

Chapter 388 - Unintended Consequences

Kai swiftly climbed the marble steps. The afternoon sun glittered over the reliefs of the Wing Aurea's gilded facade. Passing the arched doors, the blooming smells of spring gave way to a mesh of inviting baked goods, loud students and oiled wares from a leather shop.

Veiled in Shadow, he cut through the crowd for the elevators. Albeit brief, ditching Words of Power gave him some priceless breaks. Lately, his life had been marked by the silvery echo of Raelion's bells. Lecture. Practice. Lunch. Lecture. Study. Rest. Rinse and repeat. His academic life remained frenetic, occasionally dull and always exhausting. Yet, he couldn't say he minded the grueling routine.

Guess Jolene had a point. Things worth pursuing are never easy.

The gaps in his education filled up, his skills steadily grew, and his knowledge of the world expanded. He'd always enjoyed learning and honing himself, but perhaps not to this degree of single-mindedness. When did that change? Did the academy just remind him of his days at Virya's estate? Or was it meeting Elijah? The urge to chase after his teacher's shadow, gain the power to help, and be more than a burden?

Questions drifted in his mind since his talk with Valela. That conversation made him reflect. Well, more than usual.

Kai would be... among the first to admit he often overthought. Though paradoxically, he also studiously avoided certain topics. When had he gotten so *impatient* to gain more power? If hard work were enough, the Republic would have more than a paltry few thousand Green individuals among seventy million citizens.

Advancing through the grades was a slow grind. Lucky breaks could speed the pace, but that just meant climbing two steps at a time instead of one. No trick would let him skip to the top. No amount of obsessive training would substitute for years of steady accumulation.

As Professor Lysander loved to hammer, rushing without planning would at best get them forever stuck at early Green—if he didn't burn out before the finish line. Depending on knowledge and resources, the same amount of hard work would lead to vastly different results.

I'm too impatient.

Biting his cheek, Kai stepped onto the humming runes of the elevator. "Fourth floor, please."

"Yes, mister..." The array operator squinted as if he couldn't quite see him. Before the man could question the strangeness, more students pulled his attention. The engraved doors glided close, reducing the noise to a soft murmur as the stone platform smoothly ascended.

Kai grinned. Shadow Magic had gained another level—one closer to Yellow. Nobody outside of class had approached him in the last twenty-one hours, and he aimed to keep the streak.

Whatever subconscious instinct stoked his urgency to gain power, he was grateful Valela had helped him put things into perspective. He had time. No urgent threat loomed over him. No enemy was coming for him. He'd enrolled in the Republic's most renowned and safest academy.

Whatever the bunch of cultists was doing, the government would be aware of them too. Not every crisis concerned him. Not right now. If nothing else, Professor Ermellie's monologues about Merian excellence had impressed the country's size and history. The Republic had stood through wars, magical plagues and mana catastrophes for almost fifteen centuries. It would not collapse easily. Despite his reservations, the army must have plenty of competent people way smarter than him.

I just have to prepare, so I'll be ready next time.

"Fourth floor." The attendant smoothly announced.

The lacquered wooden doors opened to a clatter of sounds and smells. Students and off-duty personnel bustled in the atrium. Only the high ceiling and wide windows on both sides tempered the crowded feeling.

Kai raked a hand through his hair and headed down the branching hallway, scanning the stores for a familiar face. His resolution to be more present for his friends had been going *okay*. Given that lectures commanded most of his schedule, he was learning how to fit in hangouts, meals and group study. The trick was good planning. Among first years, he was rarely the only one who needed to complete any one activity and assignment.

Just another skill he needed to work on.

Memo 19: Check in on what your friends are doing and look for matches. (edit. do not ask for a copy of their schedule).

If they didn't change their mind, they should be at—

"In here, Mat!"

Turning toward the voice, Kai spotted Flynn poking his head out *Vesper's Amulets and Magical Wares* across the hall. Through the display window, Lys perused a spread of enchanted baubles with grave concentration, while Valela stood beside her, watching the hunched shopkeeper with gentle pity.

"Val didn't tell me you'd be here too." Kai wove through the streaming buyers to enter the shop. "What are you buying?"

"Nothing here. Just dropped in to say hi to Val, and got recruited to carry the bags. A professor convinced Rain to assist her with her research for extra credits. So, I thought I'd get some commissions done. You get the best prices during the week." Flynn lifted an ivory

cloth bag and sighed toward the small pyramid of boxes at his feet. "It's taking longer than I thought."

"...I'm afraid this artisan doesn't work with alloys of starlight copper, Miss Fairmont. Though we could customize the gemstones and engraving?"

Lys bit her lip, then gave a mournful shake. "A pity. But what about that one?" Her attention snapped toward a half-moon pendant shimmering like diamonds. In her intent inspection, she didn't notice him walking up.

Valela did. Her lips eased into a warm smile. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Well, I promised I would." Kai huffed grandly. "I've got a reputation to defend." He also had a list of items to buy; he'd found efficiency was key to maintaining social relations.

"That you have." Flynn laughed. "We totally didn't think you zoned out practicing party cantrips and forgot. Right, Val?"

Valela folded her arms and threw him a dirty look. "I didn't even consider that." Her stiff expression softened. "At most, I thought he might not know where to find us."

"Of course you'd never doubt him." Flynn smiled wider.

"Uhm," Kai cleared his throat. "I did think you'd be farther in." Better not mention he'd mapped the most likely route through the shops they needed to visit. "I hope you didn't wait for me."

Valela's expression grew a little strained. "So did I. Lys had a little... trouble making up her mind on the supplies for her courses. But we're almost done. *Right?*" Her voice rose slightly.

"Huh... pardon?" Lys jolted up from her examinations and spun around, a pristine smile on her delicate features. "Oh, Mat. Just the man I was hoping to see! Please, come here." She grabbed his sleeve. "I desperately need a second opinion." She lifted the half-moon pendant and a pair of teardrop topaz rings to her face. The enchantments beneath their cloaked surface seemed to make them glow. "So? Which one looks better?"

"I don't know... What are they for?"

"That's not important. A girl needs to be prepared." Her manicured eyebrow curved to a perfect arc. "Do the topazes make me look old or mature?"

"Uh." Kai looked at Flynn and Val for help, but the traitors had already retreated three steps. "You look good in both. But don't their effects matter a lot?"

At least, more than their appearance.

"Matthew, Matthew." Lys let out a deep sigh. "Your naïveté is charmingly adorable." She twirled to inspect the three dozen the shopkeeper had taken out. "If my jewelry clashes with

my clothes, people will know something is off. Then they'd inevitably wonder what kind of enchantments are worth that price and look closer. Now that wouldn't make for an effective protection, would it?"

That... makes a strange amount of sense.

"I see..." It was probably an excuse, but Kai couldn't well say that. Before he could join Flynn at the far corner of the shop, Lys held up two more amulets, smiling brightly for his opinion.

And this is what I get for being punctual...

Knowing the fastest way out was to surrender, he tried his best. He'd never delved into this branch of enchanting, but then again, Lys didn't seem to particularly care about the runes. Amulets could carry all kinds of effects, from spellcasting focuses akin to wands, to varying kinds of defensive wards and single-use fireballs.

Any delusion to swiftly guide Lys toward a choice fell short as the graying shopkeeper produced more baubles from behind the counter without batting an eye.

"Mhmm, I'm not sure. Hey, Flynn! Val! What do you two think? Four heads work better than two." Kai smirked at his dear friends.

Come back here. I shall not suffer alone!

Minutes crawled as Lys narrowed down her choices. "Alright, truly just one more!" She raised a pair of emerald earrings to her face and frowned. "Hmm, no... these probably look better on Val, wouldn't you say?" She moved the pieces to her friends. "Try imagining them with a satin dress."

"Uhm." Kai blinked. "Yes.... I mean, they look great on you."

Standing stiffly, Valela averted her gaze, cheeks blushing. "Thank you." Her eyes lingered on the earrings before fleeing. "We should finish here and hurry. We have more shops to visit."

"Yes. You're right." Kai nodded. "We have lots to do."

"Always in a rush." Lys sniffed and looked at the shopkeeper. "Could you set those aside for me, Vesper? I might yet squeeze some sense into their heads."

"It'd be my pleasure, Miss Fairmont. We're always grateful for your patronage."

"Of course." She lightly giggled, taking out a gold-threaded, pink purse to pay. "That's because I keep coming back."

Kai tried not to gawk at the amount of mesars she set on the counter as Flynn graciously stepped to take another bag.

I better never let Hobbes find this place. Nope, mind clear. Don't even think about it.

Leaving the amulet's displays, they swiftly moved through the next shops on their lists. Months after enrolling, the Wing Aurea still contained endless wares to peruse and explore. With Val occasionally dragging Lys out, they made good time.

Almost done.

Entering the Moonroot Apothecary, Kai wistfully breathed in the scent of drying herbs. The novice Alchemy course only provided ingredients during classes. If he wanted to hone his skill outside, he needed to buy his own stock. He couldn't take up Alden on his offer to brew together as well as use his roommate's supplies. Even if the pale patrician truly didn't care, his own thick skin had a limit!

No wonder nearly every student in the Artisan path had a sponsor.

I should get him something nice. Hmm, what do you give to someone who's already filthy rich?

Memo 21: Figure out a present to repay Alden.

Memo 22: Ask Rob to practice Space Magic and consider forgiving some of his chore debts (no more than two).

The number of tasks only rose. Kai reluctantly set a hefty pile of mesars on the apothecary's counter. Perhaps, he did need a skill to schedule his life. "Thank you." With a tight smile, he stored the bundle of herbs in his ring.

Valela waited for him in front of a wand display. Her focused brows eased when she saw him. "Did you find everything you need?"

"Yep. And I only had to barter one kidney."

Her lips pursed in disapproval. "You shouldn't joke about Necromancy. That's a forbidden discipline. People might misunderstand."

"My bad. Where to next?"

Closing their last commissions, they regrouped with the others. Who knew socializing would be such an intense endeavor? But, despite the added drain on his time, he was feeling oddly refreshed.

The piles of boxes, packets and bags in Flynn's arms now brushed his chin. His tall friend looked as drained as Lys looked lively, his eyes darting to the far elevators for an escape. Upon spotting them, he mouthed help.

The golden-haired girl didn't seem to notice. Her dainty hand rose to wave at them. "Great, you're here! Val, you have the best instincts for picking friends. Maybe I should talk with more students from Martial Studies. Oh, time truly flew. Rena said to join us too. Why don't we get something to eat? It's my treat."

Flynn's grumbling face smoothed into a pleasant smile. "What a brilliant idea! Don't you think too, Mat?"

"I..." Before answering, Kai checked on his mnemonic chain with his schedule.

When did it grow so large?

"I can't today. I agreed I'd grab a bite with someone to discuss elemental magic and compare our spellcasting."

Three heads snapped on him. The Wing Aurea's bustle strangely seemed to become quieter.

Finally, Lys squared him up with a prim smile. "You've already made an appointment for dinner?"

"Yes..." Kai scratched his neck, feeling he should pick his words carefully. "It was the most convenient time." Talking and eating together was just more efficient. He'd agreed to exchange pointers with Isadora mainly to free himself, but she took it more seriously than he'd expected. There had been no way to slip away without breaking his word.

Lys' grin turned sharper. "By chance, is that someone a woman?"

Uh...

"Yeah, she's in my same class for Combat Magic and Mixed Combat. I told you how Professor Valdibal made me duel other high rankers during my first class. I beat Isadora, so she insisted we compare our casting and get a rematch."

"Isadora Forlow? The seventh ranker in the Trials?" Valela asked with no inflection in her voice, not meeting his eyes.

Throat dry, Kai simply nodded. He knew that several patrician students had approached him, fishing for favors or attempting to recruit him. But he'd also noticed how all of them belonged to minor Houses. *One* high result in the Trials didn't change the fact that he was a commoner with no background. At best, a curiosity or gamble.

Isadora was a scion from a prominent House and ranked high on her own. She had been bubbly and friendly from their first meeting. Even if she wanted to make a friendly connection, why would she care for more? When discussing the invitation, he made clear he only cared to discuss skills.

It had all made sense in his head. Yet, looking at Valele's impassive face, he felt he'd messed something up.

Gripped by a sudden panic, he searched for a way to escape the widening chasm opening beneath his feet. "You can come too. If you want? I mean, I told her I might bring some

friends. It shouldn't take long. We'll just eat together and do a round of practice. Isadora said she's book a private field."

Valela didn't reply right away, and her voice sounded flat when she did. "Maybe another time. I have to finish an assignment for tomorrow. Flynn, it was very nice catching up with you. If you'll excuse me." Turning with perfect poise, she walked down the hallway.

"Alright then. We'll catch up tomorrow." Kai waved awkwardly. He felt the impulse to do something, but he didn't know what.

Shit.

"Really, Mat?" Lys pursed her lips, a disapproving line creasing her doll-like face. Then, with a sniff, she ran after Val. "Wait for me!"

"Hey, wait! What do I do with these?" Flynn balanced the packages, his shout going unanswered.

They remained in silence.

"Guess I'll go too," Kai said, though his body remained still, his mind still tangled in knots.

Flynn gave him a deadpan look. "You think?"

"I really didn't mean anything by it. With Isadora, I mean."

"I know. She probably knows it too. But still... You just told her that you have a date with a very powerful woman from a very important house. Regardless of intentions, that's how it sounds. How do you think she feels?"

Uhm... spelled out like that? I'm an idiot.

Kai pinched his face. It was not that he didn't understand. Reincarnation put him in an awkward spot with dating. So, rather than agonizing over it, he'd resolved that nothing could happen for a few years. He'd been avoiding every thought of romance for so long now that it felt almost weird to think others weren't like him.

I should probably talk with her...

But what could he say? What did he want to clear up? What did *he* want? He enjoyed her friendship, spending time with her, watching her smile...

Hmm, did he want more?