

Chapter 404 - Aunty K

Raelion's towers soared against the reds and pinks of twilight. Across the paved squares and ornamental gardens of the central cluster, students crowded the streets, savoring the last of the weekend.

Kai followed the courier to the Wing Aurea; the pack only grew denser as they entered the building. If the woman knew more about the Blackwood client, she remained tight-lipped. Cutting through the hubbub, they queued at the elevator platforms, his mind humming with curiosity.

It must be about Alden, he's the only Blackwood I know. So... the fire at the party, the vanishing assassin, or me dragging him out of his room? Why didn't he tell me if there was an issue? He never had problems scowling at me. This feels a little abrupt... Is it something else? Maybe Dora's book? He promised to keep that quiet... Does he know his family contacted me? It can't be about me teasing his House. Surely not... I was joking. Mostly...

Kai swallowed a nervous gulp. Rather than staving off distractions, splitting his conscious mind only offered more rabbit holes to fall down.

Huh? We're already there.

The local branch of the House of Mirrors opened before them. The courier opened the etched door for him.

"Thanks," he muttered, hesitating a heartbeat on the threshold before crossing in.

Chandeliers gleamed on the shiny steel-blue and onyx tiles of the walls and floor. With a glance behind him, Kai noticed the woman hadn't followed him inside.

He got no chance to question it as a weighty presence approached. Kai turned to see an older gentleman with a perfunctory smile; the sober suit he wore thrummed with enchantments.

"Mister Veernon?" The man dabbed at his damp forehead with a handkerchief. Not waiting for an answer to continue, he wrung his hands with stiff politeness. "Please, this way. Your connection has been prepared and is *waiting* for you."

"Uh, okay..."

Undeterred by Kai's stunning eloquence, the fidgety man gently urged him forward, giving him no option but to awkwardly push back or follow. Kai resigned to the latter.

What's with everyone today?

Even if a patrician from a Great House had requested the connection, this hushed reverence felt excessive. Raelion never lacked students from the big seven. He couldn't imagine the mighty House of Mirrors panicked each time one of them visited.

The receptionist's gaze tracked them until they moved into the corridors with the mirror rooms. Above them, a line of blue crystals bathed the doors set at regular intervals on both sides. Each surface was covered by ironclad wards.

An adult patrician might have more weight than a student. But still... something's off.

"May I know who requested to meet me?" Kai quickened his pace to keep up. They were going deeper than usual; the doors grew farther apart, their designs and enchantments increasingly lavish.

"I'm afraid, I'm not at liberty to say." The man dipped back his head in apology, never quite slowing. "It's House policy not to discuss our clients, even when they arrange the connection."

"Uhm, I see."

It just kept getting stranger.

Past a corner, they stopped before a heavily enchanted door. The silver filigree of the etchings shimmered faintly across the polished dark wood. Even up close, Kai could only sense the impenetrable void of the wards shielding it.

With a hushed mutter, the sweaty man tapped a runic key to the door. Enough locks to compose a jingle clinked and snapped in quick succession.

"If you require further assistance of any kind, please do not hesitate to ring the bell. Our personnel will be honored to fulfill all requests within our power. The House stakes its reputation on both our services and the privacy of our clients. As a personal apology, I'll cover any expenses for this and your next visit."

Huh... did you say next visit?

Casually glancing inside, Kai had to do a double-take. Rather than the expected plain shoebox of a room, the space opened into a chamber with luxurious furnishings, polished wall panels, and soft lighting. A silver bell rested on a low table arranged between the floating mirror and a set of deep-cushioned velvet armchairs. On a corner table lay a tray of tarts and snacks that would have gained Hobbes and Flynn's instant approval.

The man stepped aside with a bow. "I hope everything is to your liking."

"Hmm, it will do." Kai managed a nod. His plans to exploit the free offerings crashed when he failed to find what else to ask. Whoever called this meeting, at least they weren't cheapskates.

The man lingered by the doorway. "The connection has already been established, only waiting for your presence. I wouldn't wish to trouble you, though the House would deeply appreciate it if you put a good word in with the client."

Perhaps if you told me who it is...

Kai feigned ignorance of the glances, offering a noncommittal smile. "Thank you." He closed the door. Ironclad wards snapped like interlocking gears, isolating the chamber from the outside.

And bye.

Unhurried, he perused the decor on the refreshment table. Armed with a goblet of some chilled fruity drink and a plate of berry tarts, he sank into the plush armchair.

I could get used to this.

Stretching his legs in front of him, Kai gazed at the large floating mirror, curiosity and apprehension meshed together. A touch to banish the whirling fog and answer his questions. He didn't like not knowing who he faced, but retreat wasn't an option.

We must be hundreds, if not thousands, of miles apart. What's the worst that could happen?

Reaching with his hand, he tapped on the cold mercurial surface.

Specks of color bled and shifted, sweeping outward and bringing sharp clarity. As if a window had opened, another chamber came into view: gilded furniture, tapestries, and glittering enchantments. Enough opulence to make his own room feel like another ratty storage closet.

A woman sat on an armchair of purple velvet, her gaze trained on a book in her lap. Lustrous black hair cascaded down her shoulders, as did the black silk dress flowing onto the carpet. Despite her relaxed posture, she exuded a natural elegance.

She finished the page before setting a bookmark. Her deep purple eyes lifted to regard him, the same shade as Alden's; her smile was like a polished painting. "You must be Matthew."

Faint lines fanned at the corners of her eyes. Beside her, a finely carved ebony table bore a golden goblet and a stack of weathered books. She wasn't young, though her face carried an ageless quality that could place her anywhere from her thirties to her fifties.

"Hi," Kai muttered. He'd been around enough high-grade people to spot the signs. And this wasn't someone who had just touched upon Green.

Probably peak Green, or higher...

As his mind analyzed the new information, he split a thread to speak and avoid staring dumbly. "It seems you have me at a disadvantage. You already know who I am. How should

I address you?" When in doubt, better to go with formal speech. All evidence said this wasn't someone he wanted to offend.

"Oh, forgive my manners and the impromptu summons. People address me in many ways. You may call me Katherine." Her smile deepened. "I must say it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"The pleasure is mine." Kai matched her relaxed posture while his mind churned.

With the introductions done, Katherine observed him, seemingly content with the silence.

Hmm, so... You called me here for what...?

As seconds built into awkwardness, Kai chose to break the impasse. "May I ask the reason for this meeting? Not that I don't appreciate the chance, of course."

"You may," she smiled lightly. "Though I thought you'd guess. How could I not personally thank the young man who saved my Dennie from an assassin?"

Your Dennie...? Who— uh, is that like Alden... Den? Wait! How does she know what happened at the party?

Kai bit his cheek to keep his expression impassive. "I barely did anything. Just shouted a warning, and Alden saved himself."

"Is that so? No need to be humble. I heard differently. A word and a well-aimed spell can make all the difference. Trust me, I know how easily a nick could turn fatal if the attacker carried a poisoned blade."

"I'm just happy I could help," Kai said in an even tone. Not even the academy knew about the shrouded assassin—or at least, they hadn't questioned him about it. How had this woman learned of the precise details of his involvement so quickly?

Did Alden tell her?

That was the logical explanation, if not for his roommate asking him to keep it quiet. He wasn't the type to pass on every detail without even a heads-up. Then again, an assassination attempt *did* sound like House business.

"I've taken the liberty of preparing a small token of thanks." Katherine gestured. Her head tilted toward the side of his seat. "They should have arranged everything in the package."

Which package—

Kai straightened and leaned to the side. A plain wooden box lay tucked beside his armchair, lost amid the glittering decor.

"No need to be shy." Her teeth shone through her lips. "Go on. Take a look."

Alright...

Bending to move the package on the crystal table, Kai sensed the layered enchantments. Perfectly cloaked. His finger traced the seam of the lid to the lock. It opened with a metal click, and a thick herbal scent wafted into the room. Spatial runes stretched the interior deeper, so he seemed to peer into a narrow storeroom.

Despite feeling prepared, his breath caught at the sight. Rows upon rows of bundled herbs, distilled vials, and alchemical reagents lined the inside. *All* of them glowed like mid- or high-Yellow ingredients. There was enough to stock a small shop, without mentioning their quality. Even calculating for the cheapest ingredients—which he doubted these were—the value alone...

This is crazy.

“I’m glad you like it.” Katherine gave him a pleased look. “I know you have an interest in herbal alchemy. I copied a few recipes that I found interesting in the booklet at the bottom. They should help you consolidate your skill once you advance it to Yellow.”

“Uh Huh.” Mind blank, Kai managed a strangled sound. A sliver of rationality noted and filed away the strangeness of how she knew that much about him. Thoughts for later.

“I... I can’t accept this.”

“Nonsense.” She waved a hand dismissively. “I just scrounged up a little something as thanks on short notice. Take it and don’t overthink it.”

Yeah, just enough to resupply the academy’s own storeroom.

Throat dry, Kai pressed his mouth shut to keep himself from rebutting. Was this the power of a Great House? To toss around a fortune in rare ingredients like candies? This... He needed to...

Memo 155: reevaluate the Houses’ wealth scale ASAP.

He released a breath and put on a polite smile. “It simply feels like too much. I did what any other student would have done. I don’t need all this *thanks* for helping my friend.”

Maybe like a fourth— or a third of it.

“Isn’t it for me to decide how I show my gratitude?” Her tone gained a subtle edge. “Or do you think Dennie’s life isn’t worth at least this much?”

“No— of course not.” Kai dried his sweaty palms on his pants. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

She leaned toward the mirror. “So you’ll accept?”

"I... yes. Thank you for your *token* gift. It's very gracious."

"Hardly worth mentioning. I'm simply glad Dennie has found a reliable roommate." Her face turned distant. "You know, he was always such a lonely child. I appreciate that you've made the effort to get to know him."

"It really was no trouble."

"Now, you needn't lie, Matthew." She glanced back with a soft chuckle. "I've watched my nephew since he was a toddler, hiding behind potted plants to sneak into my library. I'm aware of all his qualities and potential. But an easy personality was never among them."

Kai gave a tight smile rather than answering.

You just need to get through twelve layers of scowls.

Katherine sighed, her nails drumming on her book cover. "I can't help but worry about him, you see. It would lift a great weight off my chest if you could keep an eye on him. Ensure he stays focused, away from trouble, and doesn't frequent the wrong crowds." Her purple gaze drifted over the box of ingredients. "Naturally, I would repay such thoughtfulness with equal gratitude."

Oh, right...

"So you're asking me to spy on him?" Kai asked dryly.

"I only want what's best for him. Is it spying if it's among family?"

Yes.

"I don't need a bribe to look after my friends, but I won't report anything. If Alden wants to share something, I'm sure he will."

"Is that your final decision?" Across the mirror, the air seemed to ripple. Her lips hardened into a lone, thin line. "That box is a mere pittance of what I can offer."

Kai met her gaze. "I'm pretty sure."

"I see then." Rather than glaring, her face eased back into a smile. "In that case, there is nothing to be done. It was a pleasure meeting you, Matthew. And please, send my love to Dennie. And tell him to write more. He's at that age when he forgets about his old Auntie K."

"I'll... give him your words. I'll send back the box."

"Please, don't insult me. Keep it. That was really just a small thanks." She waved with a flair. "Until our next meeting, Matthew."

Our next wha—

As his mouth opened, mist already billowed over the enchanted mirror.

Oh, great... Why do I get all the weirdos?

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Smoothing her black gown, Katherine hummed in thought. In two centuries at the head of House Blackwood, she rarely found herself so befuddled.

*How curious indeed.*

As the chamber's wards released, Martien swept in with his usual efficiency. Her books and notes vanished as he offered her a hand to stand—an entirely unnecessary gesture, yet the more the years passed, the more she found herself enjoying those little superfluous rituals. Of the five secretaries who had served her, Martien was by far the best.

“How did the meeting go, ma’am?” Martien coolly inquired. He held up her fur coat, helping her shoulders slip into it with a smooth grace.

Katherine tugged her hair free from her coat, taking a moment to mull it over. “Odd. A very odd boy. Though in an amusing way.”

“I see.” Martien’s eyebrow arched a fraction, but he didn’t comment further. He knew she wasn’t prone to exaggeration.

“Has the House of Echoes gotten back to us?” she asked.

“Nothing of relevance, ma’am. Either he is exactly what our information suggests, or someone very powerful has a bastard to hide.”

It only grew more curious. “Could he be an asset from one of the other Great Houses?”

“Possible, but unlikely. His origin in the Baquaire Archipelago appears largely genuine, minor discrepancies aside. And his attention-begging behavior would clash with the effort required to construct such a convoluted backstory. Would you like me to dig deeper, ma’am?”

“Mmm, no. That won’t be necessary for now.”

“Should I take measures to remove him, ma’am? Whatever his background, an unpredictable variable could endanger the Young Master.”

Katherine chuckled. “Always so zealous, Martien.” She patted his arm as she moved to leave. “Let the poor boy be. He was amusing. And Alden could use a friend to break him out of his brooding shell. Besides, today was just a first meeting.”