

Chapter 79 - Flynn

Shaking hands with Flynn, Kai returned the smile. Then he tightened his grip. Not all at once, that would be rude. He waited for the other boy to accept his challenge, slowly increasing his strength.

Flynn seemed overly eager to accept his challenge, immediately giving his all. Perhaps hoping to take him by surprise. He was older, but the distance between Red to Orange wasn't easily bridged.

Kai could see the other boy's muscles and tendons tense. His affable grin strained. "You've got a pretty strong grip."

You have no idea.

Until now, he had only matched his strength, remaining on the defensive. He would easily win if he got serious, but why not do better? With a surge of Empower, he completely overpowered his opponent, using Acting to make it look like it was no effort at all. Shock grew on the boy's face.

People would tread lightly when they didn't know what they were dealing with. It would ensure the boy would not try anything stupid. Kai stopped crushing his hand before actually hurting him. Ultimately, he was the one who needed help.

I hope he doesn't get mad or scared.

Unless Flynn was a complete idiot—and Kai chose him precisely because he didn't look like one—he would know he was at Orange and get curious.

“Are you from the Republic, mister?” The boy said with a much more respectful tone. This time he looked straight at him, not at his possessions. There was a hint of caution and intrigue in his eyes.

I can work with that.

Shaking hands, his mixed appearance and a strength much higher than his age would suggest he wasn't a local.

Seems he's a smart kid.

“I was born in the archipelago.”

His answer was vague enough to lead him to believe there was more to it. That he was the son of someone important. It might have been better to let Flynn think he was just a rich brat from the Republic, but that didn't sit well with him.

Kai let Acting guide his actions. He needed to look confident and sell the part.

“Do you know the town well, Flynn?”

Any sign of hesitation vanished from the boy's face, replaced by a confidence that matched his own.

“I know every corner of Sylspring, and all the best spots. I'm the best person in town if you're looking to tour the city. Is there something you're looking for, mister?” A shrewd glint in his eyes. From his smooth words, this probably wasn't the first time he had done something similar.

I'm not sure who is taking advantage of who...

“I need someone to guide me to these shops, and I need to get this done before the day is over.” He took out the list. “I can pay you for your time.”

Flynn took it. A frown appeared on his face.

Didn't you say you were the best guide in town?

“I know these places. Just give me a minute.” The boy was squinting at the list. His tone sounded confident, but his mana flow was fidgety.

Kai sighed. “Maybe you could introduce me to someone who can help? I'll still give you something.” He was on a tight schedule. It looked like it was a bust.

“Just give me a moment, mister.” Flynn's flow was growing more restless.

I'll tip him extra. But I don't have time to be nice.

Kai tried to get the list back, but the boy was not letting go.

“I just need a second longer to read the list, mister.” A note of anguish bleeding into his voice.

Kai stopped. “Do you want me to read it for you?”

The boy froze. “I know how to read.” He raised his voice. “It's just that... it's written so weird.”

“You could have said it sooner, my teacher has terrible handwriting. I also have some problems reading it sometimes.”

Taking back the paper, Kai read out loud. “Sylphie’s Herb shop, Blue Cloud restaurant, merchant Taleen Sarrik docked with the Viveen, merchant...”

The words looked almost printed, flowery with long curves and embellishments. Back on Earth someone might have paid to have their wedding invites written like this.

Kai paid close attention to Flynn’s reaction as he read the list. Relief and confidence grew with each name he read.

It seems he truly knows his way around town.

“I need to visit them all today.”

“Sure, it’s not a problem. I know all the places very well. It’s just...” Flynn hesitated. “I was about to go to work when you stopped me. You see, mister, my mother is sick, and I need to earn money to buy her medicines. It’s not that I don’t want to help, but...” His eyes were getting moist. “I’m sorry something must have gotten in my eyes.”

Kai would have almost fallen for it, if his mana veins didn’t show the same emotion of a dead fish.

And I was feeling bad for you. Maybe I should ask for some tips for training Acting.

Kai rolled his eyes, and then people called him the shameless one. He was tempted to start poking holes in his story. A few well-placed questions and his castle of lies would shatter into a thousand pieces. He was scarily good for a kid, but still only twelve old or so.

I guess that is what happens when someone grows up on the streets and has access to skills.

Another time he would have played Flynn at his own game, but not today. He was still tired from the journey, hungry and looking forward to a long bath. Even worse, he was on a tight schedule to complete a ton of errands.

“Cut the crap. I already said I would pay you. How much do you want?”

Still with a tear-streaked expression. “They promised to pay me five mesars for this afternoon’s work, mister.”

“Sure, did they also promise you a potion of eternal youth and a villa? Maybe I should take my money somewhere else...”

Flynn reigned in the sad expression. “My mom is really sick—.”

“One mesar,” Kai said curtly.

“Four,” Fynn replied with a steady voice.

“One and a half.”

“Three. Medicines are really expensive.”

“Two. One mesar now, and one when we’re done. I’ll also pay for food. Now let’s get moving.” Kai exerted his aura to show this was as far as he was willing to go. It was already an outrageous price for a half a day of work. Even adults with professions earned less than that.

“You got yourself a deal, mister.” His confident grin was back. His hand darted to shake his, as if afraid he would change his mind.

Kai took out a copper mesar, careful to not let him peek inside his backpack. Elijah had been generous with his allowance, but most of it was for the supplies. The butler wanted a list of all his expenses when he got back.

I'll make sure to prepare something to sell for my own money next time. I only had a few potions at hand.

The coin disappeared in Flynn's hands. “Where would you like to go first, mister?”

“I need to visit all the places before they close, so you can choose the best route. Just keep Jerry and Var'sevi for last. Do you need me to reread the list?” Those two merchants were the only ones he needed to pay and haggle for.

“I have a good memory, mister. This way.” Flynn began leading the way with confidence.

“Stop calling me mister. It sounds ridiculous and I'm younger than you. Just call me Kai.”

Flynn gave him an amused smile. “Okay, Kai. So what's your story, *Kai*?” His eyes curiously scrutinized him as if he could unveil his secrets if he stared hard enough. “Were you truly born in the archipelago?”

“Yes, born and raised. I'm a local.”

He couldn't be sure, but the smile on Flynn's face looked a bit more genuine.

“And...? Tell me more. Your clothes are dirty but worth like ten pairs of mine and all the places on that list of yours are in poshtown. You must have a lot of money.”

“I’m just here to pick up supplies for my teacher. The goods have already been paid and he is going to take it *very* personally if something goes missing.”

It was better to make things clear. Kai paid close attention to where they were going. His piece of paper could only be useful if he had time to show it. It didn’t look like they were heading to a dodgy part of town. There were enough enforcers around and he was sure no one would try anything.

“So is your teacher someone rich?” Flynn asked, completely unbothered by his veiled warning.

He is not going to shut up, is he?

“I guess...” Even after all this time, Elijah’s origins were still a mystery to him. “But trust me, you wouldn’t want to meet him.”

“Why?”

“Enough about me, I paid for your time. Where are we going?”

“To the Sage Tree.”

“I don’t think that was on my list.” Kai was pretty damn sure it wasn’t.

“You need a place to change. You can’t go to poshtown dressed like a beggar. Tourists like the rustic island vibe, but they like their idealized version better. There is no real rule, but the enforcers keep all the *unwanted* people away.”

"I don't look like a beggar!"

"Well, close enough. And I assume you need a place to stay and eat."

"Fine." With the governor's signature, he could easily march in *poshtown*, but if he could avoid dealing with that entirely, all the better.

"But what about you? You don't look much better off than me." Flynn's clothes were certainly cleaner than his own, but his sleeves were worn out and too short for his arms.

"As long as you look rich enough, people will overlook me. I can be your loyal servant. 'Kay, mister?"

"I told you to stop calling me that."

"You should see how well it works with the kids from the Republic." Flynn chuckled. "They puff their chest and start doing these ridiculous gestures." He waved him around in a grandiose way.

"Do you scam many people, oh loyal servant?"

"Your words hurt me deeply." Flynn put a hand on his chest like he had been stabbed through the heart. "I'm a model citizen! I just offer my help to those who need it. It's not my fault if I'm so good at my job they insist to pay me generously."

And I'm the nicest and most patient person on Elydes. Never complained about anything in my life.

“So, is your mother truly sick?” Kai gave him a long look. The boy didn’t flinch.

“Of course,” Flynn grinned. “She is sick of me.” His mana rippled.

“Look, we’re here.”

Kai turned to look at a two-story wooden building. Above the double door, a large sign in white letters announced: *Sage Tree*.

“Best tavern in town, outside poshtown.”

“So it’s not really the best?”

“It has the fairest prices. All the establishments in poshtown are owned by people from the mainland. Without a posh ID they don’t let you inside. So the Sage Tree is the best for us.”

“Aren’t the normal papers the same?”

Flynn burst out laughing.

“Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be making fun of you. Have you never been to any town before? According to the enforcers, every business has the right to refuse clients. It just so happens they reject anyone without the posh piece of paper. Complete coincidence.”

Kai followed Flynn inside the Sage Tree. A large hall with a homey feel. Half of the tables were occupied by people eating and chatting. The floor was clean, and a light smell of flowers filled the air. Kai noticed fresh bundles of coral flowers at each table.

“What did I say? Ain’t this amazing? They make a shrimp pie that is to die for.”

“Who did you bring here?” A large woman easily balances a half dozen plates in her arms steep before them.

“This is Mister Kai.” Flynn introduced him.

Kai felt his ears burning in embarrassment.

I’m going to strangle him.

“He’s new in town, so I’m helping him out. I thought we could start with the best tavern in Sylspring.”

Her gaze examined him. “Does he have the money to pay?”

“Of course. You know, I only bring my best clients here.”

Kai didn’t miss how the woman shared a look with Flynn.

“I’ll be with you in a moment.” She left to serve her customers.

Kai let himself get dragged to wait by the counter. His eyes observed the other boys closely. “Do you get a cut for each *client* you bring in, don’t you?”

This time he didn’t need Mana Sense to know he got it right.

“If she is going to charge me extra, I’ll deduct it from your pay.”

Looking at his stony expression, Flynn let out a nervous chuckle. “Come on, Kai, my dear friend. I can assure you her price will be extremely fair.”

I know, you’ll make sure of it.

When the owner came back, Kai could see the frantic glances Flynn threw her.

Model citizen, he said.

“I need a room for two days, a bath and a quick meal for me and my *dear friend*.”

The woman gave him a warm smile. “I’ll give you my best room. Just 8 copper mesars. I’d also need your ID. The hounds of the Republic have been snooping around, so I need to do all this pointless paperwork.”

Flynn put an arm around his shoulder in a friendly gesture, his mana flowing in disarray. “Couldn’t you give my friend a discount?”

Their gazes engaged in a silent conversation. Kai took out his paper. “Here.”

The woman lowered her gaze to read. “That’s not—.” The color left her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry. That’s the wrong one, my bad. Here’s my ID.” Kai took back the note with the governor’s seal and gave her his official document. She took it with a trembling hand.

“S-since you’re a f-friend of Flynn, your stay will be on the house.”

“That’s not necessary. I’ll pay the normal fee. Just be quick with the bath and meal. We’re in a hurry.” Kai had not expected the permit from the governor would have this effect. The woman looked downright terrified.

I’ve been at the estate for too long. What the hell is going on in the archipelago?

The owner tried to recompose herself. “It’s one mesars and 40 chips.” Her hands were still slightly shaking when he took the money.

He had thought it was a quick way to solve the situation. After seeing her reaction, he felt dirty. He used the governor’s name to get what he wanted.

“You can take any table. I’ll bring you something to eat immediately while I get the bath prepared.” With that, she almost ran away.

“What was that about?” Flynn asked, confused. “Did I miss something?”