

## Chapter 370 - Parting Gifts

Kai set aside his birthday present on the bed with just a hint of reluctance. A silver twine tied the night-blue wrapping, the fabric woven with enchantments to cloak the contents. From touch, the box was made of wood, two palms thick, over a meter in length, and a third as wide.

*Nope, don't get sidetracked by the shiny bauble. Not like it's another priceless artifact like the ring. It can't be. He found out I was alive just days ago. Unless... he picked something he had on him. It could— Damned curiosity.*

Kai trained his gaze on the butler lounging in the padded chair at the desk. Thoughts disciplined, focused, *undistractable*.

After seconds of staring, Elijah gave a sullen glance at the wrapped present and exhaled a slow breath. "Yes, I'm leaving today."

*And you wanted to bribe me with a gift.*

"When exactly?" Outside his window, the waning afternoon lit the rustling trees. So little time left. "Midnight?"

"More like within the hour. There are few means to quickly travel long distances in the Republic. If I miss my arrangements, the journey back will take weeks longer than I can afford."

*I see...*

Hands tightened around his blanket and mattress. The news should hardly be surprising, yet it still caught him unprepared. His vision narrowed to the whirls in the grain pattern of the hardwood floor. "When were you going to tell me?" He squeezed the words out through his dry mouth.

"After you opened your gift and paid respect to your master," Elijah said. His haughty chin lowered into seriousness. "I only finalized my departure this morning when I got word from Virya. The situation in my land requires my presence. I've already stayed away longer than planned."

"And you were waiting to tell me till the last moment, so you could vanish before I could reply?"

A rueful smile tugged at his lips. "I like to keep my options open. I did teach you, one should—"

"Always have a plan, yeah. I remember." Kai caught himself from rolling his eyes. The situation was outside their control, though he couldn't suppress the rising grumpiness.

*I'm being so broody and mopey. Damned teenage hormones. Get a grip.*

He straightened on his bed and laced his fingers. "What happens after, then? When can we meet again? And how do I contact you?"

Elijah opened his mouth and worked his jaw. "You don't. Any repeated communication is a link that can be pulled and traced. The risk is too high. The danger would only soar if I came in person."

"So you're going to disappear again?" Kai snorted, his voice regaining the accusing note he had been trying to suppress. "I'll just have to wait here, knowing nothing till you decide to contact me?"

"For now, yes." Elijah's tone cut with frigid calm. Only his stiff posture on the chair betrayed his indifference. "I'll keep an eye on you. I don't know when I'll be able to send a message, much less visit."

"You said you had enemies. It seems you're the one in the larger danger."

"If I die, you're better off never revealing you knew me."

His gaze snapped up. "Are you being serious?"

"Yes, Kai. That's how it works." Elijah looked deadpan. His tone remained even, though his jaw and neck went taut. "I can't risk my enemies getting a hint that I have a disciple. I won't take unnecessary risks, nor make promises I know are lies. Until you can protect yourself, you'll be a danger to yourself. And to me."

*Of course... I'm too weak.*

It was that simple. Against any foe at Green, he wouldn't survive an instant if they made the first move. Annoyance drained from him, and his shoulders sagged. "Sorry, I know I'm being unreasonable. I'm glad you could stay a bit. It's just... after four years, three days felt so short."

They had thoroughly discussed his encounters with the cultists. Every blurry memory, scrap of paper and suspicion. Still, he had so much left to tell. So many questions. He barely touched on the Hidden Sanctuary, his year at Higharbor, or his studies at Raelion.

Kai sank into the bed. "When can I learn what's going on? How long will you be in danger? Months, years or more?"

Elijah offered him a brittle smile. "I honestly can't say. I might settle my matters in the next months or take decades. There are many pieces on the board, and more than one front. As for you... Learn what you can from this academy and graduate first. If you're still so stubborn, we'll talk about it when you reach green. "

"I hate not knowing. I understand it, but I still hate it."

"I know." Elijah leaned back in the chair with a soft creak and a low chuckle. "Now open your present. I didn't go through the trouble of wrapping it for it to rot. Gods, where is your head? How do you forget your birthday when you're not even fifty?"

"I've had other things on my mind. Someone kept me busy," Kai said. He lifted the wooden case onto his knees and began picking at the knots. The silver string had been tied tighter than a sailor's hitch.

"You could tear it open. Or use a knife."

"And risk ruining your beautiful package? I'm not such an ungrateful disciple." Kai smiled, amused by the butler's impatient shuffle.

*Eager to see my reaction? Who's the kid now, huh?*

Where would he get an enchanted wrapping for free? The blue fabric and silver twine must have been repurposed—possibly not even from the Republic. Worth a pretty chip, if not a clue on the butler.

The final knot finally came free. He pulled the wrap aside, revealing a polished box etched with a whirling leaf pattern—still cloaked.

*What was even the point of that package?*

His fingers traced the smooth wood, grooves and seams in search of a lock and finding none. Kai let out a quiet huff of frustration. After receiving an unexpected gift, it was only polite to play up his reactions and ignore the petty voice telling him to deny Elijah the satisfaction.

*He still remembered my birthday... even better than I did.*

He probed for a minute before pressing an ivy leaf, connecting a mana tendril onto a concealed latch, and twisting forty-five degrees clockwise. Three sharp clicks released the lock.

Kai smirked at Elijah's feigned disinterest and opened the lid with both hands to peer inside.

*Oh... of course.*

A longsword nestled against deep green velvet. Coiling thorns gleamed on the embossed pommel, and oiled leather crosshatched around the hilt, the matte scabbard the color of old bark with dull metal rivets. Solid and well-made, though it hardly called for a second glance.

*Hmm, something's off.*

Plain metal without the mana or enchantments.

*Is this a joke, or... another cloak? I can't pierce it at all.*

Kai closed his fingers around the hilt and drew the blade free. Pale steel slid out with impossible smoothness. A mirror sheen flashed along the metal where the light caught it, tracing the leaf-and-vine motif down the fuller.

Beneath the delicate etching, mana shimmered like moonlight over rippling water, blurring the enchantments. Pushing his senses deeper, the runes looked odd. Their shapes flowed inside the metal, almost—

*Not of human make. At least not the Language of Power used in the Republic, and that Dora taught me.*

Elijah watched with a faint smile from his seat, one boot crossed over his knee. No chance he'd offer any answers. Another mystery. Another piece of the puzzle. Another proof he'd picked the gift from what he carried around.

Kai gave a practice swing as his bedroom permitted. His hands fit comfortably around the hilt. The blade whistled, each motion carried through by the perfect balance. It was a palm longer than what he was used to, meaning it'd fit him better once he inevitably grew taller. "Thank you. I really like it."

Elijah cleared his throat. "You needed a proper sword. How can I let my disciple walk around with a piece of junk? What of my reputation?"

"Didn't you say no one should know you're my master? Like, not ever?"

Elijah snorted. "I like being thorough. And it would still bother *me*."

"Of course." Kai chuckled. The gleam of the blade played over the etching, carrying a quiet elegance. "Uhm... I'm sorry I ruined the old sword when fighting the sea serpent."

His brows creased. "You mean that lump of sharpened iron I threw you at the estate? I never expected you to keep it."

"It saved my life a couple of times."

"Then you have no excuse to die with this one."

Kai smiled at his gruff scoff. "As you say, master. This disciple will carry out your will to the best of his ability. Where did you find this sword?"

"Don't try to sweet-talk me, brat," Elijah grunted. "You're not good at it. And it's rude to inquire about the origins of a gift."

"My bad." Kai squinted at the blade when the light caught the tiniest nick on the pommel. He arched an eyebrow at the butler. "Huh... Did you give me a second-hand sword, master?"

“That blade—” Elijah pressed his mouth shut.

He gave him a knowing look. “There is no shame in being economical.”

“You’re better with taunts. Still not falling for that.”

*Such a killjoy.*

Kai innocently smiled. “I’m not sure what you’re saying, master. Who was the previous owner anyway... uh...” He scratched his ear. Glancing at the butler’s stiff jaw, his throat closed with suspicion. “It’s... a really thoughtful gift. What kind of enhancements does it carry?”

“Do you want me to list them for you?”

“No, not really. That’d be boring.” Kai honed his senses with Mana Analyst, Arcane Enchanting and Runic Scholar. How nostalgic. The runes’ flowing patterns had a vague resemblance to the Vastaire’s scripts, though they also had distinct differences. The engraving on the blade seemed to grow and branch to mirror the vine motif.

His fingers slid over the cold metal. Lighter than steel, with a sheen paler than platinum—probably some kind of mana alloy. He couldn’t read the runes, but he’d handled and studied enough weapons to guess at their effects.

*Sharpness along the edge. Durability and flexibility linked together? And, uhm...*

“Can it self-repair?”

Elijah glanced over in mild surprise. “For the enchantments, yes. It won’t regrow the metal. It’s a minor effect, mostly for maintenance.”

*Interesting... What’s the big one threaded underneath?*

The pattern took almost half the blade. Kai tried channeling mana into it. He nearly dropped the sword when his essence flowed with a smoothness and ease he’d never experienced in any material. It was still much slower than his own channels, but the mere fact he could compare the two was absurd.

“I thought you might enjoy that,” Elijah smirked with a dismissing wave, turning as if interested in the textbooks. “It’s a spellcaster weapon. Offensive enchantments are wasted on any competent mage. The runes will amplify any magic you channel or cast through the sword. It won’t be as good as a dedicated wand or staff, but you can’t behead people with those.”

*A bargain any day.*

Kai cast a reverent look at the milky blade. His mouth stretched in a silly grin. He felt like a kid who’d discovered swordfighting with sticks for the first time, eager to run off and trade bruises with his friends. The ability to smoothly channel his elemental mana had already

thrilled him, but a boost to *all* his spells. Truly, the perfect sword he hadn't known he needed before now.

A wand and a blade in one.

"Did I mention how much I love it?"

"You did a couple times," Elijah sniffed. His stoic facade cracked by a self-satisfied smirk.

"You'll have no excuses for that embarrassing showing with Elemental Swordsman."

"I won't shame you," Kai said. Part of him wanted to sprint off and train the skill immediately. But he couldn't. Not now. Elijah was leaving. The thought doused his enthusiasm like a splash of cold water that could not be ignored any longer.

He ran through a few more practice swings, then reluctantly sheathed the blade. The room settled into a brittle quiet. Fidgeting with the scabbard, shifting his weight from between his feet, he hesitated. Speaking it out loud would corner him to the truth, yet delaying it felt even worse.

"Thank you for the birthday gift. And everything else. Guess this is it, then... Goodbye, butler."

Elijah shed his smug pretenses, meeting his gaze. "It's a goodbye. For now." Despite his words, he lingered on the chair. "I have one more thing, actually." He reached a hand in his coat and tossed him something.

Kai caught it: a dull, black coin, slightly thinner than a gold mesar, but heavier and with a rougher polish under his thumb. If the sheathed sword had looked average, most people wouldn't have bent to pick this coin up in the streets.

Was it even worth keeping it? What would he do with a piece of scrap metal? Why would Elijah—

*Huh?*

As if the coin came into sharper focus, suddenly he saw it. The quiet thrum of mana. What he mistook for a rough polishing were actually concentric circles of minuscule runes carved on both sides. It still carried an unassuming air, but definitely not scrap metal.

"That's a black token of the House of Echoes," Elijah said. "Once you see through the shroud, it gets easier."

"Oh," Kai scowled. His mounting curiosity immediately dampened thinking of that bunch of charlatans. "Thank you. It looks... interesting."

"Interesting." The butler gave a rueful shake. "I know people at the peak of Green who've struggled to get one."

Kai threw the coin a second glance. The spidering engravings did have their shady charm. "Mhmm... I think I'll keep it. What does it do?"

Elijah sighed. "Several things. Primarily, discounts and access to a wider well of information. Your identity will also be protected if you attempt another foolish request. Most people won't be able to buy information about you. And you'll be informed of their request if their status is too low."

*Discounts...*

His estimation shot up another notch. A myriad of ideas, plans and possibilities opened before him.

Elijah clicked his tongue. "I know you didn't have the best first impression, but the House is trustworthy if you play by their rules."

"Yeah, I understand my request was dumb. And your explanation makes sense. But how can you be sure they won't sell you out once someone stronger comes along?"

"The sisters have kept their words since they founded their establishments." His lips twitched. "It's possible, they just never got caught. But there is more. Let's just say, Virya vouched for them." His gaze bore down on him. "Remember, I didn't give you that token to get in trouble. Some information is better left undisturbed till you have the strength to bear it. Don't make me regret my trust."

Kai hummed a serious nod. "I won't."

"Good." Elijah stood up. "Because I'll be watching. If it's *extremely* important, you can ask them to send a message to me. Expect that I probably won't respond." His shadow loomed in the room.

*Better than last time.*

"I understand. Do you have to go now?"

"Your friends are almost here."

"You could say hi to them," Kai offered. The interrogation about the cultists had already briefly involved Valela, Flynn and Rain.

Elijah gave a crooked smile. "I don't think they'd like it much. Enjoy your birthday, kid. It's goodbye now."

"C'mon, come here." Kai opened his arms. "You're not too cool for a manly hug."

"How does being cold have anything to do with it?"

“Just nonsensical stuff.” Kai wrapped him in a hug, still like squeezing a lamppost, but somehow warm. “Goodbye. I won’t forgive you if you get killed before I can kick your ass.”

“Same, brat. For the dying part.” Elijah pulled back and gruffly ruffled his hair. “Stay out of trouble. Remember, I’ll be watching.”

The crystal lights flickered with shadows, then the butler was gone.

Kai had no time to mull it over when he heard the outside door opening. Two sets of steps entered.

“Hey, Mat? You alive?” Flynn called from the living room. “Val was worried you got jumped by those loony rank hunters.”

“We brought crunchy snacks,” Rain echoed. “You should try them.”

“I’m here.” Kai rubbed his face and walked into the living room. He stopped at the sight of them hunched over a bundled blanket. “What’s that?”

“Uhm... this?” Flynn folded a flap back. A tiny pink head lifted from the bundle, blind eyes, wrinkled skin, and a noodle body. “I haven’t decided on a name. And before you ask, this is not your present, birthday boy.”