

Chapter 252 - Irrefusable Offer

Two years in the Sanctuary had gifted Kai the instinctive ability to spot any monster nearby. Mana tickled the hairs on his arms, the slight pressure in the air pushed down on him as if gravity had become imperceptibly stronger.

The governor's wife stepped into the courtyard behind him. He didn't need Mana Observer to know she must be late Yellow, perhaps half-step into Green with her profession. Apart from a few passing mentions, Lady Cressida remained overshadowed by her husband, the only green human currently in the archipelago.

She's married to that asshole. I should have expected this...

The most worrying part was Valela's uneasiness. He had never seen her this apprehensive, even when dealing with the military and high officials.

A kick on his shin brought him back to the present.

Hey! Kai glared at the violent princess across the table with an arched eyebrow. What was that for?

Valela lightly tapped the documents on the table, without ever averting her eyes from the figure behind him or letting her smile falter.

Right...

Mat scribbled his signature on the contract in double copy. "Hmm... Are you—" He squinted at the princess as if just realizing someone else had come and following her gaze to look over his shoulder.

Let's see— Oh...

Honey-colored curls framed the delicate features and effortless smile, the gold and crimson silk of her dress fluttered behind her like a cape. Lady Cressida glided on the pebble path as if it were a runway. The only piece of jewelry she wore was an enchanted bracelet of rubies on her wrist.

Kai caught himself staring. There was something striking about her, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Her stature was average at best. While she was among the most beautiful women he had ever seen, that had never left him speechless.

Is it some kind of skill? Or just her grade...?

There wasn't time to think, the woman was upon them.

“Valela, my dear. I hope my sudden arrival didn’t cause you trouble.” Her voice poured sweet like syrup, keeping a note of undeniable authority. “When I heard you found such a promising young man, I couldn’t miss the chance to congratulate you.”

Great. Just what I needed.

“It’s never a bother to see you.” Valela beamed. If he didn’t know better, Kai would think they were best friends. “You’re always welcome in my father’s house.”

“May the Moons watch over you, you’re always such a gracious host. I wish my boys had your manners, but they took after their father.” The woman let out a small sigh, then her hazel eyes fell on him. “And you must be Matthew. The whole city has been buzzing with rumors about you. A pleasure to meet you. I’m Cressida Delmare, but you may simply call me Cressida.” She winked with a complicit grin and offered her dainty hand palm down. “I never cared for formalities.”

Something tells me that’s a lie. Does she expect me to kiss her hand?

“Nice to meet you too.” Kai stiffly shook her hand from his seat, for once glad awkwardness came so naturally to him.

If Cressida was put off by the dozen etiquette rules he had certainly broken, she didn’t show it. A servant hurried into the garden with a third chair. The governor’s wife folded her dress and gracefully sat without a hurry.

“The rumors were indeed true. You must be proud of your accomplishment. Few people advance to Yellow at your age, even with the advantages of Alchemy.” Her gaze dug into his. “Is it true you’re quite the talented brewer yourself?”

“Hmm, I—”

“Matthew’s quite accomplished *for his age*,” Valela answered for him. “He just isn’t quite used to all the new faces in Higharbor. His father kept him isolated in their manor for most of his life.”

“I heard. Quite the story indeed.” Cressida picked up the contract lying on the table and leisurely flipped through the pages. “I see you’ve already come to an arrangement. It’s very generous of you Valela. But tell me, Matthew, have you decided what you’ll do once you reach the mainland? I’m always looking to help promising individuals achieve their goals.”

Come to take a piece of the pie? And how does she know where I’m headed?

Kai took advantage of his timid persona to avoid her gaze. The less information he gave up, the better. He didn’t trust his acting skills entirely. “I’ve already signed a deal with Valela.”

You’re too late. What a pity.

"I don't see any exclusivity clause in your contract." Cressida smiled warmly at Valela. "Your last visit at the Raelion Academy was quite successful, but you must have realized how vast and complicated the continent is. While your hard work and abilities are commendable, you must agree you're inexperienced in those waters. You wouldn't mind if I offered young Matthew some help, would you?"

"Of course not." Valela gave her a frosty look with an undercurrent of meaning Kai couldn't unravel. "If that's what *he* wants."

The attention of the table switched back on him, two hungry beasts hiding their fangs behind pearly grins.

Thanks a lot. Why can't the Republic just leave me be?

"I— I still don't think that would be fair to sign another deal..." Kai mumbled, looking at Valela for support. "I've already got everything I need."

Instead of annoyance or outrage, Cressida's lips curved upwards. "You're quite principled too. That's rare nowadays," she said, sadly shaking her head. "The continent can be quite cutthroat for young honorable men. I could never forgive myself if I let you wander in that den of wolves, and something happened."

Blessed spirits, what a sneaky snake.

She was far more experienced in fencing with words than him. Whatever he said was turned into a reason why he should accept her help. Even Kai would struggle to turn her down without offending her, as for naive little Mat, he was stuck in her web of half-truths.

He couldn't refuse outright. If Cressida was half as sharp as Valela suggested, she would notice the inconsistencies in his cover, or at least suspect he was hiding something.

Smelling blood in the water, the governor's wife continued her assault. "I don't like to boast, but I still hold sway among the patrician families of the mainland. Trust me, Matthew, you can never have enough friends out there."

"I'd need to thi—"

"Naturally, I won't ask anything more than you've given Valela, and can offer much more. You'll represent what our archipelago is capable of." With a wave of her hand, three neatly written sheets appeared from thin air. "Why don't you take a look? We can discuss anything you don't like."

Stunned by the display of a spatial artifact, Kai found himself with the contract in his hands before he could refuse. The looming feeling he was dancing right in her palm grew stronger, but he didn't know how to break out of it.

Is this the difference between people who take social skills? Or is it a profession?

Valela tapped his leg and sent him covert glances, perhaps worried he'd blow his cover. She engaged Cressida in small talk while he read, but if she was trying to tell him some secret message, it flew right over his head.

Come here to show your face and leave, she said. It's just a formality, she said.

Kai slowly scanned the document, looking for any excuse to refuse. There were none. He was offered resources and connections based on what he achieved, in exchange for selling them his potions at production cost. The wording made clear the deal wasn't with the Republic but with the governor's family—not that it made it much more palatable to him.

The only quibble might be the clause on future renegotiations. He had to give them the chance to respond before signing a contract with anyone else, though it didn't force him to accept anything. The excuse was too flimsy to use.

Dammit, where is the greedy line trying to steal my soul?

Two maids came to serve drinks and tarts, offering the chance to delay further. But no matter how much he looked and squinted at the words, they were squeaky clean. The contract carried an eerie similarity to the one he had already signed, so much so that he suspected it was no coincidence.

Someone must have leaked it. Or she has more than one version stored in her bracelet...

Cressida could have gone through Valela's agreement, checked the competition and brought out the most reasonable deal. It meant she had planned how to lock him in a contract before she even stepped into the garden.

I really hate insistent people.

Even if Kai nitpicked the wording of a few clauses, he wasn't confident in talking his way out of it while keeping his cover. He wasn't going to win an argument based on logic. If he started discussing the deal, he had already lost.

There was a very easy solution out of it: to sign.

No, thank you. They're not going to get another chip from me!

Kai gave back the contract drawing the attention of both women. "I appreciate the offer, but I must refuse."

Cressida cocked her head, showing the first hint of displeasure. "I can assure you those terms are more than fair, and my pockets and connections are far deeper than what the contract you've signed offered. Certainly, you can see it too."

Kai ignored the kick on his shins. He wasn't going to get forced into another deal, even if he had to take a small risk. "It's— it's not that. The terms are fine... but I can't sign it."

The sly woman furrowed her manicured eyebrows together. "What's the issue, then? I'm sure we can reach an agreement."

Nope.

"It's my father... he made me promise to not get involved with the Republic."

Considering the knowledge she showcased, she must also know about Cyrus' distrust of authorities. If Kai couldn't win with logic, he would play an emotional argument that didn't heed reason.

"This is a deal between privates," Cressida pursed her lips. "But I can scrub any mention of the Republic if that would put you at ease"

"I can't." Kai shook his head. "Father said the governor was responsible for my mom's death." He ignored the shock that crossed the table, gaze lost staring at his own hands, throat choked up with sudden emotions.

Long-forgotten memories made his eyes itch. A crimson pool grew larger beneath a motionless body, unresponsive to his pleas to wake up. His sisters huddled together, crying, and he was powerless, unable to console them...

That's enough.

Kai focused on the rustling willow and the hardwood table under his clenched fingers. He cleared his throat and continued his story.

"We... We lived alone in a small village on another island. I don't remember much, but she... she died in the famine after the governor ordered the relocation of the smaller settlements. So, I'm sorry, but I *can't* sign your deal."

He watched the annoyance and irritation weave on the woman's face. The whispers in his mind warned him to keep his cool, though the danger was a faraway breeze compared to his experiences in the Sanctuary.

They had kept Mat's backstory intentionally vague. People couldn't disprove what wasn't said and the addition would fit perfectly with the timeline. Lou and Velela's complaints were a small price to get out of this.

"I understand it must have been a difficult time." Cressida tried to look conciliatory. "Maybe you don't remember how the *governor* worked hard to provide food for the entire population."

You mean to take advantage of the situation you cause to extort them ludicrous prices?

"I remember the ships stopped arriving after a while," Kai muttered, getting another kick on his shin.

“That wasn’t my fault, I—” The sneaky snake shut her mouth, perhaps understanding that line of reasoning was pointless. When she spoke again her voice was even, albeit lacking any warmth. “You must know Valela works closely with me for the well-being of the archipelago. What would the difference be in dealing with me too?”

She sure is persistent, or is it just her pride?

“It would feel different to *me*.” Kai rode his emotional outburst to stand his ground. “I thank you for the offer, but I can’t break my father’s wish.”

“Is that your final answer?”

“It is.”

“Well then. I sincerely hope you won’t regret your choice. I wish you good luck on your travels. You’ll find out that the continent isn’t as forgiving as me.” Cressida downed her drink and cleaned her lips on a napkin, any sign of vexation evaporated like mist at dawn. “Valela, it’s always a pleasure to see you, my dear. You should stop by my house more often. Adrian has bought you a ticket on the *Serenity* to make your journey back to Raelion with him. You know my foolish son. I would be grateful if you could keep an eye on him.”

“Of course, I’ll pass by as soon as I can.” Valela was about to stand up too when Cressida raised a hand to stop her.

“No need to inconvenience yourself. I know my way out.” The governor’s wife strolled out of the courtyard with the same casual elegance of her arrival, her thoughts were anyone’s guess.

Byeeee! I’d say it’s been a pleasure, but I’d be lying.

Kai waited till he was certain she was outside earshot. “I—”

“Not yet.” Valela put an engraved disk covered in anti-spying enchantment on the table, channeling mana into it. A bubble of runes sprung up around them. “That was stupid,” she simply stated.

“That bad, huh?”

“Don’t look smug. Cressida isn’t going to forget your refusal while she draws breath. She doesn’t take a no kindly.”

Kai couldn’t find any morsel of regret inside him. “What’s she going to do?”

“She, uhmm... probably nothing. At least for as long as you don’t cross paths with her.” Valela bit her lip. “I admit you pulled that story off better than I thought possible. Most people immediately buckle under her.”

“Thanks.” Kai grinned. “I guess it’s good that I’m leaving. I won’t risk meeting her again.”