

Chapter 261 - Chances

The door stuttered close behind Kai, creaking on rusty hinges. Body Augmentation rushed into his legs. He was confident in bolting outside, but where could he run?

I'm on a ship, miles from land.

Shouting for help would accomplish nothing. Oraine could simply feign ignorance, the eerie teen was far more adept at dealing with people than him. If he could convince the other survivors they knew him, he could definitely turn them on him.

With one last squeak, the door swung closed, trapping Kai in the narrow cabin. Hallowed Intuition was silent, though so little made sense about the white-haired boy, he didn't know whether he should trust it. As his teachers taught him, every skill had a counter.

Blessed Spirits! Why can't I catch a breath?

Oraine leaned comfortably against the boards of the wall, less than two meters away—it would not even take a step to cross the distance for someone at the peak of Yellow. There wasn't a hint of worry on his handsome face, or a flutter of mana to show he was preparing a spell.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, Matthew." He gestured him to take a seat. "It's your room."

Then why are you in it?

Left without a better option, Kai sat at the very end of his cot, rigid like a block of wood. The air felt unbearably stuffy. He dried his sweaty palms on the sheet, keeping his fingers spread to avoid fidgeting.

"You can relax. I don't mean any harm to you." Oraine smiled reassuringly. He took out an obsidian pearl speckled with gold from nowhere.

Kai took a second to realize the flecks of gold were a network of minute lines and symbols. They weren't in any of the runic alphabets he knew, though he recognized the mana web that covered the room: a privacy ward—the most elaborate he had ever seen.

Not creepy at all.

Layers of hidden functions were hidden within the foreign enchantments. He bet no one would hear a thing even if he were to scream and bang his fists on the door.

"I thought we'd better have some discretion for this conversation." Oraine brushed it off and pocketed the pearl. "The arrays of this ship are quite abysmal."

Why does that sound like serial killer talk?

“What do you want?”

“Just to avoid any misunderstanding. It was you who inquired about me with the other survivors of the *Intrepid*.” Oraine bit his lip, the first sign of hesitation. “I thought it’d be easier if we were straightforward. I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

Hmm... Is this all a ruse? I guess it doesn't matter at this point.

Kai released his hold on Water mana. If the teen had done half of what he suspected, fighting would only worsen his position. “If you don't want to alarm someone: try not turning up in their room in the middle of the night.”

“Mhmm... I thought you’d have avoided me otherwise. There wasn’t any other place for a private talk on this ship.”

You can bet on it.

“I’m sorry I asked questions behind your back, but some things about your story didn’t make sense.” Kai watched carefully in case the boy took offense at the accusation.

Oraine sat crossed-legged on the lumpy cot and leaned forward with an amused grin. “Really? I thought I did pretty well with it. No one else suspected anything. What gave me away?”

“Well...” Kai mumbled to take time. He hadn’t expected the teen to confess so readily. “The pirate who tried to kill me after the *Intrepid* sank had his throat slit in front of me, and someone dragged me away. When you lied about it, everything else was just a matter of piecing together the clues.”

“I see.” Oraine furrowed his pale brows. “You were bleeding a lot when I saw you amidst the wreckage. When that man tried to choke you, I thought you might not make it if I didn’t act quickly...”

Kai blinked, once more surprised by his frankness. “So it was you!”

“Yeah... wasn’t the point that you had figured it out already?”

“I— yes...” Despite his suspicions, there had been too many missing details to be certain of what had happened. “You saved my life. Thank you...”

Oraine tilted his head and gave him a long, perplexed look. “Flynn did say you were quite odd.”

"It's just..." His face burned fiercely. "Why did you lie about it?"

"I was trying not to attract attention..." Oraine wrapped his arms around himself, looking at the dark sea out of the porthole. "It wasn't something planned. Leaving home, I mean. I just left our convoy to get a break from my mother when a current pushed me toward the storm. When I saw the wreckage, it was obvious the humans using Darkness were the ones who caused it..."

Left his convoy? Did he just jump into the sea? Guess it's my fault for using the Fulcrum...

"Who are you exactly?" Kai asked, unable to suppress his curiosity.

Oraine snapped out of his stupor, perhaps realizing he had said more than he meant. "It's complicated."

"Didn't you want to be straightforward?" Kai silently cursed his big mouth. Possible explanations fluttered in his mind, one crazier than the other.

Can he be...

"Hmm... are you also going to tell me who you really are?"

"What?"

"I heard you were a reclusive alchemist, but you and Flynn have also been friends for years." Oraine grinned. "For someone unused to social interactions, you were pretty apt at figuring me out."

"I don't—"

"You've also a spatial artifact on your finger. They should be somewhat rare."

Kai covered his silver ring with the other hand. "How—"

"I was only half sure before you confirmed it." Oraine flashed a pointy smirk. "Sorry, I didn't mean to trick you. It's an old habit."

Well... I'm fucked.

"You're right. I shouldn't have pried into your identity." Kai sagely nodded. This sounded like the perfect opportunity to cut his losses. "If that was everything, I'd like to rest on my bed. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

Oraine looked about to stand up for one beautiful second, then he shook his head and slumped back down. "I'd also like to get to know you better. Flynn said you're also new to the

continental territories of the Merian Republic, perhaps we could explore the town together tomorrow...?”

The bright hazel eyes nailed him with tentative optimism. Kai almost said yes. “I—”

“Of course, there is no commitment,” Oraine rambled. “You’re the closest to my age and grade. So, I thought it could be interesting to explore the town together. To see if it could work.”

Maybe he’s not a serial killer...

An easy path blinked in his mind. Kai could have led along this naive rich boy, and disappeared the next day, but the teen had also saved his life. He at least owed him honesty. “I don’t think that’s a good idea...”

“Oh.” his buoyant face froze into a blank mask. “May I ask why?”

“You made other passengers believe they saw you on the Intrepid.”

“It was the only way to blend in.” He held his gaze with a hopeful glimmer. “I swear it won’t do them any harm. The charm will vanish in a couple of weeks. It will be like nothing ever happened.”

So you say...

“How can I know you won’t mess with my or Flynn’s mind? If you haven’t already.”

“I would never do that!” Oraine stood up, looking livid. His mana fluctuated wildly, and voice choked up “I... sorry, this was a mistake.”

Before Kai could speak a word, the teen stormed out of the cabin faster than he could follow. The steps thumped quickly away, disappearing into the creaking of the old ship.

Why does it feel like I’ve bullied a kid?

Kai couldn’t invite a teen of mysterious origins and powers to join them. Between the Republic and his fake identity, they had enough problems without whatever baggage Oraine carried.

It’s the only sensible choice.

He just hadn’t expected Oraine to react so intensely to his rejection.

I should check on Flynn.

Kai ran out of his room, trying to recall the structure of the ship. What if the boy was upset enough to harm them? He had admitted he could charm people's minds.

A sleepy sailor cursed after Kai when he cut him off to get on the deck. Mana Observer swept ahead of him till he found the familiar signature.

Flynn was playing cards with a mixed group of seamen and passengers. He also spotted him and waved him closer. "Mat, why don't you join us?"

"Maybe later. I need to talk to you. Right now."

"Huh, sorry guys. Looks like I must close it here for tonight." He picked up a dozen pieces of silver from the floor and exchanged quick goodbyes with the group. "It was a pleasure playing with you."

"I thought you didn't have any money," Kai whispered when they were further away.

"Yes, I *didn't*." Flynn winked. "The captain isn't so stingy with her crew, and they wanted to share. Anyway, what's so urgent?"

"Oraine."

"What about Rain?"

"Not here." Kai led him back into his tiny cabin. There were indeed few places to talk aboard the crowded ship.

"What's this?" Flynn picked an obsidian pearl covered in golden enchantments from the sheets of his cot. "It looks expensive."

"It must have fallen from Oraine's pocket." Kai took the item, poking it with a filament of mana till the privacy wards expanded to cover the exact confines of the room.

Neat.

"Shouldn't we give it back?"

"Of course. We can do it tomorrow." *After I've got time to study it. They must have painted these runes with a single hair to get them so small.* "I'd rather not bother him tonight."

Kai recounted his conversation with Oraine, the sudden ambush, the lies he admitted and how he left. There were still several unanswered questions since he hadn't been bold enough to push. "I think we should keep our distance till we reach land... Uh, why are you looking at me like that?"

“Don’t you think you were a little harsh?” Flynn pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on his knee. “He hasn’t done anything to us, except *saving your life*.”

“Yeah,” he lowered his gaze. “But what if one day he gets angry and decides to make us disappear? Who’s going to stop him?”

“Who’s going to stop you if you decide to turn me into a dashing ice sculpture and sell me for profit?” Flynn mimed a pose with his face frozen in dramatic agony.

“That’s not the same thing.” Kai raised his eyes at the antics. “You know me.”

“I know you *now*. But you could have done much the same when we met.” He raised a hand to stop his objections. “Oraine rid us of a group of murderous pirates and didn’t harm anyone else.”

“How can you say that when he messed with people’s *thoughts*? And we still have no idea who or *what* he is. He just popped out in the middle of the ocean!”

“His background can’t be any crazier than yours, can it?” Flynn chuckled. “You’re from another planet altogether, where people communicate across continents with a magical net and glowing boxes.”

“The internet and phones aren’t magic.”

“Yeah, right. You can speak with people thousands of miles away, but it’s *not* magic.” Flynn raised the corner of his mouth and slapped his forehead as if that were obvious. “I assume flying to your *single* Moon wasn’t either. They just built a tall ladder.”

“I didn’t reincarnate with a library in my head. It’s complicated to explain. And that only proves you should have stayed away from me too. It doesn’t change the situation with Oraine.”

“Look, Kai.” Flynn abandoned his cheeky grin. “I know you two aren’t exactly compatible, and I’m not saying we should become best friends with him, but we could hear him out and see how it goes. Sometimes it’s worth taking a chance on people. That’s how we became friends.”

Now you’re playing dirty.

His newly built palace of caution cracked under the unfair assault. Flynn’s reasoning might not be entirely nonsense. If Oraine hadn’t tried anything when Kai accused him of playing with their minds, they probably didn’t run any risk by chatting.

“Tell me. How much of your eagerness to give *Rain* a chance is because he’s obnoxiously pretty?”

Flynn rubbed his stubble with a pensive look. "I'd say about the same amount as you dislike him for being stronger than you."

"I'm two years younger."

I'll catch up!

"Of course you are." The grinning boy leaned to ruffle his hair. "And you also hate the idea of trusting someone without being in complete control."

"I'm not that much of a control freak," Kai grumbled. "...am I?"

Flynn put his index and thumb close to each other. "Just a tiny bit. So, do we talk to Rain to hear him out? If he does anything suspicious, we can ditch him faster than you ditch buying groceries on me."

~ ~ ~

Rain rested his chin on his knees. He fiddled with the bracelet his sisters had gifted him for his sixteenth birthday, a shell to remind him of each of them—Meirylla included.

Why am I so bad at this?

Everything had been going so well. He had managed to break his mother's geas and somehow lose her guardians in the storm. He had even found someone his own age who liked him for *him*, and not for his family or to exact revenge for some millennia-old feud.

All he had to do was befriend one more person, and still, he failed.

Of course humans would be unsettled if they found he could sway their minds. They didn't know the difference between a passing charm or entralling their spirit.

Guess I proved the stereotypes right.

He had done exactly what his mother taught him, swept aside an inconvenience without blinking. It had seemed so natural, easy even. Among the Abyssal Houses, if someone was foolish enough to be charmed or entranced, they would have been laughed off for being weak-minded. There was a reason why he left.

Perhaps Lydiene had been right: swimming to the surface wouldn't solve any problem.

No, that was the best decision of my life.

Every breath of this sweltering air was more freeing than—

A knock made him jolt to his feet, proud he didn't stumble. Despite all his Dexterity, he was still getting used to their weird shape and articulations. No one should disturb him at this hour. He had swayed the captain to leave him this puny room—though he didn't feel particularly bad about her.

Is that wrong?

"Rain?" A familiar voice called. "Are you awake?"

This time he almost tripped to open the door. "Flynn, I don't know what Matthew told you, but I never—" His gaze landed on the shorter boy behind. Self-Mastery barely managed to keep his face from turning ruby red. "I wasn't expecting you. Come in."

Mother would drown laughing if she saw me.

The two friends stepped inside. Flynn flashed a quick smile while Matthew admired the squalor of his quarters with a critical eye.

"Flynn made me realize I might not have been entirely fair when we talked earlier." The suspicious human sat on his bed with a grumpy look. "So I'm giving this one chance."