana skills. Awareness warned him of someone watching. Turning around, the corridor was empty.

The sooner the better.

Breaking off from the group, Kai followed the unmistakable presence. No clerk or enforcer tried to stop him. Without hesitation he turned the knob of a room, the little princess was waiting for him inside. She looked on come with an imperious pose, seated on a plain wooden chair like it was a throne. As she was a queen receiving her subject.

"Why did you follow me here? Moving without clearance in a governmental building is suspicious, maybe I should call my bodyguards..."

Kai wanted to roll his eyes at her theatrics. By how she walked at the edge of his senses, and slowly made her way down the halls, it was painfully obvious she wanted to be followed.

"Oh, no. Please, don't do that. I was just snooping around. I don't want to get in trouble."

Despite using Acting, someone had to be deaf and blind to believe his words, or completely lack a brain. By the displeased look she threw him, Valela knew better. He was only willing to go so far to entertain her games. He'd play along a little but make clear he wouldn't bend to her every whim.

If Valela was puzzled by him and he bowed like a frightened child, she might lose interest. In that case, he would only be able to count on her good heart to keep her mouth shut. He'd rather increase the mystery and intrigue. Maybe there was a pinch of narcissism in his reasoning, but if she grew more curious, she was more likely to reveal useful information.

Kai found another chair and dragged it in front of her before sitting down. "You wanted to talk with me?"

The only answer was a silent frown. He could see the gears turning in her head as he went off script.

If Valela decided to go around gushing about the weird kid she met in Sylspring, it wouldn't be the end of the world. He was confident he could deal with anything if he could prapre—but he'd rather avoid the hassle. He needed to understand her better to be sure she would keep her word if she promised to keep silent.

"So," Kai pressed her, "Is there truly nothing you wanted to ask me?"

She pursed her lips. "Why would you think I wished to talk to you?" Her posture and words were stiff, vainly trying to intimidate him. Beyond that, Kai could see curiosity peeking through the cracks.

This time he didn't stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Please, why don't you stop insulting my intelligence. I hate to waste time running in circles. Trust me, it will be much easier to have a conversation if we're honest with each other."

Her green eyes looked eager to saw his skull open to see what was inside. "Fine." She sat down more comfortably, leaning slightly forward. "Who are you?"

"I'm pretty sure you already know. I'm Kai Tylenn, you can call me Kai. I can give you my ID if you want. I was born in—."

“Didn’t you just say we would talk bluntly?” She interrupted.

“Yes, but your question was so vague I didn’t know where to start.”

“It’s obvious I didn’t *literally* mean to ask your name.”

“Then, you should have asked what you actually wanted to know. Otherwise, you’re not being very straightforward either.”

Did I make her mad? Well, she said to be blunt and honest, just doing as agreed.

“What I meant was—“ Valela stopped speaking. It looked like the words were stuck in her throat and it burned her tongue to say them out loud. “How did you reach Orange so early and why? I looked it up, and they say you were born in the archipelago. It doesn’t make sense. Why have I never heard about you before? Were you truly born at Red ★? Who were your parents? And who is supporting you with the necessary resources?”

Her hand rose to her mouth as if surprised by what she blurted out.

Kai chuckled, “That was hell of a lot to deduce from just ‘who are you’, wasn’t it?”

From her glare, she didn’t find it as funny, but her pretentious posture was also slipping away. She sat like a normal person. More like an adult than a nine-year-old to be honest, but he would take what he could get.

Has she never spoken bluntly in her life?

Valela showed a hint of doubt on her face, so he started talking before she could go back into her regal shell.

“I was born in Whiteshore, a small village on the northwest coast of Yatol. And yes, I started at the bottom of Red ★. My father was from the mainland.”

Kai gave her a shortened version of his life story. The memories of his earliest years filled him with bittersweet feelings. It had been so long since he reminisced about his carefree childhood, when he ran on fine white sand and swam in the crystal-clear waters around Whiteshore. Often with his little ducklings in tow.

I hope they're doing well. I promised Ana we would meet again soon, but it has been three years.

Valela listened in silence. She didn't look annoyed that he was spending time on pointless details. After the relocation, Kai hurried the rest of his life story. Nothing of what he said was a lie, but he edited some events and entirely omitted others.

A quiet 'I'm sorry' escaped her lips when he informed her his father had died. A burning streak of anger pulsed beneath the surface.

How dare she feel sorry for him? It had been the Republic's fault. The same people she went around singing the praise. The old wound never stopped hurting. He only got better at living with it.

And yet, what would be the point of yelling at her? She was just a child. At the time his father got murdered, she was too young to have done anything, for better or worse. Glossing over more details, Kai quickly wrapped up his story.

“Is this answer good enough, princess?”

The vacant look on her face washed away. Her gaze bright and focused again. “Ehm... Yes. What did you call me?”

Kai shrugged. "That's what most people call you around here. The little princess from Highharbor, showered in gifts since she drew her first breath. She dresses only in silk and bathes in elixirs every night." Kai realized too late his mouth got him into trouble one more time.

Damn me.

Apologizes and justifications to contain the damage were ready on his lips, but there was no anger on her face, just... sadness? Her ever-steady mana flow showed numerous ripples.

Please, no. Spirits help me, she can't start crying. It's not fair!

"Is that what people think of me?"

"No. I mean, maybe a few. They are just rumors that spread in Sylspring."

Thankfully, I didn't get to the part where her father sold his soul to the devil.

"Be honest!" Her intense green eyes stared at him.

"Well..." He might have overheard a dozen kids using the nickname just today. With many more ridiculous pieces of lore added each time. "You are famous. To most, you are more like a story than a real person. It's inevitable for people to make up their own assumptions, spinning wild stories from a single grain of truth, or not even that."

Usually, facts and logic didn't work well to comfort someone, but that was the best he could offer. To his surprise, Valela's mana flow turned peaceful, a thoughtful look on her face.

"So, you managed to reach Orange thanks to your master." She sat up straighter, the steel back in her pose. "What did he want in exchange?"

A way to kill time and somebody to torture? Maybe see how far I'd go?

"I don't think he would be happy if I talked about him..." Kai hesitatingly said. There had been enough honesty for one day.

She nodded to herself. "I understand. That was all, thanks for satisfying my curiosity. If there is anything I could do for you, just ask."

And here she goes acting like a lady twice her age.

"There is something. Could you maybe not mention me to anyone?"

"Just that?" Valela looked surprised. "I would have done that anyway. It was clear you didn't want attention from how you held back during the tests. I don't understand why you participated in the first place."

To spy on the Republic and destroy it from within one piece at a time. Muhahahaha!

"Oh, you know. I was just curious. My master doesn't let me visit many places. The selection happened right as I got here, so I thought I should check it out."

Val gave him a long judging look. "Do you always make such impulsive decisions?"

Kai hoped she didn't notice him blushing with his tanned skin. "I know it sounds stupid, but it felt like such a huge coincidence, I thought it could be fate. That there could be a good reason to come here."

A brief smirk flashed on her face. "You're right, it sounds stupid."

You little brat! If you knew I had 19 Favor, you'd die of envy!