

Chapter 161 - Strange Events

Alarmed shouts and murmurs rang from outside.

“You don’t think it’s connected, do you?” Flynn voiced what they were both thinking, backing off from the silver disk.

“I don’t know.” Kai deposited the strange artifact into his ring, careful not to press another hidden switch. Better if he didn’t touch it until he knew more.

The window in his bedroom overlooked a narrow side alley. There was a cloud of dust and the rapid shuffling of people towards the main street. No sign of what had caused the crash.

Only one way to find out...

Kai put on his shoes as he ran to the front door with Flynn on his heels. A small crowd had gathered across the street for the commotion. All eyes were focused on a pile of rubble lit by the cold crystal lamplights. No one was looking in their direction.

They squeezed between the group of gawkers to get a better look. Wood, stone and scraps of concrete lay scattered. A whole storefront and part of the wall had collapsed, revealing slivers of turned shelves and goods. Before the ruined shop, a middle-aged woman frantically dug through the rubble.

Kai recognized the bright red and yellow paint on the wooden debris, pieces of the *Secret Crafts* sign he walked past each day. It sold silver-plated keepsakes and odd souvenirs that had as much to do with the archipelago as a cube of ice. Stores like this were a dime a dozen in High Harbor and rarely held anything of value.

“It was a shoddy job. I told them so, but did they listen? No, obviously not. All that mattered was that it was cheap.” An old man with a gray mustache grumbled to no one in particular. “These rookies think my job is easy, and they can do the same, and this is....”

Kai let the rambles fall into the background, his attention caught by the woman trying to lift the rubble. The hem of a blue skirt poked out of a wooden plank.

Shit, is somebody down there?

Three people from the crowd helped the woman dig in the debris. With a grunt of effort, they lifted the largest remaining piece of the sign, stone and concrete still attached. The middle-aged woman rushed to pull out a young girl. “Ellie, baby, are you hurt? Mama is here.”

The girl stared at the crowd with a dazed expression, not helped by her mother shaking. She was likely in a state of shock, but there was no visible wound on her. After a few seconds, she squeezed a few words through the barrage of her mother’s, standing on her own two legs. A chorus of relieved gasps crossed the crowd. Apart from the dust on her clothes, she was entirely unscathed, not so much as a scrape or bruise.

“The Moons must have protected her.”

“It’s a miracle no one got hurt.”

“Bless the spirits.”

Kai pulled back from the crowd toward his house, trying to parse his jumble of thoughts. No building had fallen on him, but he mirrored the girl’s confusion.

No, this can’t have anything to do with me.

It was a weird coincidence, it *had to* be. There was no other connection between the silver disk and a poorly constructed facade collapsing. It didn't make any—

Flynn roughly pushed him with full strength. Kai flew a meter back landing on his butt on the paved street. He didn't have time to curse before a ceramic vase crashed with a sharp clatter.

Heads turned in his direction, attracted by the noise. Flynn crouched beside him. "Are you okay? Sorry for the shove, you looked too lost in your thoughts to react."

"I'm fine." Kai stood up, massaging his backside, better that than a cracked skull. "Thanks for the help."

The back of the crowd shifted their attention to them, muttering prayers to gods and spirits alike. Demanding to know what was going on, a squad of enforcers made their way through the mass of gawkers.

What the fuck is happening?

"I told you not to drink so much," Flynn shook his head disapprovingly and dragged him into another alley in the opposite direction. The enforcers were more interested in the collapsed building. Better not to reveal they lived across the street.

Why didn't Hallowed Intuition warn me?

He had been distracted, but the whispers were proportional to the danger, and he had risked having his head split open if he was hit at the wrong angle. While he might have survived, thanks to his Constitution reinforcing his bones, the warning bells should have blared like High Harbor on Founding Day.

"What's going on?" Flynn hissed when they were sure no one was following. "One can be a coincidence, but two?"

“Punch me if I know—,” Kai tripped forward, his foot caught on a bump in the ground. He came close to meeting the ground a second time and regained his balance by clutching a discarded table conveniently lying in the alley.

The culprit was a black silk purse half buried in the dirt. The pouch jiggled with coins when he picked it up. Checking the contents, Kai counted *sixteen* silver mesars into his palm.

“The fuck is going on?” Flynn exclaimed both awe and fear. “Cause something *is* happening. Didn’t your teacher tell you what that thing does?”

Kai shared his feelings. “No, she only said it was priceless and would be useful to me. I mean, tripping on a purse of silver isn’t *bad*.” He tried to put a positive spin to reassure his friend as well as himself.

“A knife is also useful, but it can poke a hole in you as well as anything else.” Flynn snarled, pacing with both hands in his pockets. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like breaking my neck on the sidewalk tonight.”

Kai wished he had a better answer for him than silence. Flynn’s words made a troubling amount of sense. What if the silver disk was some kind of weapon he had inadvertently activated against himself?

No, don’t be ridiculous.

“That witch would never give me something that powerful,” Kai said with all the conviction he could muster. Virya had counted each drop of help she bestowed on him. Even hidden behind a mind-bending puzzle, she wouldn’t hand him a tool that could kill a person with a *click*. “We just need to wait it out. Whatever this is, it *must* end, maybe it already did.”

A flock of seagulls cawed overhead, and something hit his shoulder with a wet squelch. Kai pressed his lips to suppress a string of curses. The Universe had taken his words as a challenge and gave him another jab. The worst thing he could do was lose his cool.

Fuck the Universe and fuck Virya. Was it too much effort to put a warning note inside her dumb puzzle? 'Don't touch the switches'. I'm so damn tired of her mysterious bullshit.

“Better that than a brick on your head.” Flynn helpfully provided, a smile tugging at his lips.

Glad my misfortune amuses you.

Kai sent him a withering glare that only made Flynn chuckle and offer him a frayed handkerchief to clean his shirt. If this indignation was the price to calm his friend, Kai was willing to pay it. He was the reason they ended up in this situation.

“Wait for me at home, I’ll come back when I’m sure it’s over.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Flynn protested. “Who’s gonna watch your back if something else drops on your head?”

“I’ll dodge faster by myself. They simply took me by surprise, that’s all. It won’t happen again now that I know what to look for.” Faced with Flynn’s stubborn hesitation, Kai pressed. “We don’t know if these accidents are following me or are linked to the place where they started. I’d rather not find out our house burned down while we weren’t there.”

“Wait... Do you think that could happen?” Flynn paced in the narrow alley, raking a hand through his hair. “You should come back with me, we can both wait it out there. There isn’t much that could happen in a closed room.”

“What if these events *are* following me, and our building burns down because I’m there?” Kai shook his head. “You need to trust me on this. I wouldn’t tell you to go if I wasn’t confident in handling it myself. Bird droppings and lost purses are hardly fatal.”

“I—”

“Go,” he urged. “Make sure our house is safe and the enforcers don’t snoop around.”

Biting his lip, Flynn was slowly swayed. “I’ll check our house and come looking for you if you’re not back in half an hour.”

“I’ll count on it. And start cooking dinner while you’re at it, I’m starving.”

Kai marched out of the cramped alley before Flynn could change his mind, and dove into the night crowd, paying close attention to his surroundings—especially the sky.

Perhaps it would be better if he stayed in an unpopulated area to not involve anyone else or attract attention. He was about to disappear into another side street when Lou’s warnings on the shady parts of Higharbor popped into his head. Any other night, Kai would consider the teenager’s worries overly cautious, but he couldn’t readily dismiss them with how things were going. He wasn’t in the mood to get stabbed, mugged or kidnapped.

To his left, a young man slipped on the sidewalk, tripping six more people down with him. Already on high alert, Kai evaded the tumble. He increased his pace on the thin hope he might outrun the accidents if he moved fast enough.

Please, get this over.

Hallowed Intuition remained silent. Sparing a few moments of focus, an indistinct mass of whispers filled his head with chaos. Nothing he could use or make sense of in a reasonable amount of time. The skill was still there, it had simply chosen to take a vacation from its duties.

Damned slacker, I better not get killed for this.

The scraps of an idea were forming in his head. Whatever was going on had to do with Favor, that much was clear, though it was different from the good luck or providence the attribute should provide.

Forced to keep in mind his surroundings, the answers eluded him. Kai wandered without goal, sticking to the well-lit roads. His eyes and senses darted over people and buildings to predict what random occurrence would happen next.

Most events were innocuous enough. A tear-stricken reunion between a mother and her long-lost child, two light globes enchantments fizzled out, and a man ran out of a tavern laughing hysterically and threw mesars to the crowd. No more bird droppings or bricks fell on him, the sky had given enough for the night.

Searching for less crowded places, while keeping to the secure areas, Kai found himself in the upper city. Perhaps some unconscious part of him felt less guilty about bringing calamity to the rich; the elites who isolated themselves on a hill to watch the commoners from above.

A patrolling guard took interest in him with a stern gaze, Kai pulled on Improvisation to hide his panic. His frantic look for dangers must have aroused the enforcer's suspicions.

I'm a defenseless kid, not a threat.

Kai met the gaze of the enforcers with a smile, waving energetically like a kid who had eaten too many sweets. The officer gave a curt nod and went back to his patrol.

Calm and collected on the outside, Kai continued his wandering. It had been a couple minutes since the last accident, but he didn't dare hope till the count was closer to five.

It's finally over! Now, where the fuck am I?

Two rows of spindly trees flanked a wide boulevard, their bluish leaves rustling in the wind. The fenced private residences showcased their gaudy statues and marble ornaments like peacocks in mating.

No useful clue then.

He found the stiff pretentious attitude of the upper city unbearable enough even without counting the tight security. He rarely visited the upper city beyond the shops at the base of the hills.

When in doubt, the easiest solution was to head downwards. The two hills were only so big, and the slight incline was easy to spot, he'd reach *Ring Road* and find his way from there.

I might make it before Flynn comes looking for me.

Entering a small square, he moved around the statue of some Merian warrior he didn't care to know about. In his haste, he barely noticed two teenagers coming from the opposite direction. Kai sidestepped them, brushing a boy who had made no effort to halt his walk.

Rude brats.

"You! Stop!" A female voice demanded.

Kai murmured an apology, hoping that would appease whatever spoiled scion he had offended.

Just keep walking, she'll lose interest.

A hand grabbed his arm, firm enough he'd need to apply his Strength to free himself. "She's talking to you, kid. It's impolite to ignore someone speaking."

And so is touching a stranger without permission. Damned spirits, I knew I shouldn't have come here.

Kai masked his annoyance behind a veil of shyness and turned to the strangers. They weren't much older than him. The boy was about Flynn's age, though he was clearly from the mainland, with honey-blond hair and hazel eyes. Perhaps he would be considered handsome if it wasn't for the condescending look that sent a spike of irritation through his veins.

A new challenger for the most slappable face approaches. I must warn Flynn he's got competition.

The teen stood with his chin high and shoulders back, perhaps it was meant to impress him, Kai couldn't tell. Being used to Lou, this attempt at intimidation was laughable. He had to clench his jaw to suppress a chuckle.

"Sorry, I'm in a hurry," Kai said, terse but polite. "Is there something I can do for you?"

A brush of Mana Sense revealed the strangers' clothes hid their mana channels. The fabric could light a room with all the enchantments that had been woven into it. If he weren't in such haste, he wouldn't have minded using Mana Echo to borrow a few copies for himself.

Displeased by his reaction, the boy pursed his lips and stared down his high nose. He let go of his arm and took a step back to let the girl talk.

She wore an embroidered dress of flowing silk and straight chestnut hair down her shoulders. Her proud posture was far more effortless than the boy's. Distracted by her appearance, Kai hadn't realized she was a native of the archipelago, likely not much older than him.

Her green eyes burrowed into him, brighter than most islanders, like polished emeralds.

Have I seen her before...? Oh, shit! How was she called, it's been years. Vela? Nalela...?

“Go ahead, Adrian. I’ll reach you in a moment.”

“Do you know him?” Adrian did a second take on him, perplexed.

Instead of answering, the girl smiled sweetly.

“I— I’ll wait for you at the mansion, and have supper prepared.” The boy blushed, almost tripping on his feet as he walked up the boulevard.

They were alone in the square. No hint of her smile when she moved her attention back to him.

“I thought I’d seen you before.” The girl narrowed her eyes like a detective who found an important clue in a crime scene. “You’re that kid from Sylspring, Kai Tylenn.”

I’ve got a stalker, how exciting.

“I didn’t know I was that famous,” Kai gave her a cheeky smile, too tired to care. “I’m sorry, but what was your name again?”