

## Chapter 126 - Sacrifice

Muffled mutters buzzed in the back of his mind, too faint and confused to make anything out.

*Give me a hint. What do you want me to do?*

Hallowed Intuition refused to give him a straight answer, so Kai turned toward the only person who might know. "What's going on?"

"Lower your voice," Flynn whispered pleadingly, glancing at the ends of the alley. "You need to take your family and leave Sylspring now. You need to trust me, I can't explain."

The murmurs in his head got louder and more insistent, but they still gave him no clue as to the nature of the danger. As if it was everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"What did you do?" Kai grabbed Flynn's arm, forcing him to meet his gaze. The crafty green eyes lit with frantic desperation. "Why do I need to leave?"

"I'm sorry. I can't stop them. There's no time to—." Flynn's gaze shifted behind him.

Hallowed Intuition screamed at him to move as Mana Sense detected a strange glow he had somehow missed.

Kai didn't get the chance to activate any of his skills before darkness swallowed him.

\*\*\*

His head was spinning. The migraine made Kai wish he could go back to sleep. His thoughts had to wade through a swamp of confusion.

*What happened? Where am I?*

Something blocked his sight. A crude wooden floorboard was scratching his arm. He attempted to get up but failed, his hands were stuck behind his back. As he tried to speak, only muffled grunts came out.

Despite the jumbled mess in his mind, the pain was too real to be a dream. His silver ring and satchel were gone, only the cold metal of Virya's amulet still pressed against his chest.

"See, I told you I didn't hit him that hard."

Kai took several seconds to understand what he was saying. It was the voice of a man from the archipelago, but not a familiar one.

As his mind put all the pieces together, panic swept through him with the inevitability of a rising tide.

*Damn, how could this happen?*

He had thought nothing could happen to him in the middle of town, that he could avoid any danger with his skills. He had been such a fool. Mana Sense had failed him and he didn't even fully grasp how Hallowed Intuition worked.

*I should have run at the first whisper.*

"Let me worry about our needs," a cold female voice spoke with authority. "We can't afford to raise their attention when we're this close."

The man grunted. "It was your boy who went to speak with him. Spirits know what would have happened if I didn't follow him."

Kai tried to take off the blindfold to get a glimpse of his surroundings. He couldn't be sure but he might have heard the male voice before. Maybe one of the hundreds he heard around Sylspring.

With his ankles tied, he tried to wiggle when a kick sent him crashing into the wall. Unable to protect himself, he hit face first, screaming into his gag. Fear pierced the haze in his mind, blocking his breath.

"Don't move, you mutt. Thank the ancestors that fool insisted you'd be more useful alive. If it was for me, I—"

"Go back to your duties. Now," the woman hissed. "We can't afford any more mistakes today."

After a brief silence, his steps moved away, followed by the creaking of a door. Kai didn't get the chance to put order through his pounding head. Without a warning, someone hoisted him on a chair and took off his blindfold.

The sudden light made him squint. A spartan room came into focus, the bare walls and crude crates offered no clues of his whereabouts. His attention was taken by the only other person in the room who sat across from him. So close, their knees were almost touching.

A woman no older than his mother, but without a shadow of Alana's warmth. Her hard gaze was framed by an angular face, made up of stern sharp edges.

"I know you must be scared and confused. But if you do as I say, I promise you're going to be fine." Her tone softened with a hint of worry.

The way her features turned warm and gentle was too sudden to be natural. Kai fearfully nodded. Whatever the case, antagonizing his captors before he had any idea what was going on wouldn't be wise.

The woman smiled, a genuine heartfelt ray of sunshine that made Kai want to trust her.

*Fuck, she's dangerous.*

"I'm Maela and I'm here to help you. Your name is Kai, right?"

Kai heightened his surprise with Improvisation. His head was pounding and his thoughts moved at a crawl. All he could do was rely on the skill and hope it would pull him through. He could only formulate a better plan if he was alive to think about it.

"You don't have to be afraid. Remember I'm here to help you, *but* I can only do that if you behave." The sincerity in Maela's voice was like sweet poison.

*Yeah, I beat up and kidnap all the people I want to help too. Somehow they never believe me when I tell them. I really don't know why...*

Trusting Improvisation, Kai showed her the emotions of a lost and scared kid who found his savior.

*Stockholm syndrome here we go.*

Maela brushed his messy hair out of his eyes. When her fingers touched him, Kai fought with his body not to flinch back.

"Now, I'm going to take off your gag. Can you promise me not to scream?"

Kai nodded. He was free to stretch his jaw but remained quiet. With no windows, they might be in a basement anywhere in Sylspring or outside of it, depending on how long he was out. He had no idea if there was anyone who could help him within earshot. And the fact she took the risk made him doubt his chances.

“Where am I? Why have you taken me?”

“I’m afraid you heard something you shouldn’t have. We have worked so hard for this chance that we can’t take any risk. Naturally, there was no need to treat you like that. Some of our members can be... overzealous sometimes,” she said with a regretful expression.

“What’s going to happen today?” Kai prayed to the spirits that Improvisation would sell his naive curiosity. What was so important to risk kidnapping him under the nose of the enforcers?

Maela didn’t seem to mind the question. “The first step in taking back what’s rightfully ours and make the tyrants feel the wrath of Kahali.” Her eyes shone with conviction and fervor.

“You are a smart boy, Kai. You already know who we are, don’t you?”

He considered feigning ignorance, but that might be a step too far. “You’re the rebels.”

“We’re The Voice of the Ancestors,” Maela corrected him. An instant later the annoyance disappeared from her face, replaced by her magnetic intensity. “We are martyrs fighting for the future of our people. We are the warriors bringing the wrath of the spirits on the oppressors who invaded our land!”

*She might have a point.*

“Some of my fellow members think we shouldn’t trust anyone like you,” Maela shook her head like an exasperated mother. “I know that despite the unfortunate conditions of your birth, you felt the crushing heel of the Republic as much as anyone else, didn’t you?”

The woman continued her speech without waiting for an answer. “They’ve taken much from you. Your home, your dignity, and your father. Yes, I know it all. And now the teachers you’ve trusted have left you too,” her hand caressed his face, drying a tear that ran down his cheek.

“I know how painful it’s to lose the ones you love. A part of yourself is wrenched away and there’s nothing that can fill the void. No matter how much time passes, the ache never fades.”

His mind was confused. He didn’t know where his thoughts ended and the woman’s mellow words began.

*The Republic needs to pay.*

“We’ve been observing you for a while. You’ve reached orange grade so young and know how to brew many kinds of potions. We could use someone like you. Don’t you want to help free our people? We can repay the invaders with the justice of the spirits.”

*This is my chance.*

The Republic had always felt untouchable. He was just a powerless kid, but what if it didn’t have to be that way? Joining the rebellion would be the perfect chance to repay them for all the pain they caused.

“But how?” Kai couldn’t help but ask. “How can we beat them? They are so strong.”

Maela’s mouth curved upwards as if she had been waiting exactly for that question. “That’s what they wanted us to believe. That we have no hope of defeating them. But that’s a lie!” Her eyes shone with rightful conviction, though her gaze wasn’t really looking at him.

“Till now we’ve used the wrong approach and lost many good people, but we’ve learned.” She shook her head regretfully.

“How can we defeat them then?”

“Even if they’re powerful, they still have weaknesses and the governor can’t be everywhere.” Maela followed a crescendo. “Today we’ll begin by taking away their money. After Higharbor, Sylspring is the town that attracts more tourists.”

Kai stared in disbelief. “You plan to attack the town?”

“No, silly boy,” Maela threw him a pleased look. “We don’t have the numbers for a frontal assault. And they keep a close watch on us.”

“Then how?” As far as he knew, there was no big pot of gold hidden in the town that they could conveniently steal. The wealth came from businesses and tourism.

“When you amass such wealth, it doesn’t take long before sharks start to smell the prey. We just had to spread the news of such a profitable target with hardly any defenses to find an interested party.” Her face was a picture of happiness.

As his mind cleared up, Kai put together the last piece. No one would be that stupid.

“There have never been pirates in the archipelago,” his voice faltered.

“Not until now.” Maela agreed with a very pleased expression. “They had no reason to come, we were too poor with nothing valuable to steal. But the Republic’s greed will be their downfall. They’ll do the job for us without us needing to lift a finger.”

“What about the people who live in Sylspring?!”

*Can't she see the death a wave of pillaging would cause?*

Her eyes flashed with the manic folly of someone who believed they could do no wrong. “The Broken Sea pirates agreed to leave the population alone in exchange for our help. There might be some unfortunate casualties, but that’s inevitable. The ancestors will see their sacrifice and welcome them with open arms.”

The words that had sounded so convincing shattered like glass. Her warm smile sent shivers down his back.

*She's batshit crazy. It will be a bloodbath.*

“I see you’re still not ready,” Maela said, sounding almost sad. “I know for some it’s difficult to accept the truth.”

*Fucking lunatics.*

Kai was about to drop any pretense and free himself with his magic when the door opened. Two new sets of steps walked behind him.

A sweep of Mana Sense made him freeze in his tracks. The woman in front of him was yellow tier in both race *and* profession, while the people who entered were just a step behind with their race at the peak of orange. Same as him, except for his lack of profession and the undeveloped body.

More signatures pinged him outside the room. Maybe he could have had a chance with his sword, but it was stored in his missing ring.



“Seems like you’re truly good with mana skills. I almost didn’t sense that,” Maela said, then addressed the people behind him. “Make sure he doesn’t try anything funny.”

Kai didn’t get any more time to consider his options. Two pairs of hands had grabbed him. As he opened his mouth to scream, a sour substance was forced down his throat.

The kidnappers forced his mouth shut when he tried to spit it out. Kai struggled desperately without holding back, he couldn’t compete with the strength of adult men. When they were sure he had swallowed, they gagged him with a rag and blindfolded him again.

*Poison? That would be a convoluted way to...*

“Don’t worry, I won’t give up on you. We’ll have more time to talk after everything is done.”

The door was locked after them as they left him on the floor of the room. This was his chance to do something, but he was just so tired. Whatever drug they used it was fast-acting.

*Fucking overzealous fanatics, I need to—*

Kai fought against the slumber for as long as he could. He hardly wiggled on the floor. The effects of the drug were too strong. His racing heart slowed down, then his thoughts. He wanted to use Empower, but he couldn’t remember how to activate the skill.

Darkness took him once more.

\*\*\*

“—shit! I’m so sorry. Damned spirits, I—”

Whispered curses and apologies alternated. Someone was pacing before him, each step resounded through the floorboards like the beat of a drum in his ear. It made his head pulse as if his skull was about to split open.

Each part of his body was heavy, weighed down by an invisible burden. Not that it mattered, even if he were able to move a muscle, his arms and legs were still tightly bound. It had been years since he felt this powerless.

*Shit!*

The irritating drums continued to batter him.

“Can you shut the fuck up! I’m trying to think.” After much convincing, his mouth let out an annoyed grunt.

The steps stopped. And two hands pulled him in a sitting position. The sudden movement made him want to puke.

“You’re awake...” the voice sounded disbelieving. “I’m sorry, I fucked up.”

The voice now was broken by weeping sobbing. And Kai’s brain decided to work enough to identify the familiar voice. Then his blindfold was removed.

“You shithead, stop pitying yourself and give me a hand.” More muffled grunts got the message across.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Finally, Kai could breathe properly. His mouth and throat were dry, but he didn't need them to send a killing glare at the idiot in front of him.

Fury burned through his veins. With his hands tied, Kai was a step from head-butting Flynn's nose. Unfortunately, his body only slowly flopped forward.

*I swear I'll skin you alive and use your insides as fish bait!*

The boy grabbed him before he could hit the floor. Kai tried to speak but only managed a dry cough.

"You must be thirsty, wait a second."

*You bet, shithead. I don't know if they told you, but your accommodations kind of suck.*

Flynn helped him drink from a flask of water.

"I'm sorry this happened." He began to sob again. "The richer districts will take the worst hit and I wanted to warn you. I swear, I didn't think Tridel would follow me."

"What. Did you. Say?" Kai croaked, though already knew the answer. If a crew of pirates came to pillage Sylspring, the raid would focus on the wealthier neighborhoods.

*I need to warn my family. I need to warn them all.*