

Chapter 150 - Higharbor

As the *Ventura* drifted closer to the docking area pushed by its pink sails, more details slowly came into focus. Kai swept his gaze over the port to grasp any useful information. He had heard stories of this place since he was a child. The largest and richest city, the heart of the Merian Republic in the Baquaire Archipelago.

Higharbor had the same polished aura of Sylspring but with a grander, stately feel. Its buildings lacked the cozy and warm atmosphere of the seaside destination. Straight, soaring lines drew the eyes up their elegant and intricate decorations.

The architecture of the docks *demand*ed to be admired. Kai could glimpse the numerous skilled hands that had designed the ivory port to guide his first impression. Likely an attempt by the governor to present the islands as something different than a backwater and rural territory.

How terrible to get grouped with the rest of us.

Laws and decrees rolling out of Higharbor to the rest of the archipelago had painted a picture of the man in Kai's head. Not a very flattering one. He could almost see the governor's planning, the cold and calculated moves to maximize his profits and power.

They were heading straight into the belly of the beast.

Kai would recognize the stone of the Vastaire's ruins anywhere. Perhaps that lavished pier was made with the same ivory towers he had witnessed on Yatol as a child. Demolished after they stood for millennia for the greed of a man.

"Have you already been here?" Flynn asked, looking at him as intently as he had been studying the city.

“I told you I’ve never traveled beyond Sylspring.”

“You don’t look very impressed. I stared for hours the first time they brought me here. I couldn’t believe such a big city existed. Same for the other kids in my scholarship class.” Flynn scowled at the ivory construction. “I think that was half the reason for the trip, so we could be *awed* by the might of the Republic.

It’s little more than a town. A pretty pompous one, but still a town.

Higharbor was the biggest settlement in the archipelago, but it didn’t reach a hundred thousand in population. As the morning sun dispersed the mist, Kai could glimpse a stretch of coast clear of buildings in the distance, the limits of the city.

“Maybe I’m just better at hiding my awe. I read about the cities in the mainland, this is a much smaller version of them.”

“*Maybe.*” Flynn agreed with a distracted nod. “Anything you plan to do?”

“Reishi gave me the name of one of the businesses he runs here. We can stay there for a day or two while we look for long-term lodging.” Large cities were always overpriced. Kai was confident that held true no matter what world he lived in.

While his pockets were full of silver now, he needed to make it last. It could be months yet before Reishi managed to organize his business and continue their alchemy venture in Higharbor.

“Spirits, save me,” Flynn raked a hand through his hair. “I meant what you planned to do *for fun*. We’re going to *Higharbor*. The city is filled with exotic foods, taverns and strange ways to spend time. Last time they brought us to a place where a group of actors performed stories. Is there nothing you are looking forward to?”

Sorry, I’m not so eager to waste my shiny coins.

“No, not really. I just need a place to train,” Kai said in a flat tone, more to annoy him than anything else.

“You’re impossible,” Flynn covered his eyes with a hand like he couldn’t bear to look at him. “There is more to life than training skills.”

“I guess that’s why I already passed you in grade.”

“Hey, I’ll let you know almost no one reaches Orange ★★ at fourteen. I’m a genius, you’re just an anomaly.”

“Of course, whatever helps you sleep at night, old man,” Kai smirked and patted his arm like he would reassure a child, ignoring Flynn’s glares.

“I also train my skills,” he took away his arm with an offended sulk. “I can simply do that by talking with people without shutting myself in a dusty cabin.”

Was he training his social skills by speaking with the sailors?

“I’m sure you’re amazing for your venerable age. Just tell me if someone tries to bully you and I’ll beat them up.”

Flynn stood up straighter to highlight their difference in height. “Don’t think you’re stronger than me yet. I wasn’t fighting seriously last time we sparred.”

“I’ll give you a rematch.” Kai accepted the challenge.

I do need a bit of target practice for my spells.

In a pure cold weapon fight, Flynn might not be an easy opponent. With their age difference, and the profession levels the boy must have gained since last time, his physical attributes were bound to be significantly higher than his own.

Well, I can't improve fighting against weaker opponents. And I can always beat his ass with Empower and Water Magic if he starts gloating.

The crew of the *Ventura* swarmed the deck, tanned sailors lowered the sails and prepared the ship to moor. A row emerged from both sides of the ship to guide them closer to the pier. Slivers of the paved land emerged beyond the forest of masts and hulls.

"There's one thing I'm looking forward to," Kai suddenly said. He had avoided thinking about them during the journey to not get his hopes up and end up disappointed. "I had some friends who went to Higharbor."

"You mean they were moved here during the relocation?"

"Yeah, we were just children, so I don't think they remember me. And I wouldn't know where to look for them anyway." While not a metropolis by Earth's standards, tens of thousands of people still wasn't a small number. They could have moved to another town or... Kai steered his thoughts clear of the worst possibilities.

Maybe it's better not to know.

"We'll find them." Flynn declared with certainty. "If you were half as weird as a child, I'm sure they'll remember you too."

"Thanks."

“Anything for my little brother.” Flynn threw an arm around his shoulders and ruffled his hair. Kai suffered the affront in displeased silence.

You get a freebie. Next time I'll break your hand.

The *Ventura* sailed past dozens of other ships, more than he had ever seen in Sylspring. The deepwater port was the main reason the Republic chose to nest in Higharbor. The seabed had continued to be further excavated after their arrival, allowing large vessels to moor during all but the most extreme low tides.

As they emptied their cabin, his own bag was far lighter than when he came on board in Sylspring.

It's easier to carry this way.

Ventura came to escort them on shore, fussing over them to ensure they had a place to go.

“I’m sorry to see you go so soon, it was so nice to have you on board, hon’.” The captain imprinted a kiss on his forehead before he could react. “I stop at Higharbor at least once per season except for winter, I’ll be happy to host you again if you need a ride.”

“I’ll make sure to remember,” Kai struggled to keep his hands still and not clean the red lipstick mark he could feel on his head.

“Are you sure you don’t need a guide on shore, hon’? Two young boys such as yourself, you never know when you might run into trouble. I can find someone for cheap.”

“We’re sure. I already know the place,” Flynn politely turned her off for the third time. Reishi said not to accept any deal with her. Even if it seemed harmless, there was no point risking it when they could do it on their own.

“Such a pity.” Ventura dried a nonexistent tear from her eye. “I pray you’ll stay safe.”

“Safe journey, Captain,” Kai wiped the smile off his face as soon as they were out of sight, furiously rubbing his forehead clean. “Stop laughing, it’s not funny,” he glowered at Flynn.

“I’m so proud of you, little brother.”

The gaudy constructions looking over the docks were more imposing from up close, easily surpassing the highest buildings of Sylspring. Kai took out a letter with the directions Reishi gave him. He passed it to Flynn since he had no idea where any of those streets were. “Do you recognize the names?”

“Of course.”

“Of course, yes. Or, of course, I’ll never admit when I don’t know something?”

“I can’t believe you have so little faith in me. I’m the greatest navigator in all the archipelago after all.” He puffed his chest, indignant by the outrageous slander.

Kai threw him a skeptical look.

“*Of course*, I can ask for directions and easily find out,” Flynn grumbled under his breath. “I only came here twice, and they didn’t let us roam the city.”

Streams of people strode the paved roads in the early morning, carrying themselves with the self-important air of the local capital in the archipelago. Seeing the unapproachable air of the passersby, Kai left him to the task.

At least a third of them were foreigners, be it from the Republic or somewhere else, but even the natives didn’t have the typical friendly demeanor.

Cities are overrated.

Despite the initial impressions, they received polite replies and easily found the indications they needed—Flynn’s skills must have helped. The *Golden Pearl Tavern* was just far enough from the docks to avoid the bustle of the sailors.

A three-stories stone and wood building with a shingle roof and a clean exterior. As good as any he saw in Sylspring, though Kai wasn’t sure how that measured in Higharbor.

Kai took a single step inside before stopping in his tracks. An unmistakable iridescent glow filled the room. Straight before the entrance, *his* precious treasure rested in a crystal display cabinet for all to see.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? A unique treasure salvaged from the ocean depth.”

Kai woke from his stupor to notice that a distinguished old man in pristine clothes had come to welcome them. “Yes, it is,” he said, snapping his fingers before Flynn’s transfixed gaze.

The man looked them over with a polite smile. “You must be the esteemed clients Master Reishi warned me about. Please come in. You are probably tired from the long journey, I already prepared your rooms.”

Reluctantly leaving his precious behind, Kai let himself be led into two adjacent rooms on the third floor.

Just for a couple of days until we decide what to do next.

“Let me know if you need anything.” He bowed down and left.

Inside the spacious room, Kai immediately noticed a plumb bed that begged him to take a nap. After sleeping in a hammock for four days, he wanted nothing but to doze off for a few hours.

I can always insist on paying if I want to stay longer.

Quickly settling in, Kai left his clothes inside his bags and took the chance to take a bath. Washing away the sweat and salt of the journey was a cathartic experience. To avoid the tempting bed, he dragged Flynn outside.

“We’ve just arrived. I want to look at that pearl again.”

Guess Reishi got his money’s worth.

“Didn’t you want to show me all the attractions? Come on, we also need to look for a place to stay.”

“That tavern looks good to me.”

“It’s too expensive. We can’t afford to stay there for long. Wait... what’s that?” There was a faint buzzing in the background. Kai focused his ears, the sound was rapidly growing louder.

The street turned dark, a gleaming *something* flew over their heads in the sky. Before he could grasp what was going on, the *thing* was gone, the buzzing becoming faint again. His head jerked to take another better peek, but the tall buildings prevented his eyes from following.

What the fuck is that?

“Oh, *that*.” Flynn dismissed him as if he were pointing out a palm tree. “It’s just an airship. The wealthy piggies use them to travel from the mainland.”

Right, an airship. How did I not think of that?

Kai ran to the intersection of two streets, finally getting a decent view of the aircraft. It reminded him of the zeppelins from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The oblong shape gracefully glided over the lavish palaces built on the hill to disappear somewhere on top.

“There is an airdock somewhere up there,” Flynn helpfully informed. “But they don’t let anyone unauthorized come near.”

“Let me guess, you’ve tried?”

“Of course, I’ve tried. I wanted to see the flying monster,” he exclaimed, breaking the cool facade.

“It’s a flying ship. Just a metal framework and lots of enchantments.”

“Let me guess, you read about that too?” Flynn threw him a judging look.

“Yes, I did, though I didn’t expect to find one here.” Kai tried not to sound too much like a bookworm smartass. He was willing to pay to peek at the array on that zeppelin. “There is truly no way to take a closer look?”

“We can try in the upper city. We need to register our ID to go there, but we’ll need to do that anyway if we stay in Higharbor longer than a week.” Flynn began leading the way. “Come, we can take the long way to see the city.”

Glad I didn’t come alone, I’d certainly fuck up the bureaucracy.

The clean paved *Ring Road* running around the hill framed the inner city, linking the docks to the heart of the town and housing shops like the ones in Sylspring. Further inland, the outer city wasn't as prosperous, though Flynn had only been there once.

The divide with the upper city was just as blatant. Every glimpse of the palaces and manors on the hill exuded lavish opulence. With bright colors, blooming flowers and intricate decorations.

Kai began to create a map in his head. It would take some time to wrap his head around the size of Higharbor. He just had to get used to the people and labyrinthine streets.

One step at a time.

"Do you remember the names and ages of your friends?" Flynn asked as they were waiting in line at the Town Hall for the registration process. "I'm good at finding people, the more details you remember the better."

"There were four of them..." Kai delved into the nostalgic sea of memories. There was the innocent Ana with her prized shell collection, quiet Lou, and the twins, Uli and Oli, always ready to pull a prank.

Lost in the past, he didn't immediately realize Flynn had gone silent, a deep frown marking his brows.

"I know that's not much," Kai said. "They must have changed a lot since then, it's fine if you can't find them."

"It's not that." Flynn hesitated before meeting his eyes. "I think I've met them... They were part of the Republic's scholarship program in Hawkfield."

