

Chapter 264 - The House of Mirrors

Steel-blue walls and windows bordered in black made the House of Mirrors stand out from its neighbors. Walking closer, dense patterns of runes swirled and faded to dissuade snoopers. Kai wasn't sure he'd be able to crack them without seeing their physical anchor.

"I always wanted to visit a place founded by one of the Three Sisters," Rain mused.

The siren had grown his land legs and regained his sunny glow. Wearing an embroidered cobalt coat with silver lapels, a silk shirt and cream breeches, he'd received many looks from passersby; a couple girls even came forward to ask his name.

He'd turn heads in a burlap sack. Guess a siren just can't help it.

In their stroll from the shop of Madame Le Garde, it became obvious how the new outfit changed locals' perception of them from mendicant to rich tourist. The guards greeted them and stepped aside to let them pass. Kai wasn't sure how they would contact Valela and was too embarrassed to ask since even fish boy seemed to know.

There hadn't been time to gather information between catching up with his family and setting up his new identity. It wouldn't have been a problem if they had arrived in Arphusa as planned. Matthew didn't know anything either, so he could learn everything while keeping his cover.

Things never go as planned.

"Looks like it's still open." Flynn walked up the onyx steps of the building. He had opted to wear black and grey to slip into Shadow, though the fit of the fine fabric still distinguished him.

A grizzled doorman in a blue uniform let them inside with a slight bow of the head.

Hmm... Madame Le Garde was right. Tailoring does make a difference...

Their steps echoed into a large hall. A crystal chandelier lit the interior, keeping the same color pattern as the outside facade. Strangely, there were no mirrors that Kai could see. On his right, sets of leather armchairs and sofas formed a cozy lounge where a young couple and an old man sat reading a book.

"Good evening, sirs." A young woman with raven hair and blue eyes stood behind a black marble counter. She wore a polite smile, although her gaze faltered on Rain. "Welcome to Varsea's House of Mirrors. How may I assist you?"

Flynn rested his hand on the desk. "Hi, we need to contact a friend in Raelion—Valela Hightide. She should have set an open link for Flynn Soveili," he said without a hint of hesitation.

“One moment. Let me check our archive.” The receptionist sent her mana on an onyx slab behind the counter. A myriad of filaments and runes flared to life, forming strings of white words.

The angle of the slab made it hard to read. Kai realized he was leaning over when the marble pushed against his sternum. He hurriedly stepped back. The last time he had seen such intricate design was in Virya’s puzzle box. Unfortunately, he wasn’t in the archipelago anymore. He couldn’t use Mana Observer and hope to go unpunished; the clerk was clearly trained in mana skills.

Spirits, she’s fully into Yellow.

“Here, Valela Hightide.” The woman nodded. “I see your contact has paid to be alerted for any incoming communication. Do you wish to leave a message, set a date, or wait to be contacted?”

Flynn glanced at Kai to confirm before speaking. “We can wait. When does this establishment close?”

The receptionist looked amused. “The House of Mirrors is always awake to connect our clients across the continent. Do you wish to rent a waiting room or stay here in the lounge?”

“Uhm. Those armchairs look quite comfortable. Thank you.”

“Of course. Please make yourself at ease. You’ll be informed as soon as your recipient is available. We also offer different kinds of refreshments. Our staff is always available to make your stay as comfortable as possible.”

After another round of pleasantries, they sat around a coffee table engraved with a privacy ward. Kai gladly slumped into an armchair and noticed a small service bell beside the rune array.

They must charge a pretty chip.

“Are you very close with this girl?” Rain leafed through the pamphlet of overpriced refreshments.

Flynn chuckled. “Why don’t you ask Mat?”

“Huh?” Kai straightened up to look at him. *Is this about how much we should reveal?*

“Valela’s a friend who helped me with some stuff at home. We were planning to meet her before the *Intrepid* sank. She offered to help us settle here.”

“I see. She sounds like a great person.” The siren exchanged a look with Flynn.

What's this about?

Too tired to play their game, Kai decided to change the subject and dig for new information. "Do sirens also have a House of Mirrors?"

Do you really have underwater cities at the bottom of the ocean? Or do they float on the surface?

"They once opened a branch in Arelia, but they shut it down before I was born," Rain said. "The mana currents within the sea interfere with most of their mirror magic. But the other two Sisters have a presence."

The siren must have noticed their blank stare because he continued, "The *Three Sisters*? They're some of the most famous archmagi to have ever lived. Or still living if you listen to some."

"I think I heard someone mention them..." Flynn didn't sound entirely confident. "One of them founded the House of Enlightenment, right? We went there when I discarded my first profession."

I should have guessed from the overpriced refreshments. The name sounded a little familiar...

Rain sat with one knee up. "That House was founded by the oldest sister. They're quite mysterious figures. They've each invented a new school of magic and opened successful businesses across the tamed lands and seas. Everyone knows about their legendary feuds."

"The archipelago is quite isolated," Kai said, wondering what other piece of common knowledge he lacked. "What did the last sister do?"

"The youngest opened the House of Echoes. It *mainly* deals with highly sensitive information." The siren lowered his voice. "They're said to have secrets that could transform the face of Elydes. Mother says it's the most successful House. But they're hated by certain kingdoms and their establishments tend to be more discreet."

Do they sell dirt on the elites?

The last thing Kai needed was to have a bunch of professional snoopers after him.

Rain rang the service bell to summon a server. To his credit, the man only blinked once when the siren took out an orange chromium. "I'll pick this citrus salad, the velvet shrimps, and the forest tarts. Oh, and one of each of these." He quickly pointed to most of the items on the pamphlet. "Do you guys want anything?"

Flynn threw a glance at the prices before curtly shaking his head.

“No, thank you.” Kai followed suit, his old frugal self was appalled at the expense.

Guess money has never been a consideration for him. I mean, it's still less than what he was willing to spend on that squirrel...

“I thought it'd be useful to exchange some money to the local currency,” Rain said when the server was gone. “Anyway, you never told me you changed your profession. You didn't like it?”

“It's a long story. I got pressured by my mother to take it,” Flynn bit his lip. “My family is *complicated...*”

“I'm sure she can't be worse than mine.”

Oh, boy...

Flynn and Rain took turns recounting anecdotes from their childhoods as if it was a competition. In some morbid twist of Fate, both mothers specialized in manipulating others. It gave Kai a newfound appreciation for Alana and his family.

I should have said how much I love them before leaving.

“Have I told you about my first friend?” Rain chewed a crunchy tart. “I was ten when I met this kid, Peile. Our birthdays were only days apart. We were the same height and even had similar affinities. His family had recently fallen from the peerage, but he was very talented, and I didn't care.

“I was overjoyed to have found a friend that wasn't ten times my age. Growing up, I was always pretty isolated because of my family situation. Peile and I did everything together. Play, study, eat and often sleep in the same room. We kept no secret from each other. Anything I liked, he liked too. Even my obsession with collecting old leviathan horns—not the whole thing, just a few shards. I woke up everyday flapping with happiness...”

Rain's smile turned rueful. “Then one day my mother gave me a shiny golden bottle. She said it was a game to test our bond. I just had to open the potion in Peile's presence and we'd both have to tell the truth till the effect wore out. It was a harmless prank. I don't remember how, but she convinced me to follow her idea. After all, Peile and I hid nothing from each other...” He paused, taking a sip from a drink that was all ice.

Flynn leaned on the edge of his seat. “What happened next?”

“Was he just using you?” Kai asked.

“Hmm... It was worse than that.” The siren pulled both legs up in his seat. “I clearly remember Peile's confusion when the golden potion covered us. And then the look of pure disgust that appeared on his face.

“I explained it was just a game and asked him what was wrong. Peile said looking at me made him sick. He found me pathetic and revolting. My family had ruined his parents.” Rain gazed emptily at the coffee table. “He only pretended to be my friend because my mother promised them mercy in exchange.”

“I was in shock. I told him something must have been wrong with the potion. Peile laughed madly, saying that every moment we spent together was torture for him. Every night, he prayed for the Deep to devour my soul and the gods knew he wasn’t lying.”

The siren’s voice turned dry. “I swam away, bawling my eyes out. I was surprised no one asked me what was wrong. Every guard and servant just watched me with pity. You see, everyone but I had known what was going on for months.” The siren laughed bitterly. “My mother had ordered them to silence, and no one dared to disobey her for my sake. Even the people who nursed me, my tutors and mentors. The sirens who had brought me up. Not a *single* one of them gave me a hint. I had no friends in that place at all.

“I cried for hours alone in my chamber till my mother came to console me. By then, I was too distraught to push her away. She said everything she did was because she loved me more than anything. It was a lesson to teach me not to give away trust so easily. People would always try to take advantage of me because of who I was. It was better to have my heart broken now than stabbed by a blade later.”

Spirits! That’s so fucked up. Kai was frozen in his seat, wanting to say something to console him, but not knowing what.

Flynn broke the silence with a long string of descriptive expletives. “I’m sorry you had to go through that alone.” He put a hand on the siren’s shoulder.

“It happened years ago. I’m over it.” Rain wore his usual charming smile, though his gaze still looked distant. “My mother did teach me a valuable lesson. I never trusted anybody in that house again. It was better to have my heart broken than to live in a delusion.”

Those shouldn’t be the only two options.

The receptionist respectfully waving outside their privacy ward saved them from more awkwardness. When she was sure she got their attention, she stepped inside. Her gaze lingered on the siren just a moment before speaking. “Your contact in Raelion is ready to speak with you. If you would follow me. A room has been prepared for the connection.”

“I’ll wait here.” Rain nibbled one of the remaining tarts. “I’m sure your friend will prefer to speak with you without a stranger.”

“It’s really not a problem,” Kai was surprised to hear his voice speak up. “And you’re not a stranger.”

“Thank you, Mat. Maybe next time you can introduce us.” He waved them to go.

“Okay.”

“We won’t take long.” Flynn squeezed his shoulder.

They followed the woman past the front desk into a corridor lit by a winding line of blue crystals. “In here.” She opened a black door for them.

An elderly clerk with a placid expression waited inside. The square room had no windows, the only decor was three empty chairs and a large oblong mirror, floating inches from the opposite wall. A dozen wards snapped closed behind them when they crossed the threshold.

The place thrummed with enchantments and the mirror still overshadowed them. To his skill, it looked like a depthless pool of mana contained in a thin surface. The mind-bending effect reminded Kai of Space Magic, though he couldn’t see a speck of iridescent mana. There was no sign of engraving anywhere on the material despite being obviously enchanted.

“It’s quite mesmerizing, isn’t it?” The clerk looked at him pleased.

“Yes.” Kai moved closer to study it. “I’ve never seen anything like it. How does it work?”

“Ehe!” The clerk chortled. “You only wish for the biggest secret of the House? The Moons know, I’d kill for the answer.”

“You don’t know?”

“I know how to make it work,” the man tersely said. “The connection has already been established. Tap the mirror twice to begin communication and again to close it. You won’t be disturbed till you open the door. Remember the House charges every second of use.” With his rehearsed piece done, the clerk walked out, closing the door behind him.

Since Flynn looked as baffled as him, Kai went ahead and delicately tapped the cold surface of the mirror. Shadows clouded the reflective surface then faded to the edges to let color fill the center. A girl in a red and silver uniform paced in a room identical to theirs.

Upon seeing the mirror change, Valela hurried over, every shade of her emerald eyes and the slight redness of her cheeks in perfect clarity. It was as if they were looking through a window, just a step away.

“Kai! You’re alive.” She moved closer to the mirror till her breath fogged the surface. “I was so worried. How did you get to Varsea?”

“It’s a bit of a long story. Our ship was attacked by pirates, and we had to improvise...”

“Pirates? In those waters?” She furrowed her brow. “You must tell me everything. Were you hurt?”

“No, we’re fine—”

Flynn threw an arm over his shoulder with a grin and a cheerful wave. “Hey! I’m here too. Were you not worried about me?”

“I— of course.” She took a step back with her usual poise. “I’m glad that you’re both alive and well. I didn’t know what to do when the *Intrepid* didn’t show up in Arphusa.”

Kai’s heart skipped a beat. “Did you tell my family?” Panic wrenched his guts at the idea of letting them go through another disappearance.

“Not yet. I had given you one more day to be certain it wasn’t just an unforeseen delay.” Valela said, her lips pressed into hesitation. “There is something else you should know. It’s about Kea. She might be chasing after something dangerous.”