

## Chapter 137 - Truth and Ignorance

Flynn cleared his throat to announce his presence before approaching the desk. "I've finished to copy and organize last year's reports on fishermen's accidents, sir."

The officer jolted awake opening his eyes wide and sitting up straighter. He was old, as old as people got in the archipelago, and close to retirement. He proudly sported the soaring hawk crest on his chest. His gray uniform was pristine like his trimmed beard streaked with white.

The senior clerk's eyes darted to the paper in his hand, intently reading before settling down on him. He deliberately put down his quill as if to say he better have a good reason to disturb him. "What do you need?"

Flynn did his best to appear oblivious to the man's napping and repeated his words.

"Have you put them in alphabetical order?" The clerk sneaked a glance at the clock behind him. "That is from the first letter of the alphabet to the last."

*So that's what that word means? It's too hard of a concept for me. I thought it by the most pointless.*

"I did, sir. I triple-checked to make sure there were no mistakes, sir," Flynn lowered his head, cowering under his superior's gaze and stealing a glance at the document on the desk. It was the same sheet of paper he had seen three hours ago, a list of the yearly yield of beets, turnips and cabbages.

"I'll check them later to ensure there are no errors. You are done for the day. Good work, kid." With a dignified nod, he went back to study his document. He massaged his temples as if the future of the Merian Republic depended on his decisions.

“Thank you, sir,” Flynn gave a slight bow of the head and left.

*What am I doing?*

According to the official customs that had been drilled into him during his education, bowing wasn't required except in official ceremonies and few other circumstances. Still, senior officers always liked it when he made them feel important.

The more incompetent they were the more they liked a bit of flattery. And if they were over forty and had been stationed in the archipelago outside of Highharbor, chances were they weren't misunderstood geniuses.

Not that he complained. That had made getting his hands on documents he shouldn't have known existed all the easier. Though lately, he had to stop snooping around. Many new faces and personnel had popped up after the raid. Contrary to the old geezers, these newcomers wouldn't be outsmarted by a clam.

Nothing to worry about just yet. The pirates had burned down one archive and made a mess of the others. Flynn had been careful, there were no clues to find, none that would lead up to him anyway. Now, even when his superior mistakenly passed him reports he shouldn't see, he promptly sent them back.

*What am I doing?*

His body went through the motions carried by skills and habits. He smiled, bowed his head and scraped like a good boy eager to please his boss. His swelling revulsion was buried so deep not a shadow showed even when no one was watching.

Outside the office department, the breeze carried the smell of salt and fish. Large puddles on the streets rapidly shrunk under the summer sun. The weather didn't improve his mood by much.

*Where to go?*

He had been given a small room in the government building in poshtown for half his salary. The idea of those claustrophobic four walls with no windows led him in the opposite direction, toward the sea.

“Hey!” Two kids in blue uniforms waved at him from across the street. Selui and Tolo had also graduated from the Republic’s scholarship program. Flynn waved back with a smile and deftly freed himself from the small talk.

*What am I doing?*

He might get a transfer to a different position if he tried. After graduation, he had been offered a job more in line with his skills. He had chosen to work as an assistant in Sylspring to stay close to his little sister. Their mother had *officially* died of a bad fever three years prior. Without any other adult in the family, he was a blank slate ready for the Republic to fill.

Now that his sister had *officially* gone to live with distant relatives in a small village on Katol, asking for a transfer wouldn’t raise suspicion. That had been the original plan—in case he wasn’t discovered and executed for treason first.

Flynn remembered a time when the idea of infiltrating into the Republic ranks had been exciting. He hadn’t had any doubts. He would find its weaknesses and help bring justice for his dad’s murder. He’d make his mother smile again, a true smile, like when his dad was still with them.

Guided by a purpose, everything had been simple and clear. He knew who he was and what he needed to do. Now everything was a mess.

*There is no going back. Not anymore.*

All his certainties had crumbled. His head only knew chaos. He desperately clung to the mask he built, knowing that if he stopped going through the motions he would shatter. Only the spirits could say how long it would take to get up again, if ever.

*They're all the same.*

It was ironic really. It had been those dumb lessons about loyalty to the Merian Republic that caused the first cracks. Countless lessons about their generosity and all the good and wonderful things they brought to the archipelago. What a gift it was to be part of such a great country. They should be proud to have been personally selected for that program.

Flynn had a hard time keeping in the laughter during the first class. How could anyone believe something so stupid? Most of his classmates agreed and joked about it. However, little by little, his peers stopped making fun of what they were taught.

After a month they began to actually believe and repeat that nonsense with fervent eyes. Flynn couldn't understand, but it was fine. He had his mission and his mother had warned him how weak people fell for the lies of the Republic and betrayed the archipelago.

When he got back home that year, he was praised for his courage and reminded of the importance of their mission. They had been chosen to free their homeland.

The words were different, but he recognized the same fervent light in his sister's eyes.

Without a second thought, he squashed any doubt. Obviously, the two things couldn't be more different. The Voice of the Ancestors was fighting for justice, their actions were blessed by the will of the spirits.

Still, the seed of doubt had been planted. It poked at him at inconvenient moments, made him realize details and similarities he would have otherwise missed. Each time he went back home, his mind couldn't help but compare what he saw and heard.

No, they weren't the same, but could he say they were entirely different? They had both lied to him, and neither cared what it took as long as they got what they wanted.

*What does it matter now? I'm screwed with both.*

He needed time to think but he couldn't afford to run away. The investigation of the raid had officially been closed, the guilty pirates captured and executed. Though Flynn hadn't missed how the new faces in Sylspring asked questions and observed everything with keen eyes.

*Even without proof, each islander will be a suspect.*

The cheery bustle of town pressed down on him, he never minded it before, now he found it suffocating. Each person seemed to be stealing glances at him. Flynn headed toward the southern gate with all the calm he could muster. He needed a quiet place to think and breathe.

Even if no one suspected him, he couldn't stay with the Republic. The only reason he joined was to get information to report back. And he wasn't going to help plan another raid that would hurt the governor as much as the islanders.

There was a limit to how many conceited idiots he could tolerate, especially without a good reason to endure. At the same time, he couldn't go back to the Voice. The rebels must suspect he had helped Kai escape and kill Tridel. His mother *couldn't* protect him from that.

*What am I going to do?*

Even more ironically, he now understood why people believed such nonsense and lies. He'd give everything to have his certainties back. For his life to make sense once more.

All he had left was a fistful of sand, nothing. No path forward, no place to go back. The people he met with the Republic only knew the facade he put forth. And he could count on

one hand the times he met his friends with the Voice in the last years. No, they were more likely to try to kill than help him.

Alone, until he broke down and started screaming about the insanity of the world. Then somebody would kill him and put an end to it.

*If I hadn't helped him, I'd still have something to cling to...*

Flynn had known there would be a price to help Kai, not that it would be so steep.

*Damn him and me both, I'd probably do it again.*

At least he had done something good. That had to count for something before the ancestors, right?

Once he had seen through the veil of lies, there had been no going back. He couldn't look the other way from what and *who* was sacrificed to fulfill the Voice's mission. He only had to close his eyes to see the bodies that had filled Sylspring and smell the acrid smoke of the burning buildings.

He would never choose ignorance. Though he did wish the truth didn't suck so much.

*What am I going to do?*

"Flynn?"

The voice pulled him out of his musings. As if summoned by his thoughts, a kid with penetrating gray eyes stood before the southern gate. Kai was a head shorter than him, but he always managed to make it feel like he was the one looking down from above.

A pensive expression occupied his face. "Do you have a minute? I need your opinion."

Without waiting for an answer, Kai grabbed his arm and dragged him through the gate. The enforcer on duty just gave them a passing glance. Even if he reported back, the Republic already knew they were acquainted with each other, though Flynn had done his best to minimize the extent of their relationship.

*He could at least say pretty please if he needs something.*

Kai let go of his arm but didn't slow down, continuing to mutter under his breath like he was trying to solve an impossible dilemma.

"What do you need?" Flynn hurried to keep pace with him. "Can't stay a day without me, can you?"

Kai motioned toward the shoreline. The tide was higher than average, but the moons hadn't pulled enough water for a proper high tide. This side of Sylspring had always been quiet, after the raid, barely anyone came here.

The heat of the sand underneath their shoes, waves crashed and sent droplets flying in the breeze.

The last time they met, their talk had ended abruptly. Mostly due to his sour mood, Flynn recognized. He couldn't help him and then get mad at him for the consequences.

*It was my own choice.*

Though it irritated him that the kid seemed completely oblivious to his current plight.

*Not like he could help even if he knew.*

Kai's casual behavior helped him forget his problems. With only them and the sea, he could pretend the world was whole again.

They walked at least a mile before his mage friend was satisfied with the distance and paid him attention. Flynn understood caution very well, but this was excessive.

*And I thought I was the paranoid one.*

“So, what’s the problem that requires my boundless wisdom and walking to the other edge of the island, Your Majesty?”

Flynn expected Kai to roll his eyes at the moons or reply with a snarky remark, neither happened. Kai looked straight at him, dead serious.

“What does your profession give you?”

Flynn couldn’t believe his thick skin to ask such a question. Kai was always so damn mysterious with his own skills and abilities. How could he ask him that?

Reading his expression, Kai rephrased it. “Not necessarily yours in particular, what does an average profession give?”

“Do you want to know more about professions to weigh your options?”

*Why can't the kid talk straight?*



“It’s a bit early for you, but sure, Uncle Flynn will share his wisdom. All at the low, low price of a single silver.”

Kai’s eyes widened slightly before he mentioned getting paid. That part was a joke anyway.

*What’s up with him? Is this a new way to mess with me?*

“Yeah...” Kai nodded a bit too quickly. “That would be *extremely* helpful for when I have to choose.”

*Maybe I should have asked for two silvers. Seems like he’s feeling generous today. I could use the money if I need to run away.*

Unsure if he was truly getting paid, Flynn did his best to recall the lessons he got at the scholarship camp in Hawkfield. Half were nonsense, the other half contained something useful beneath the layers of windy words.

“Professions give three benefits: attributes, skills and boons.” He mimicked the air of one of his haughty teachers. “Boons you can forget till Orange or Yellow, Red professions don’t give any. As for skills, most people get one, while a few very *exceptional* individuals get two.”

Kai nodded along. He didn’t seem overly impressed by his knowledge. Probably his fancy teachers had already told him some of it.

“As for attributes, in the archipelago, people consider one stat point per level the average. To get below one, you really need to have fucked up and lazed around a lot.” Flynn wanted to tease him, but Kai made it so hard. Knowing him, the chances the kid would get a bad profession were below none.

“One and a half points is the sign you’ve put effort in improving your race and skills, above that are true *geniuses*.” Flynn grinned cheekily, receiving a flat stare response. Kai didn’t even blink, just waiting for him to continue.

“*Anyway*, the Republic has higher standards. You need to gain two stats per level to be considered talented. Those are the basics, but it’s more complex than that.

“Some professions with higher attributes offer only one skill slot or vice versa. It’s not always a straightforward choice and you need to consider what they actually do. Rare professions are considered better even if they give lower benefits, though not all of them are useful.”

Strolling along the shoreline, Flynn gave his best overview, recalling all the details from those mind-numbing lessons.

“I see.” Kai had a thoughtful look. Not properly impressed—as he should be—but Flynn knew that was the best he would get.

“Why the sudden interest?”