

Chapter 148 - Doubts

The *Ventura* was moored at the pier extending two dozen meters from land. Little beyond a line of wooden buildings swarmed with people began without apparent end. Their loud bustle washed over him.

Three other vessels and a fleet of countless boats floated around them. Old Port's dock wasn't much different from the one in Sylspring, just far more chaotic.

Ventura chuckled at his dumbstruck face. "You must have taken a really good nap, hon'. I need to close some deals, and we'll set off again tomorrow at noon. Take your friend with you if you want to go on shore. I'd rather not have to send a search party if you get lost."

Kai hid his annoyance, nodding like a dutiful kid. They weren't at Higharbor yet and he had already been assigned a damn babysitter.

With a fond smile, Ventura pinched his cheek while sending a withering glare above his head. Two young sailors struggling to carry a large oak chest on deck froze in their steps.

"If you bump that chest once more, I'm going to bump your heads. I'm not paying you to damage my goods, you fish-brained fools. You better pray I won't find a speck of chipped paint on my statues."

Such a sweet lady.

Her ability to switch between opposite voices and expressions was nothing short of extraordinary. Kai threw a pitying glance at the poor sods while Ventura was already off to yell curses at somebody else.

Old Port was the first major town rising along the eastern coast of Yanlun, about a third of the way to Highharbor. That was about the extent of his knowledge, he had always been more interested in the far lands of the Talthen continent.

Might as well check it out.

The summer sun warmed his skin, mages needed to stretch their legs too. After he wrung his mind for hours to solve a layer of the cube, the idea of using any more of his mana skills was enough to give him a headache. Ideally, he'd go for a swim, but he could settle for walking on shore.

Do I really have to ask Flynn to be my chaperone?

Kai was used to being on his own, and he hadn't thought this time would be any different. It was common enough to see kids by themselves or in small groups *with* the permission of their parents. Therein lay the problem.

His family was beyond reach, and he didn't have the excuse of running an errand for his teachers either. The Baquaire Archipelago was renowned for its safety, but kids were expected to have some degree of supervision before fourteen. Even if just as a vague presence in the background like he was used to.

Kai was confident to sneak away to shore and get away from any questions with improvisation. The true problem was when they got to Highharbor.

Reishi owned a few businesses where he could host him as long as he needed, but Kai didn't want to rely on him for everything. No matter if the merfolk said it was no big deal. He'd already asked for too many favors and the pile of debts was high enough as it was.

I thought I was over with this shit. Why can't I grow up already?

Kai massaged his eyes. It might just be his tired mind, but he couldn't see any other viable solution. *Maybe* Flynn made more sense than he'd like to admit.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the grinning boy sprouted out of the ship's belly twirling a silver coin between his fingers. "Finally decided to come out of your burrow? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to avoid me."

Spirits why? He's going to be so smug.

Kai considered going back into his cabin to sulk, though it would only postpone the problem. "Do you want to go check out the town?" He kept his tone casual. The matter held no importance to him.

"You want *me* to accompany you?" An amused glint shone in his eyes.

Fuck, he knows already.

"You don't have to come if you don't want to."

"It's my duty as the older brother to show you the ways of the world." Flynn puffed his chest up. "Let's go, it's been a while since I was here."

Waving to Ventura to signal they were going on shore, Kai lost a battle against his own curiosity. "Have you already been here?"

"I've been to almost every town in Yanlun for... different reasons, and Old Port is quite close to Sylspring." Flynn's tone wasn't even particularly boastful, which arguably made it worse.

How many have I visited? two?

Kai bit his tongue, feeling more like a child than ever. But any thought of sneaking away on his own was quickly abandoned as they went down the pier. The clamor of hundreds of voices swallowed them. Stalls selling fish began just one street over, where men and women animatedly haggled or shouted their wares.

It was like he was back in Times Square at peak hour, plus the smell of sweat and of seafood left too long in the sun. Crowded didn't begin to describe the mass of people, not something he missed at all. He could hardly see the street beyond the wall of men pressing him on all sides.

Maybe this was a mistake, nothing wrong with being a hermit.

"Come on, I know a quieter place. Keep an eye on your pockets if you're carrying anything." Flynn took his wrist and Kai followed without protest.

The boy elbowed his way through the suffocating crowd. Dirt roads and a shred of blue sky, that was about as much as Kai could see. He could only imagine what muddy mess they would turn into when it rained. As for tourists, the simple idea that someone would willingly come here for fun was ridiculous.

Despite himself, Kai couldn't help grabbing tighter onto Flynn's arm. He led the way with confident steps, seemingly unaffected by the press of bodies.

I should have stayed on the ship.

Without a gust of wind to stave off the heat, breathing was hard. Kai was covered in sweat in minutes, body pressed from every direction. Even the last sliver of sky was crushed by the forest of people towering over him.

An eternity later—probably no more than a handful of minutes—, they reached the end of the stifling mass. The crowd gradually became sparser till he finally stopped brushing against another body with every step.

“You, okay?” Flynn glanced over his shoulder. “It always makes an effect the first time you come here. The docks and the market are the worst. We must have docked on a bad day.”

“I’m fine, I just didn’t expect there would be so many people.” Kai tried to fill his lungs, but no amount of air was enough. On Earth, his parents never took him to crowded places, afraid for his feeble health. Sylspring market at noon had been his upper limits before today.

“You know, Old Port was the biggest town in the archipelago before the Republic picked Higharbor for their capital. Though squishing another dozen villages during the relocation hasn’t made it any better.” Flynn explained, easily falling into the role of tourist guide like he’d been doing so all his life.

The town was about the size of Sylspring, but there were no wide-open streets, paved squares or pretty shops. Old Port had been built on the philosophy of trying to fit as many people as possible in the least amount of space. Kai quickly lost track of the endless series of winding streets Flynn led him through, keeping close to avoid getting lost.

Squat wooden buildings held more squat houses on their heads in some strange, leaning pyramidal fashion. Precarious walkways and bridges joined them at different levels. They created a symphony of creaking wood in the background while barefoot children and adults ran and climbed over them like a swarm of busy ants.

The only stone buildings were in the fenced neighborhood on the southern side of Old Port that housed the Town Hall and most of the Republic’s population. Stern enforcers regulated the traffic in and out, requesting their IDs before letting them through.

Despite the strict security, the place wasn’t much nicer than the average neighborhood of Sylspring. Even the shops were somewhat lacking compared to what he was used to. Kai hardly found any mana herbs worth taking a second look.

They don't have access to the Veeryd jungle after all...

“We can go browse the market tomorrow,” Flynn proposed. “You can find everything they have here and more for half the price, trust me.”

“No.” The idea of facing that sweltering mob sent a shiver down his back despite the heat, and easily killed his curiosity. “I mean, it’s better if I keep my money for Higharbor anyway.”

“If you say so,” Flynn shrugged, leading the way back to the *Ventura* as the moons took to the sky.

Safe on board, Kai accepted the suspicious stew they served and ate with the rest of the crew. The taste wasn’t half bad, though he’d rather not know the ingredients.

Flynn went to play cards with the sailors, loudly complaining about every loss and blessing his luck when he won. Even if Kai barely understood what the weird figures and numbers on the cards meant, he was quite sure there was more than luck involved.

Brink was the most popular game, like in poker your hand seemed to matter little if you knew how to trick the other players. It would be interesting to test his Favor on a game of chance, but he needed to have a better grasp of how to play first.

Feeling his eyelids drooping, Kai chose to retire early. Back in his cabin, he lay down in the hammock, feeling a rare level of exhaustion. The voices and laughs faded into the background as he dozed off lulled by the waves.

Waking in a strange mood, he spent the morning on board working on the cube. The raid had wrecked his flimsy schedule and he needed to make up for the time lost.

He had a clear idea of how the next three mana threads and runes had to be woven for the next layer. If the same pattern continued, there would be three equivalent layers before the cube rearranged its runic patterns. Then it would require four solutions for each puzzle.

He could hardly fathom how long those would take, though he doubted Virya would stop there. If the mana weaving wasn't enough, he also had to move the sliding pieces on the fly to change how the runes interacted with the enchantment. The level of multitasking required was absurd.

Seven more with five? That should be hard enough, right?

It was a relief when the *Ventura* raised the anchor for the next stretch of their journey, away from the suffocating bustle of Old Port.

"Watcha doin'?" Flynn leaned on the railing beside him, munching on a stick of caramelized walnuts.

Kai narrowed his eyes. "Where did you get that?"

"You said I could take any snacks from your bag, and I was hungry." Not a whit of shame on his face.

As if it would have made any difference if I told you not to touch them.

"I also told you to tell me when you took something," Kai struggled to keep the snark out of his voice.

"I'm telling you now, ain't I?" Flynn continued to crunch. "I can share a bite with you, okay?"

How generous.

"It's fine."

“But are you truly *fine*?” He squinted at him, moving an inch from his face. “You’ve been a bit off since yesterday.”

“I’m doing great. I just don’t love traveling on a ship, that’s all.” Kai moved down the railing to make some space.

Flynn scouted after him, unconvinced, going as far as to stop his chewing. “Is this about the little brother jokes? I know you hate being called a child, we can figure out a different story if you want.”

Spirits’ mercy, it was easier when he was less considerate.

“I told you I’m fine.” Kai went to the opposite side of the prow, and Flynn followed a second later.

“So... you don’t mind if I call you kid?”

“I’d rather you stopped that if possible.”

“What’s the *actual* problem then? I can’t promise to fix it, but I’ll try if you tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

Kai breathed the salty air deeply to drown the irritation, mostly aimed at himself. Flynn was nothing but persistent, he had to give him that.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, not about this anyway. I’m the problem. I hate being treated like a child, but I can’t even navigate some random town. Maybe I should be treated like one.”

I can’t believe I actually said that out loud, damn you.

Old Port had been a bitter reminder of how little he knew of the world outside his bubble. He had been like a lost puppy, reliant on somebody else to carry him around. A complete and utter failure.

He had wanted to believe the biggest obstacle was the way adults treated him, that, if given the chance, he could sail to the mainland right now. He wasn't so sure anymore, defeated by a single fishing town.

If a crowd was enough to overwhelm him, maybe he *needed* a caretaker in Higharbor. Kai looked at the sea parting before the ship, vainly trying to avoid the pair of eyes burning a hole in his skull.

Flynn threw him a disbelieving look. "Let me get this straight, you're upset because you didn't manage to do something the first time you tried? And people say I think too highly of myself."

Kai knew his ears were already on fire. "It's not like that at all."

"No?" Flynn burst out laughing.

"Navigating a town is not supposed to be hard, everyone can do that."

Flynn made a show to dry the tears in the corner of his eyes. "There are a thousand easy things I can't do that someone else would take for granted, and not just 'cause I haven't tried. No one is good at everything, not even me."

"I know that." But he also had his past life, he was supposed to know how to do better.

“But do you, *really*? I don’t understand half the things you can do and I’m three years older than you and I’ve traveled a lot. I’ve got a lot more time and chances to learn about the archipelago.”

Okay, I might have a bloated opinion of myself, just a tiny bit.

“Flynn.”

“Yes, little brother?”

“Thank you for telling me I was being an idiot.”

“You’re welcome. Whenever you need it, I’ll take this burden upon myself.”