

Chapter 254 - Confessions

Cold salty gusts buffeted Kai's face, carrying denser mana than anywhere in the Shallow Sea. They weren't sailing through a unique area like the Veeryd Jungle, just a random stretch of ocean. That more than anything made the realization sink in.

He wasn't in the archipelago anymore.

No matter how much he boosted his senses with Body Augmentation and squinted, he couldn't spot a speck of land. There were only churning waves, far darker than the aquamarine waters of his home.

Leaning on the starboard of the *Intrepid*, Kai pushed Mana Observer to its limit without coming close to brushing the seafloor. Occasionally a red or orange marine creature touched his perception. The beasts didn't even notice the ship thanks to its wards.

Everything was so much different from what he was used to, the only thing that came close was the...

Nope! His fingers tightened around the railing. That stupid nightmare had thrown him off balance. *Brain, we're not going there. This is perfectly safe, the—*

"Mat, my boy." Captain Nathumeli walked up to him, curling his mustache. "Staring into the dark depths, eh? Just don't look too deep, or something might stare back at you." The man guffawed, holding his gut.

He's joking, right?

"I'll be careful..." Kai deactivated his skill; he didn't need more fuel to his nightmares.

"Have you thought about my offer?" Nathumeli adjusted the feathered tricorn hat he wore today. "Nothing's freeing like sailing the open seas. And there is plenty of experience and coin to be gained."

"I can't accept." Kai said, not for the first time. "I've already made commitments in Arphusa when we land."

"I see, I see. You're a man of your word. That's good." Nathumeli peered at him with a cunning eye. "Let me know if you change your mind. I can always find a use for a young man of your skills in my crew." The captain marched away, boots snapping on the wood of the deck.

Kai returned to contemplate the waves, determined not to avert his gaze till his guts stopped wrenching. If his subconscious thought it could be more stubborn than him, he was ready to take up the challenge.

I'm not going to be scared of what might or might not lurk in the ocean depths...

“Look at you, already making new friends.” Flynn sauntered beside him, casually leaning with his back on the starboard railing. A crackling static danced between his fingers. He was still in high spirits since raising his Lightning affinity by 6 points to 53 and Shadow by 4 to 58. “I’m so proud.”

“Thanks.” Kai set his gaze on the horizon, the wind whistling in his ears. “Though Nathumeli’s just looking for cheap labor.”

Last night, he had offered to fix the temperature enchantments of the dining hall and brewed a potion for seasickness to stop a lady from vomiting. Any novice alchemist and enchanter could have accomplished the same, but the man had been set on recruiting *him*.

I should drop the naive act...

He had been planning to gradually change Mat’s personality to fit his own. Looking innocent was a double-edged sword. It stopped people from looking too deeply, but it could also invite sharks. A journey to the mainland after a lifetime of isolation would provide an excellent excuse for the transformation.

Flynn twiddled with an enchanted disk that muffled the whistling of the winds and their voice from traveling far. “Nathumeli seems an alright guy as far as seamen go. He just has an eye for bargains. I would offer you advice, but you’re doing pretty well with your new identity.”

“Hmm... am I really?”

“Of course, young Mat. How could you doubt your master?” Flynn puffed his chest. “Even with an acting skill, most people would forget to respond to their name or blurt something they shouldn’t. But I’ve not seen you slip even once.”

I guess I’ve been channeling my old self.

Being often sickly and alone made him quite skittish in his previous life. He must have fallen into the old patterns to interpret Mat, the recluse alchemist. “It was quite easy.”

“From humble to boasting.” Flynn snorted with a crooked grin. “I wouldn’t accept anything less from my apprentice.”

“Hmm... it’s not that. I—” Kai let his eyes wander off the waters.

The muffling enchantment made everything appear distant. Apart from the sailors on duty, most people had taken shelter from the harsh winds below deck. The closest person was the Air blower, a withered old woman who seemed to stand only thanks to the gust she summoned. The white sails of the *Intrepid* were drawn tight, propelling the vessel at a swift speed despite its size.

It’s only going to get more awkward if I tell him in the future...

The matter had been on his mind since Flynn welcomed him back like not a day had passed. With one ear to heed any whispers of warning, Kai made his decision. "It's not the first time I've used this name."

"Huh? What do you mean? Have you already faked your identity before?"

"Not exactly. This isn't the first life I remember..." Kai delved into the circumstances of his second birth and his past life.

The words came in a flood. Afraid that if he would stop he would never get the courage to continue, he rambled about every detail that came to mind till his thoughts were empty.

Kai looked at his friend, readying for his reaction. "Please, say something."

"Uhm," Flynn scanned him from head to toe. "That makes perfect sense."

That wasn't among the reactions he had considered. Kai searched his gaze for any distrustful look, but there was only his usual mischievous glimmer. "Does it...?"

"Yes!" He emphatically nodded. "How else could you become stronger than me unless you cheated? It also explains your weirdness and strange sayings. And I mean it in the best way possible."

Thanks...

"I— I've not cheated. I didn't choose for it to happen."

"Right... Whatever helps you sleep at night, bud." Flynn ruffled his hair with an irritating smile. "But you're most definitely a cheater. I'm quite the expert on the matter."

"You... You're just envious." Kai stammered, unsure how the conversation had gotten there.

"Is that the way to talk to your big brother? I thought I taught you better than that." He covered his eyes with an arm as if he couldn't bear to watch him.

"I'm older than you."

"Are you though?" Flynn stood up to highlight his height advantage. "I'm older than you've ever grown."

"By maybe a few months." Kai rolled his eyes.

I rambled too many details.

"The difference is only going to increase. Besides that, have you ever held a job for more than a couple of months? Curse at the taxes you pay to the Republic? Got a girlfriend? And no, holding hands when you were a toddler doesn't count."

“I’ve—”

“Exactly my point. You’ve never lived as an adult, so I’m still your big brother.” Flynn concluded with a triumphant grin.

Understanding there was no point in arguing, Kai resigned to his logic. His worries about his confession already forgotten. “Fine. But I’m not calling you that.”

* * *

Darkness, his body crushed by overwhelming pressure, furious whispers telling him to run. Kai desperately swam in the direction he hoped was the surface, lungs burning for oxygen.

He had no idea how he got here and no mind to care amidst the growing panic. A suffocating aura of danger froze his blood. Hallowed Intuition yelled at him to flee faster as some humongous monster made the water sway below him.

A pinprick of light shone in the distance. Hope. Salvation. Already exhausted and numb, Kai forced his limbs to paddle faster through sheer force of will. His hands grasped at stringy pale kelps to pull himself up. The glow grew brighter.

Almost th—

A piercing pain shot up in his leg. Something caught him, digging into his flesh and dragging him towards the bottomless depths. Darkness covered the light. Kai struggled to free himself with all his Strength, summoning blades of water and swinging his sword at the monster.

His efforts were useless. Hooks ripped into his torso; screams silenced by the waters till his body grew too heavy to move. Dragged deeper. And deeper...

I can’t—

Kai flailed in his bed, heaving for breath. The sheets were drenched in cold sweat. He searched for the phantom wounds, gloom and death still lingering in his thoughts.

Another fucking nightmare.

His fists clenched, but there was nothing he could punch. He slammed his hand on the control disk to increase the temperature of his cabin and drive away the cold from his bones.

“Why can’t they leave me the fuck alone—”

The cabin suddenly tilted, the enchanted wood of the *Intrepid* creaking around him. Kai slammed his hands down, nearly smacking his skull on the floorboards. The foreboding feeling in his head wasn’t just the dregs of a nightmare, but murmurs of danger.

Just what I needed.

He quickly put on a shirt and went outside, leaning against the wall as the ship slanted in the opposite direction. The narrow corridor was filled with the cries of the other passengers wondering what was going on.

Flynn stumbled out of his cabin with a head of messy hair and only one boot. "What's going on?" He yelled over the clamor.

"Nothing good." Kai made his way through the panicking group, determined to find someone who could answer. More and more passengers poured in his path till he was pressed against a wall, forced to push with his back against the crowd to not crush a little girl who got lost in the chaos.

"Silence." A commanding voice thundered, carrying the weight of a powerful skill. The mass of people fell in line, the quiet only disturbed by pained moans and the groans of the ship.

Captain Gestulf Nathumeli stood on the stairs to the deck as if the floor tilting below him was no concern. "It's just a little rough sea, gents. Nothing to worry about. The *Intrepid* has survived far worse mana storms. Please, remain in your cabins and let my crew do their job."

"I didn't pay a silver ticket for this treatment!" A woman wearing a nightgown embroidered with roses stood from the crowd. "How long are we expected to stay in the storm?"

"However long is necessary to assure the safety of the vessel." Nathumeli silenced her with a glare. "That was everything, gents. Anyone who endangers my crew with their reckless behavior better be a great swimmer." He left without giving them another chance to reply.

A pair of drenched sailors blocked anyone from following. The veil of calm lasted two split seconds before another salvo of fruitless demands broke it.

Kahali bless me, I'm not dying in a stupid storm.

Throwing a sympathetic glance at the duo holding back the crowd, Kai joined the group of passengers streaming back into their cabin. Despite his frustration, there was nothing he could do to help. He was no sailor, and he certainly had no idea how to steer a ship of this size. He briefly chatted with Flynn before they both retired back to their cabin.

Whispers swirled in his head, just loud enough to prevent any chance of sleep. His stomach clenched each time the *Intrepid* tilted while his mind conjured countless scenarios where the ship sank, drowning him.

By the time the storm settled, dawn had already risen. Kai resigned himself to survive on a couple hours of rest. The ship stank of vomit outside his cabin. Apparently, reaching Orange and Yellow didn't make people immune to nausea, though that wasn't what bothered him.

I must have used all my luck to get the ID...

Flynn merrily devoured a plate of sausages and scrambled eggs in the dining hall. "You look like crap," he greeted.

"Thanks." Kai combed a hand through his unruly locks. "Have you seen the captain?"

"Hmm, he should be on the quarterdeck, though it might be better if you wait to see him. He wasn't in a great mood after the mess in the cabins."

"I'll take the risk." Kai walked outside, the crisp morning breeze blowing in his face. He squinted in the bright light to reorient himself.

"Wait for me!" Flynn hurried after him, cheeks full like a squirrel. "Whwy... dow 'ou... need him?"

"They're not getting better."

"Ou mean...?"

"The whispers. I thought they would quieten once the storm had passed, but they're still there. A little louder."

Flynn beat his chest to gulp down the food. "Should I worry?"

"I don't know, maybe? It could be nothing, but we're moving straight to it." He finally spotted a feathered hat and headed toward it.

Hallowed Intuition was particularly stingy with details. Not all warnings realized or indicated a deadly danger. It could be another storm or a green beast that might or might not cross their path. Being hundreds of miles from any land, Kai wasn't inclined to take the risk if he could avoid it. "Captain. May I speak with you?"

Nathumeli turned toward him and half softened his scowl. "Young Mat, have you decided to accept my offer?"

"No, I—."

"That's a pity." His expression darkened. "I'd love to chat, but the storm pushed us two days off course. And you must have smelled the other passengers."

"It will take just a second." Kai stepped in his way, quickly making up his mind. "I've got a skill that's telling me we're heading straight into danger."

The man stopped to study him before clapping his back with a fond smile. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but danger skills are notoriously unreliable at sea. Trust me, I've got quite a high-levelled one myself." Nathumeli winked. "The mana storm must have messed with yours. It happens. But we must reach Arphusa in a timely manner."

Kai could only stand there as the captain went to talk to his crew. He hadn't expected they would turn the ship around for him, not without a careful interrogation of his skill, but to be so thoroughly dismissed...

Dammit.

Flynn raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. "Don't hate me, but he might be right. He knows the sea better than us. My Hunch has been acting weird since the storm."

"Yeah, maybe." Kai crossed his fingers. If the captain didn't want to listen, insisting would get him nothing. And he couldn't just leave or swim away.

"Why don't you go get breakfast? It's quite good and an empty stomach won't do you any good."

"I'm not hungry." The idea of food made him nauseous. "I'll stay here for a while."

"Then I'll wait with you."

Kai was about to say it wasn't necessary, though some company might help his nerves. "Thanks."

They found a place to sit near the prow, perusing the cloudy horizon. The whispers continued to loom, persistent without ever reaching the worried heights he experienced daily in the Sanctuary.

Kai was about to accept Nathumeli was right when a shout rose from the sailor in the crow's nest. "Pirates!"