

Chapter 200 - Complicated

It must be my lucky day.

Not one but both his elusive friends wanted to talk with him. “How do you know Valela? And what are *you* doing here?” Kai was successfully sidetracked from Lou’s stubborn secrecy.

The dirt path ran through ivory pillars and gnarly trees grasping for the sky. The signs of the Republic’s activity were everywhere: broken branches, moved earth and hardened rocks like those for their houses.

Lou stiffened his shoulders but didn’t stop striding into the dense shrubbery. “What did you think I was doing all this time? Going around murdering kittens?”

“No, wait... You work for *her*?”

“It’s complicated.”

Why do people love to say that to avoid answering?

“So I’m too dumb to understand?”

“You know that’s not the reason,” Lou said, still marching ahead. “I just can’t talk about it.”

Kai struggled to keep his tone civil. “*I* know you joined some shady project of the Republic, and you probably work for the governor since you wear his colors and he funded the scholarship program. I’m not here to judge, I’m sure you’ve got your reasons. But can I get *one* straight answer?”

Lou halted and turned back on him. His jaw clenched and the veins pulsed on his neck. “When I say I’m not allowed to talk about it,” he uttered through gritted teeth like every word took a colossal effort. “It’s not a trust issue, I *literally* can’t tell you about it.”

The burly teen swayed like a reed and leaned against a tower to keep his feet. Tears swelled in his eyes for the first time since Kai had known him. Not tears of sadness or joy. When the drops ran down his face, they were crimson.

Yatei’s mercy.

Kai was at his side before he realized. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt? I’ve got every healing potion.” He pulled a handful of vials out of his pockets using his ring, not caring how strange it looked. Mana Sense scanned every inch of the towering body. He couldn’t find anything wrong with him apart from strong fluctuations of pain.

“Potions can’t help.” Lou raised a hand to stop him, heaving for breath. “I’m fine. I just. Need. A minute.”

“People who are fine don’t usually leak blood from their eyes.” Kai watched in case the symptoms worsened and he toppled over. “What kind of fucked up shit did you get into? Is it some kind of magic, or a curse? I can help if you tell me what’s going on. Just a hint if you can’t say more.”

Lou exhaled a slow breath. “I’ve got no doubts you’re an even better mage than you showed me, but you can’t help with this. I did what I had to. Trust me, it’s not as bad as it looks. I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t share the details.” He somberly chuckled.

“You’re hilarious.”

“I know.” He smiled, showing blood on his teeth.

You stupid dumb giant. I should have beat more sense into you as a child.

Kai raked a hand through his hair and paced between two trees. There was only one explanation he could think of. “You signed a soul pact, didn’t you?” He had read of magically enforced contracts, though the books never described the consequences of breaking one.

He activated Aldred’s memory skill. Mentions and obscured passages rose through the fog of years. Nothing that could help him now.

Understandably, Lou remained quiet. A frown deepened on his brow.

“You don’t have to say a word, I’m just thinking aloud. A pact must include at least two people... Who’s the asshole that made you accept it? I swear, I’m going to find them and squeeze their necks till their heads pop.”

“Kai, stop.” Lou took one faltering step, a hand on the tower for balance. “You can’t make someone enter a subordinate contract against their will.”

“Or maybe you have to say that. Just because you dress it differently, the essence doesn’t change. There are plenty of ways to make someone act against their will.”

Kai stopped his manic pacing. A thought smashed his mind. “Was it Valela...?” It hurt to believe he had been deceived so thoroughly, but she stood in the center of everything and didn’t lack the social skills to pull it off.

I’m such an idiot.

Lou rubbed his temples. Opening his eyes, resignation mixed with determination. “It’s possible to sign a subordinate contract with someone of equal or weaker grade, but the pact will wear out quickly. And the backlash for minor infractions is proportional to the power imbalance between the parties.”

Is he reading a textbook?

“You’re saying it’s not her?” Kai regretted not delving deeper into the topic when he was at the estate. Virya only gave him access to generic volumes, but they didn’t mind answering questions when they were in the mood.

“I’m just explaining common knowledge about contracts. I can’t control your thoughts.”

Oh... there is a little wiggle room.

“So it’s not her.” A contract between them wouldn’t be very effective. She was just an enhancement higher than Lou. The discovery brought him an annoying amount of relief.

She’s still involved somehow...

“We’re running late.” Lou stood firm on his feet. “She needs to talk with you, and she can’t disappear for long without attracting attention.”

“You’re right. I should go ask her directly.”

“That’s *not* what I meant,” Lou groaned. “Please, don’t tell her about this.”

“We shouldn’t keep her waiting. Where is she?”

“Kai...”

“Lead the way, guard boy. I promise I’ll play nice.” *If she tells me what I want.*

Lou studied his face, frowning, not that he had a choice. He strode across a patch of coral flowers and weeds. “You are infuriating sometimes, you know that right?”

Thanks, I do try my best.

Crossing a patch of thorny bushes, they reached an ivory tower covered in lichens and blooming blue vines. It rose thirty meters to a jagged top like many of its neighbors.

“We need to enter here,” Lou nimbly climbed inside a window and stuck his arm out. “Do you need a hand?”

“I’ll manage.” Kai took a run-up for a graceful bounce that almost crashed him into the other teen. “I told you I could do it. Where is she?”

The interior was eerily similar to the towers on Yanlun. With earth and weeds in place of kelp and sand. Stray blocks of condensed rock piled here too.

Hmm... Compressed earth takes less space and it’s easier to move.

“We need to go down.” Lou pointed to the square opening in the floor. A rope tied to a boulder provided easy access. “The diggers and earth mages have already cleared this area

of dirt and rubble. We shouldn't meet anyone, but in case we do, you want to explore this area for research."

"Whatever you say, guard boy. You're the brains of the operation."

"And I thought the twins were a handful..." Lou muttered as he lowered himself down the rope.

Kai stepped into the hole and landed in a superhero crouch. Empower strengthened his legs to absorb the impact. The light dimmed since the windows were filled with dirt and roots.

"Show off." Lou was envious of his glorious entrance. "You'll sprain an ankle if you touch down wrong."

Kai grinned. "Don't worry, I don't have three tons of muscles to weigh me down."

The unfairly large teen shook his head and climbed down the next aperture to the lowest level of the tower. It was connected to the underground complex with three doors.

Scant rays of light filtered from the ceiling and cast most of the place in shadow. Dirt and rocks were piled in the corners. The air was damp, smelling of mud and moss. It must have taken an ungodly amount of effort to clear the room.

Kai was curious to meet these earth mages. He had seen a few richly robed individuals on the day of his arrival, but they disappeared after that.

How did Dad do it?

The journals skimmed through the logistics of his exploration in favor of detailed accounts of architecture and glyphs. While there were skills like Mana Sense to perceive through rock and debris, it was easy to miss something. It was probably why the Republic went through the hassle to clear the ruins.

Lou took out an enchanted globe to illuminate the chamber. Looking around to reorient himself, he picked the leftmost door.

"Don't you have a map?"

"I've memorized the undergrounds," Lou casually said—definitely trying to get back at him. "The meeting place isn't far."

"I'm just making sure." The site was many times larger than the sea serpent ruins. Not enough to get lost forever, but enough for an unpleasant day.

They jogged through a series of winding corridors. The mana density was slightly higher at this depth. Maybe it was the dark and humid cold, or the snake hissing in a corner. The atmosphere made him uneasy. Flashbacks of being chased through underwater tunnels crowded his mind.

It's a little spooky, so what? These ruins are completely different.

Another light peeked behind a corner, making him forget his worries. Valela stood with her arms crossed. A glowing ball floated lazily around her. She had left her swaying gowns for the pants, hat and brown leathers of a stylish adventurer. "You're late, I can't stay long."

We're skipping greetings then?

Kai set himself before her. "What kind of pact did Lou make? What are the terms and who did he sign it with?"

Lou stared blankly at him, mouth open, aghast.

Better to get to the point if time is limited.

The princess was taken aback and barricaded her thoughts behind a stoic veneer. Her gaze shifted between them. "Lou told me you knew each other. How much did you pester him? It's dangerous to flaunt a soul pact."

"So you know about it. How do I break the contract?"

"You've no idea what you're talking about. I can't help you with this."

"Can't or *won't*?"

Valela scowled. "It's—"

"I swear if you say it's complicated, I'm going to hit you."

Her eyes burned in irritation but her voice remained calm. "It's an intricate situation with many moving pieces."

Cheater.

"I'm serious. Who's forcing kids to enter binding contracts?"

Lou recovered from the shock enough to glare at him. "I'm an adult and three years older than you. I wasn't forced to sign the c—" He swayed on his feet, clutching his chest with a pained grimace. A wet cough left blood in his hand.

Kai hurried to support him. "I'm sorry, I—"

"I assume this wasn't the first time you made him push his restrictions today." Valela sent him a reproachful look and helped Lou sit on a nearby boulder. "He should be fine if you stop pressuring him."

"You can't tell me this is fine! He can't mention a word without bleeding."

Valela stood up, hands on her hips. "I'm not debating fairness with you. We must work with what we're given, not with what we wish it'd be. You'll only make things worse for him if you don't drop this."

Seeing Lou's strained expression, guilt and anger bubbled. He needed to do something. "There must be a way to void the contract. For every skill and spell, there is a countermeasure."

"Contract magic was studied to prevent exactly that. Otherwise, why would anyone bother?" she patiently explained. "Maybe there is a way on the continent, but it's not something we can get our hands on. And even if we could, it would create more problems than it solved. I can't tell you the specific terms, but Lou wasn't forced to accept the deal, and there are significant pros with the cons."

Without information, Kai could only trust their words. Trust was frustration. "Why can't he mention it if it's not shady?"

"It's—" Valela pursed her lips. "The fewer people know, the better for everyone."

His fists clenched in irritation. "How am I supposed to trust you if nobody tells me what's going on?"

"Kai, please..." Lou weakly said, attempting to stand up.

"Well, he's not totally wrong." Valela sighed.

Both heads snapped at her with surprise.

"Why did you think I called you here? I promised you an explanation on the ship, and I was going to if you had let me talk. It won't answer everything, but it might help clarify."

Huh... Right, it was about the investigation.

Seeing Lou's pale visage, Kai decided to accept the consolation prize, for now. "Uh... What's up with the two camps and why do you both act as if you don't know me?" Neither relationship had been particularly secret, and the Republic loved snooping.

"Because the military probably doesn't know about it," Valela answered for both. "And it's better to keep it that way since you joined us in this mess. But it's easier if I explain in order. What do you know about the Republic power structure in the archipelago?"

Kai shrugged. "The governor's on top?" He had never been interested in learning the bureaucratic intricacies.

"How do you expect to improve things if you don't know how they work?" Valela looked peeved. She smoothed her clothes, halfway realizing she wore pants and not a dress. "Yes, the governor holds the most power, followed by the council and the heads of the various

departments. At least that's how it works in a normal province, but the archipelago has been annexed for less than a century."

Basically yesterday.

Valela ignored his looks to continue her lecture. "Usually, the commander of military forces works under the political wing and the governor. But in new territories, stability and integration aren't assured and the military wing has the final say if public safety is at risk. Right now, the beasts' accidents are threading that line, and both want to control the investigation."

"You mean they're squabbling like children?" Kai delivered in a flat tone. "Ignore my face, I'm actually shocked to my core. But how does that interest me?"

Valela huffed. "You mean apart from the fact the archipelago is our home, and you're now involved in the investigation?"

"You read my mind." He nodded with seriousness.

The princess looked strangely untrusting of his words. "The two sides are keeping information from each other such as our acquaintance. And besides stopping the attacks, they want control of whatever is behind the beasts' appearance. The whole archipelago could be impacted if depending the military gets their hand on it first."

Beasts go on a murderous rampage and the guys in charge want to figure out how to make a mesar out of it. How could that ever happen?

He hadn't expected the divide to go so deep. "What if it's not something that can be controlled but only stopped for good? What will they do?"

"I know the Republic does many questionable things and you've no reason to trust them, but they're humans too. They'll stop it."

Oh, I'm sure some are decent people. The question is how many, and if they're the ones in charge.

"Can you swear on that?"

"I can do better," Valela held his gaze. "I promise to do it myself if they delay. That's why I need you to tell me if you find anything. Can I count on you for that?"

"Hmm... Wait." Kai raised a hand to ask for silence. The unease he felt since coming down here had grown into something tangible. A terror suddenly gripped his guts. Hallowed Intuition's ominous whispers rose, heralding nothing good.

He stretched his Perception to find the threat. Did some military personnel stumble upon their meeting? The threat had no clear direction, and Mana Sense didn't detect any other

human in the vicinity. With the skill drawn, he quickly noticed when mana started to flow unnaturally. Motes gathered inside the ruins.

Not again. I didn't do shit this time.

There was no time to curse. Kai grabbed both Lou and Valela. "We need to get out of here!"