

Chapter 144 - The Path Forward

Kai sneaked a glance at the boy walking beside him, Flynn was being unusually quiet.

Should I have asked how he's doing?

Noticing him looking, Flynn flashed a smile at him. "Do I have something on my face, or are you just admiring my handsomeness? No need to be ashamed, it happens to a lot of people."

"I was just thinking whether it would be more satisfying to punch your left side or the right," Kai said with a wondering tone like he was choosing whether to buy a coconut or papaya for breakfast. "What do you think?"

Flynn put a hand on his chin to check and clenched his jaw. "I think the right one is my best side. I'll let you punch the left one if you let me do the same."

"I'll think about it, but I go first."

Still an idiot.

After the quipping exchange was done, Flynn went back to a brooding silence. His smirk disappeared like footprints on the water's edge when Kai turned his attention back to the bustling street.

His house was just outside poshtown, a five-minute walk.

"We're here." The new coat of white paint on the door hid the arrow hole where Moui nailed a raider. Kai opened the lock with a smooth *clank* and let Flynn inside.

“Don’t—” Kai paused, telling Flynn not to do something would likely sound like a challenge or invite. “Just put back anything you touch, and make yourself at home.”

“It’s a very nice house, it looks even better than from outside.” Flynn inspected the room.

“Does it?” Kai gave him a brief tour. “That’s the kitchen, the bathroom is over there and our bedrooms are upstairs. It’s a bit messy right now.”

Kea had left a bunch of half-finished arrows and a mess of twine in the living room; a bundle of canvas with Ele’s equipment sat in a chair. In the kitchen, the plates and a pan from this morning’s breakfast waited to be washed.

I said I would take care of it, didn’t I? Mom would have a heart attack if she knew I brought someone without tidying up.

With a sigh, Kai got to work cleaning and heating up the meal. He didn’t forget to follow Flynn with Mana Sense in the back of his mind. The boy was snooping around downstairs, without touching anything, and stopped when he found the bathroom. A moment later, Kai heard running water.

Can’t fault him for admiring my masterpiece.

“Stop poking my enchantments, if you scratch them, I’ll scratch your eyeballs,” Kai yelled at the wall. “And don’t drip on the floor.”

Flynn poked his head back into the kitchen. “You have hot water?”

“Doesn’t the Republic have it too?”

“Not in the storage closet they give us. I share a bathroom with a dozen people and I have to heat a bucket if I want to take a bath in winter.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Kai looked at him with deep pity, glad he didn’t have to live like that anymore. “Anyway, lunch is ready.”

He served reheated meat skewers with crunchy bread from the posh baker and a tropical salad. Kai placed the plates on the table. Flynn observed them with a critical eye, smelling the food like a connoisseur with a bottle of aged wine.

I’ve seen you eat far worse while complimenting the cook.

“This will do.” Flynn declared his verdict with a solemn nod. After the first bite, he began stuffing his mouth like a starved child.

“Glad it satisfies your palate, your majesty.” Kai raised his eyes to the sky, setting a jug full of water on the table. He couldn’t let him choke to death until he got the answers he needed. “No need to wait for me.”

Flynn mumbled a sorry with a full mouth but didn’t stop eating.

Guess we might finish what Mom prepared for once. She’ll be so happy.

First to finish, Flynn stretched his grubby hands toward his plate. Kai’d bet it was just to annoy him rather than for hunger. He’d already eaten for two.

“Try me.” A simple smile and the wooden skewer firmly in his hand were enough to dissuade the thief.

“I was just stretching my arms.” Flynn retracted his hands with a pout.

“Obviously.” Kai bit a piece of snake meat off the skewer. “Anyway, did something *interesting* happen lately?”

Very smooth genius, very smooth.

“About the same.” Flynn used a piece of bread to clean his plate till it was pristine. “I’m just waiting for things to settle down before I decide what to do next.”

There was *something* more in the look Flynn gave him, but Kai had no idea what. Did he think the question was weird or was he playing dumb?

Damn, how do I probe for information when you don’t know what I’m looking for?

Normally Kai had to beg him to shut up, today any attempt to extract information led nowhere. Flynn responded with a witty remark or a joke that closed the conversation. Kai swallowed the last morsel of beets with a glass of water, never taking his eyes off him.

Even the hints at his new profession didn’t evoke much curiosity. Kai thought he would get pestered until he was forced to speak or throw him out of his house.

Is he mad at me?

“Well, thank you for the meal.” Flynn stood up. “Do you want me to help you clean up? I need to be back on duty soon.”

Kai put the last skewer down. “I can do that later. We need to talk first.”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing the whole time?” Flynn raised a questioning eyebrow.

Does he truly know nothing? Why did I bump into him then?

“I want to show you my room. Come on.” Before the boy could protest, Kai marched upstairs, leaving him no choice but to follow. If he had to put all his cards on the table, it would be better to do it where no one could eavesdrop.

“What’s up with you today?” Flynn mused out loud. “You’re being weirder than usual, and trust me, that’s not a low bar.”

Ha. Ha. Very funny.

Kai waited till they were both inside and slammed the door shut. “I’ve got soundproofing enchantments on the walls, no one will hear us here.”

“Yeah...?” Flynn retreated a few steps. “Very cool, your room is amazing. Much better than mine, but I really need to go.”

“Sit down and stop acting like an idiot.” Kai took a seat on his bed and pointed to the only chair. “We need to talk about what happened during the raid and figure out what we’re going to do with the new Republic investigators sweeping the town for culprits.”

For a second, Kai thought Flynn would dash for the door and was ready to tackle him. Then the boy dragged his feet to the desk chair like it was the executioner’s block.

“How do you know about the investigation?”

“A *friend* told me.” Kai crossed his arms. “Since you couldn’t bother warning me.”

Flynn pressed his lips in a thin line. "What does it matter to you? You're not the one they're looking for and *you* don't risk getting your head chopped off if discovered."

Kai froze an equally snarky response on his lips. The fact the boy had such a punchable face didn't help, but he needed to be the adult here.

Calm down and think things through.

Yes, it wasn't as simple as Flynn made it out to be, he was also risking a lot if the Republic started digging into him. But maybe the boy wasn't *entirely* wrong either.

I might get robbed or forced into a shitty contract. Whatever situation I end up in, I can find my way out. On the other hand... he would likely be tortured for information and killed. He's Fourteen, an adult by law, and I doubt it would make any difference anyway.

The more Kai pondered the matter the worse he felt. Indeed, there were *a few facts* he hadn't considered. All he had worried about since the raid were his broken plans and his profession. The only topics they talked about when they met.

If he has closed with the rebels, he might risk getting killed by them too, and he can't go back to his family either. Staying with the Republic is also not an option... Oh, spirits, smite me now! I might be a bigger fool than him.

The only reason he had invited Flynn today was because the boy might have something *he* needed.

And I just snapped at him because he didn't come running to check on me about my problems. Fuck, I'm a hypocrite.

Kai wished he could sink into his bed for shame. And he was supposed to be the adult, wasn't he?

“I’m sorry,” Kai muttered, though that seemed hardly enough. “I’m sorry if I was... a bit of an egocentric asshole. I should have considered your situation and checked if you were okay sooner.”

The chair creaked as Flynn leaned forward as if he couldn’t hear him properly from a meter away. “It’s fine. You don’t need to nanny me.”

Kai cleared his throat, avoiding his gaze. “But it’s not fine. I didn’t even thank you properly for your help during the raid.”

“I got you into trouble in the first place, so we’re even. And you don’t need to worry for me, I know how to take care of myself.”

“It’s not the same thing.” Kai stared at his hands, afraid to look up, his heart was thumping in his ears. “You were just trying to warn me and didn’t know that Tridel was stalking you. And you also didn’t need to follow me to my lab, but I’m grateful that you did. I’d be dead twice if it wasn’t for you.”

The expected jokes didn’t come, silence stretched. Gathering his courage, Kai forced himself to raise his eyes. Flynn was looking out the window, turning his back on him.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” His tone, quick and even, didn’t betray any emotion. “I just need a moment.”

Kai noticed how the little of his face he could see was a different shade than normal. If his skin wasn’t tanned, he would probably be bright pink.

That’s... not what I expected. Guess even acting skills have limits.

A minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. When Flynn finally turned around, his eyes shone with something more than his mischievous glint.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, stop asking me that. You’re the kid that needed saving. Luckily for you, I’m a selfless paladin. You need no fear, I’ll save your ass every time.”

And here we go. If I ever need shade, I can take cover under his big head.

“Do you want to try another spar since you’re so brave and strong?” Kai scoffed with a smile. “I’d be honored to learn from such a mighty hero.”

“I fear your bedroom isn’t big enough for a proper duel.”

“Well, tell me the day and place you prefer, and I’ll be there.” Kai took out a notebook and pen with a flat smile.

“What kind of role model would I be if I taught you to resolve all conflicts with violence?” Flynn sighed dramatically, slumping down in the chair. “Maybe we should start with philosophy. You see, cultivating the mind is as important as the body. There are three fundamental principles to lead an honorable life...”

Spirits spare me, I’d rather watch the tides rise.

Kai’d bet gold that the boy could go on for hours, spouting nonsense if he dared him. “I get it, I get it. Now shut up, we have yet to decide what to do with the Republic.”

Quieting down with an offended harrump, Flynn rocked on the chair and rested his legs on the bed. “I told you that there is no need to worry. We just need to keep our heads down and everything will be fine.”

“First, take your damn shoes off my bed.” Kai slapped his feet off with a glare. “And *second*, what if you get interrogated by someone who can detect lies?”

The boy continued rocking the chair without worry. “Many enforcers have some kind of intuition skill, but they aren’t as infallible as they let you think. There are ways around if you are prepared and have a counter—which I do. Not that anyone would have reason to suspect me to begin with.”

That’s not how Reishi made it sound, did he just want me to be cautious?

“So, it’s not a problem if a *truthteller* questions you...?”

With a painful crush, Flynn tipped over the chair. “Shit! Cursed gods!”

Tell me he’s cursing about the fall.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes. No.” He stood up massaging his shoulder. “You didn’t say a *truthteller* was in Sylspring, right?”

It couldn’t be that easy, could it?

“Weren’t you saying that lie detection skills aren’t a big deal?” Kai could feel his hopes crumbling into dust.

“That’s for general skills.” Flynn scrubbed a hand through his hair, pacing back and forth in the cramped room. “Questioners get their abilities from their profession and spend all their time leveling them to sniff out lies. I wasn’t even sure there was one in the whole archipelago, why should a damn questioner come to our town?”

The boy loomed over him and looked straight into his eyes. “Are you *completely* sure it was a *truthteller* and not just another investigator? They’re the equivalent of a high official, the mayor should have gone to welcome them if one arrived in Sylspring.”

“Yes, the *truthteller* landed here this morning from Higharbor.” Before Flynn could continue his manic steps, Kai grabbed his arm. “Sit down. We can figure this out.”

Maybe nothing of this was about me... Did I bump into him to warn him? Or maybe I'd also be fucked if they question him and follow the breadcrumbs to me.

“Did you notice anyone new today?”

Flynn shook his head. “I don’t know, there have been a ton of new people lately.”

“Did you talk with anyone you hadn’t seen before?” Kai forced his tone to remain calm and still his tapping foot.

“I don’t think so... No, not today at least.”

Good, we're not fucked yet.

“I think whoever this *truthteller* is, they didn’t make a fuss so they could ask questions unhindered.” Kai began to think aloud. “I heard they have restrictions on what you have to answer. But what if they ask you about the rebels over lunch or make small talk in the hallway?”

“They could question other officers and employees without letting them know they were even suspects and ensure no one runs away,” Flynn finished for him, looking like he had managed to recompose himself—at least on the outside.

“You need to leave Sylspring,” Kai stated, that was the only option. The *truthteller* could reveal his or her identity and change tactics at any moment. They could also get suspicious if Flynn avoided every new person. Even knowing the dangers, the risks were too big.

“Who would suspect me if I suddenly ran away without explanation?” Flynn said, sarcasm dripping from each word. “It’s not like they’d chase after *me*.”

He closed his mouth, passing a hand over his face. "Sorry. I know you're trying to help, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life hiding."

"It's fine."

He can't hide with the rebels either... he'd be alone till they find him.

"But you can't stay there either. They're not going to be satisfied by scaring the Voice into hiding this time. What are the chances some other member sells you out?"

Flynn clenched his fists. "It's possible."

"And I don't think coming clean to the Republic and telling them what you know is an option either?"

"I'd rather cut my tongue." Flynn exhaled slowly. "Since the arrival of the *truthteller* wasn't made public they won't be too suspicious, if I'm lucky. I can come up with a reasonable explanation to leave, but I'll need to resign in person."

His eyes stared blankly at the floorboards. "Where would I even go?"

"We're going to Higharbor, that'd be the last place someone who has something to hide would choose," Kai closed the conversation.

Flynn's attention jolted on him. "What do you mean *we*?"

"Two people will attract less attention than one. I also wanted a change of air, Syspring is becoming too stuffy. It's decided, I know a guy who can take care of the journey."

Certainly, it can't be a worse place to train than here. I'll fit right in with all the spoiled scions.