

Chapter 146 - Departure

“So, that’s why I’m leaving for Higharbor,” Kai concluded, lifting his bag on the kitchen chair to emphasize his point. Half the dinner plates were still on the table, this was the first chance to talk to his whole family.

He had made clear he wouldn’t be alone. His *merchant* friend could help him settle down, and while they didn’t have many interactions with Flynn, his help during the raid hadn’t been forgotten.

Four pairs of eyes locked on him, silently deliberating his fate. Only one of them tried to crack a smile, and it still was a bit uncertain.

Cold sweat ran down his back. Kai maintained his stoic composure. He had managed to deliver his speech without stuttering, he couldn’t falter now. They had to know how serious he was. He had given Flynn his word and he had no idea what he would do if his mother forbade him to go.

Yatei help me.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, remember to take care of yourself,” Ele stepped forth, pulling him in a hug and breaking the tension. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“*Thank you, sis. I promise I will.*” Words could hardly express how grateful he felt. “I’ll miss you too, a lot.”

Ele would support him in anything he chose as long as it wouldn’t get him killed, but she was likely overstating her thrill for his sake.

“Have fun in the big city,” Kea managed to make the encouragement sound like an insult. She was never a fan of unexpected changes, and in her defense, to say he had dropped the news overnight was an understatement.

Kai gave her a grateful nod all the same. “I’m sure Higharbor has nothing on Sylspring.”

With a gloomy glower, Kea strode out of the kitchen with Ele after her. A quick encouraging smile before she also disappeared beyond the doorway.

Now the true test began. His sister's acceptance would matter little if he didn't pass.

There was only one authority who could declare life and death in their household, especially if it regarded her children. Alana watched him with measuring eyes, her face an impassive visage betraying no hints of her thoughts.

Moui stood beside her, mirroring her demeanor. The hunter had a higher threshold of risk and was usually more open to his *unpredictable* decisions. Yet, Kai knew he would get no support from him, not while his mother was within earshot.

His uncle would back up his mom’s ruling, whatever that was. He might have argued his case if Kai had gone to him first, but there had been no chance for that. This choice was as sudden for them as it was for him. By the time he secured a passage and discussed it with Flynn, the day was already over.

“*Kai.*” Alana paused to ease her tone. “Why don’t you sit down?”

It wasn’t a request, he took a seat beside his bag. His mother towered over him before taking her chair with a sigh.

“Do you remember when we spoke about making important decisions? Traveling to another city isn’t a small thing, you should have warned us so we could discuss it together.”

"I came to tell you as soon as I knew," Kai tried not to sound defensive. "The chance came out of the blue and I'd have to wait a long time for another."

He had explained his urgency to the best of his abilities, briefly mentioning the Republic investigation and how that could complicate his life. Though Flynn's links with the rebels weren't his secret to tell, and it'd risk dragging them into the whole mess.

Alana took his hands, gentle but firm, and forced him to cross her gaze, "Do you promise on the spirits that you'll be safe?"

It took him a few moments to grasp what that implied, afraid saying it out loud would break the dream. "Does this mean I can go...?"

His mother gave him an exasperated smile. "I knew you wouldn't stay with us forever, you never hid *that*. Though this is sooner than I anticipated." She punctuated the statement, her gaze falling on their hands.

"If you think it's important you go to Higharbor, then you can go. I can't keep you here forever. Better you learn more of the world before you try to sail beyond the archipelago."

"Some lessons can only be learned through experience," Moui said, sharing a look with Alana.

Am I missing something here?

"Thank you, Mom." Kai relaxed his tense muscles, letting out a relieved breath. This went better than he could ever imagine.

"Not so fast, sweetie. You haven't answered my question, I expect you to keep out of trouble. You've never been to a big city before, they are chaotic and it's easy to get lost."

Alana launched into an endless list of dangers he might meet in Higharbor. From scammers and pickpockets to kidnapers and *very dangerous* people who came out at night.

Kai made a show to listen to every monster that waited to drag him into a dark alley, more nostalgic than scared.

Can't be worse than any metropolis on Earth. It's been so long since I lived in a place like that.

"When did you visit Higharbor, Mom?"

"It was a long time ago with your father. From what I heard it hasn't improved much with the years. Now repeat to me what you *absolutely* must not do."

"Stranger danger, be skeptical of everything you hear and keep to the safe public areas," Kai said, counting on his fingers.

"Are you not forgetting something?" Alana's gaze bore down on him.

"Always bring a friend along if you go out at night and stay out of the shady areas, especially if someone you just met asks you to go, no matter what they promise."

His mother nodded, satisfied. "Good. We're going to write that down before you go. Now, let's get your luggage fixed."

"Mom, I've already prepared everything I need." Kai pointed at the backpack beside him. The important books and equipment were safe in his ring, together with his eighty silver mesars.

“You’re not going to go to Higharbor carrying one measly bag. Have you taken enough change of clothes and folded them properly? What about food? It’s a long journey and sailors always overcharge you on board.” Alana took charge of his luggage, ignoring his protests.

The next morning, Kai dragged a heavy bag down the stairs on top of his backpack. It had been a hard-fought battle to not carry a third. Apparently, his mother had been buying him clothes while he wasn’t aware. He had managed to leave ten silvers beneath her pillow with a quick swipe from his ring.

“Are you sure we haven’t forgotten something? You don’t have many winter clothes and the seasons move rapidly.”

“Mom, I’m sure Higharbor has decent shops if I need something.” Slowed by the bags, Kai didn’t manage to reach the doorway before being pulled into the fifth rib-crushing hug.

“I’m going to miss you so much, sweetie. Remember you promised to write to us every two weeks, *at least*.”

“I’m going to miss you too, all of you.” He locked eyes with Ele and Kea, receiving a bright smile and a disgruntled snort. “I’ll send you a letter as soon as I land.”

“Are you sure you don’t want us to accompany you to the docks?” Alana pulled back, kissing him on the forehead.

Please don’t, there have been enough teary goodbyes in private.

“I think we can manage, right Uncle?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he boards the right ship.” Moui took his extra luggage from him. Kai looked away as his uncle got uncomfortably close with his mom. Goodbyes made everyone touchy.

I'm not going to miss that.

The crisp air of the morning greeted them outside. The sky was streaked with reds, yellows and pinks as dawn poked the horizon. Three heads watched them go from the doorway until they turned the corner.

"I wanted to give you this," Moui stopped to take out a small paper packet tied with a string.

Don't mind if I do.

The knot quickly loosened, revealing a palm-long blade with a bone handle. Kai didn't have to test it to know it was sharpened to perfection. He wouldn't be slaying beasts with this knife, but it was discreet enough to hide in a pocket or a sleeve. "Thank you, Uncle. I love it."

"I thought so, I carved the handle myself." Moui ruffled his hair. "I hope you won't have to use it, but in case trouble finds you, it's better to be prepared."

"I'll be *extremely* safe, the only danger will be dying of boredom." He just needed a safe spot to grind his skills and profession. There had been enough mishaps for years to come.

Moui muttered something about miracles under his breath but gave him no time to reply. "She took less than I thought to get over the stubbornness, I'll wait just ahead."

"What do you m—"

The hunter slipped away with his bag, while Kea ran to the corner and came to an abrupt stop before him.

Oh... he does know her really well.

His sister took a moment to catch her breath, eyes throwing fire. "I want you to know I'm not going to stop training like we did together even if you leave."

"I never thought you'd stop. I'm sure you'll reach Orange ★★ before you choose a profession."

"I will," Kea stated like it was written in stone. "I'll show you my progress when you come back."

"I'm going to miss our training, sis."

Kea scrunched her brows, "I'll miss you too, little brother, a little bit. Don't let the snooty brats of the city bully you. If I can't beat you, no one else can." Done with her piece, she sprinted back the way she came.

I guess that went well too.

Kai caught up with Moui. Reishi had managed to find them a spot on a merchant ship that would leave this morning, he couldn't be late. Streams of workers already filled the streets to get an early start, sharing nods with those they knew.

Despite the few months he spent in Sylspring, there weren't many people Kai would consider more than passing acquaintances. He had already dropped by Old Selly's shop to say farewell to Telu the previous day. *Sylphie's Herbs* had been miraculously unscathed by the raid, that witch's luck might rival his own.

Flynn is coming with me and Reishi said we'd meet in Higharbor.

No suspicious individuals followed them till they reached the warehouse where the merman told him to meet.

“Thank you, Uncle. I can take it from here.”

“Stay safe, kid. I’ll make an offering to Yatei for you.” Moui watched him enter the building.

Jiro found him before Kai could take three steps inside. The guard led him to a room where Reishi was waiting and closed the door behind him.

“Please sit,” Reishi put down a fold of documents. “Did you already have breakfast? I can have someone fetch some food if you want.”

“Thank you, I’m fine. I’ve eaten plenty.” Kai sat on the chair across from him. “When does the ship set sail? I thought I didn’t have much time.”

“There’s still an hour or so, and your friend is already aboard. I just wanted to make sure this was what you really wanted.” His deep blue eyes examined him. “Yesterday you were in such a hurry we didn’t have time to talk.”

Kai felt his ears heat up. “I’m sorry I showed up with a big request without warning. It must not have been easy to organize it while you’re already busy. I truly appreciate your help, I know I owe you.”

“It’s not about money or favors. Though the captain of the *Ventura* did owe me, so I didn’t have to pay anything.” Reishi chuckled. “But I was asking if *you* had considered this decision carefully.”

“You think I shouldn’t go?”

"I think you might have not considered all the possibilities. Higharbor is both the safest and most dangerous place in the archipelago. A talented child will attract less there, but you need to tread carefully. It might take a few months before I can visit."

Why does everyone think I can't last a day if they're not looking over my shoulder?

Kai was tempted to show him the five pages of warnings his mother had forced him to write. Embarrassment kept his hand. "I'll be prudent. Is there something else you wanted to tell me or can we go?"

"There is." The merman tapped on the desk. "I don't want to tell you who you should be friends with, but I know trouble when I see it. Even if *he* doesn't mean it, he could drag you with an unsavory crowd all the same."

Does he know about the rebels? How?

He'd need to talk to Flynn later, though he wasn't going to change his decision either way.

"And what do you see when you look at me?" Kai raised an eyebrow. "Is it more or less trouble than when you look at him?"

The merfolk's lips quivered, struggling to stay straight before he covered them with a webbed hand. "Let's say I see a different variety of trouble in you."

After igniting his curiosity, Reishi refused to elaborate on that. "I understand your concerns, but I trust Flynn. He has distanced himself from any *unsavory* company. And if he can put up with me I'll do the same for him."

Thoughts ran beneath the unreadable scaly face. "Then let me accompany you on board. I'll introduce you to the captain, Ventura is an eccentric lady, but you can trust her if she swears on her father's grave."

Kai frowned, "Wasn't that the name of the ship?"

"It's both." The merman shrugged, leading the way. "I told you, *eccentric*. It can get a bit confusing, but most people on the ship just call her captain. She'll stop in a few towns to trade along the way, but she assured me she'll reach Higharbor in three or four days. I might find you a faster route if you want to wait."

"No, it's fine." Kai followed him outside. The sooner they left Sylspring behind the better.

Proudly moored at the dock with two masts and light pink sails, the *Ventura*—the ship—was impossible to miss. Its name in bright red letters on the hull was what Kai imagined a giant could write with her lipstick.

Well, that's certainly a statement, she must not lack courage.

Sailors busy loading supplies hardly spared them a glance even as they walked on board.

"You've come." Flynn greeted him, a hint of surprise or relief disappeared behind a grin too quickly to be sure. His eyes shared a glance with Reishi.

Did they talk without me?

Kai didn't get a chance to ponder the matter. Flynn's grin stiffened, boots punctuated each step of a new arrival on the deck. A middle-aged lady with a pink feather hat and painted red lips came up to them.

Yatei's mercy.

“This one is even cuter.” Ventura winked at him and pinched his cheek. “Don’t worry, I’ll deliver them both safely to Higharbor, you have my word.”

Reishi threw him an amused smile and bent to whisper in his ear. “Don’t take any deal she offers you.”

“Have a nice journey,” he added in a louder tone, already walking off the ship.