

## Chapter 233 - Chase

A cloudy cloak draped over the moons, leaving only the cold crystal lamps to illuminate the streets of Higharbor. Beyond the shops and stalls of Ring Road, voices and bodies grew sparse.

Flynn stole a glance over his shoulder. A band of drunken sailors sang a lewd shanty about the three sirens, while a woman smoked a pipe on a balcony two floors up. None of his perception skills detected suspicious individuals, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was being followed.

*That merchant has made me paranoid.*

What should have been a done deal had turned into an hours-long argument. Somehow the oily guy had found out the black market price of cloaking spheres and wanted to renegotiate. As if the Free Brothers or the Spirits' Hand would trust a foreign merchant; not even private buyers would step into the same building as him without a trusted intermediary.

*Why did I trust Nem again? His tips always bring more trouble than they're worth.*

The demand for privacy wards had soared with the Republic's stifling presence. Restricted goods skirted the line of legality. The wealthy and powerful didn't like being told what they weren't allowed to have, so possession of lower-tiered items wasn't a crime—trafficking, however, was another matter. Punishment ranged from a hefty fine to a one-way trip to the executioner's block.

Flynn had sworn not to deal with anything that dangerous—and had kept his oath as far as he knew. If possible, he wouldn't touch the goods. His talent was in connecting buyers and sellers for a fee, and most people understood they paid for quality and discretion.

*I should have known no reliable merchant delays a meeting twice.*

Some people wouldn't believe that jellyfish stung till they touched one. A few fruitless days without a buyer would do more to convince that guy than a divine revelation. Hopefully, the greedy fool would learn before Flynn left Higharbor. A gold or two wasn't worth missing Kien's birthday.

The faint crunching of gravel under a boot echoed from the street behind him, causing Hunch to flare. Flynn Dashed into the alleyway, running through a series of winding turns without looking back.

Keen Perception helped him discern a slew of information from how someone walked. Were they arrogant, confident, or uncertain? He'd need to observe them to form a complete picture, but the sound of a stalker's steps was pretty distinct. The muffled movement of someone holding back their weight.

If it were an innocuous passerby, Flynn should have heard them coming from a mile away instead of appearing out of nowhere. Moving on gravel was a beginner's mistake, though Hunch told him otherwise.

*Did they do it on purpose to lure me out?*

A year ago, he would have turned to face the pursuer, but the scar on his back had stripped him of that arrogance. Since the Republic had covertly doubled its investments in the archipelago, crime became scarcer, and a lot more dangerous.

Even unparalleled talent and greatness had their limits if he ran into a rogue with double his attributes.

*As ol' Nasi says: better to exceed in cautiousness, than to meet a fool's death.*

From the paved roads of the upper city to the maze of meandering dirt alleys of the outer circle, Higharbor held no more secrets than the hilt of his serpent dagger. His job was to get to know people and places. New faces stuck out, he could safely find out who was after him in the morning, if he cashed in a few favors.

A hint of violet shone through the cloudy sky where the Wandering Moon peeked through. He stopped in the nook between two houses to listen. The caw of seagulls, a married couple arguing over who last washed the dishes, the cheery ruckus of a tavern. Five minutes passed without any sign of his pursuer.

Tension faded away. Flynn slipped his knives back into their sheaths under his clothes and headed home. Perhaps the danger wasn't the stalker but their employer.

He had always stayed away from the Republic's shady affairs and the true criminals. And despite his greed and oily smile, the merchant hadn't seemed the type to hire thugs to threaten him. He rarely misjudged humans.

*I guess there is a first time for—*

The soft drumming just behind the corner sent his instincts flaring. His gut had been right, if the stalker managed to follow him, he must be dangerous.

*Why did he alert me again? What game is he playing?*

His hands rose to his throwing daggers before Hunch told him that would be a bad idea. Flynn resisted the temptation to exert Mana Sense over his pursuer. If he was forced into a confrontation, the less information he revealed about his skills, the better.

The stranger wasn't the only one holding back. Flynn darted into a closed alley and kicked off the wall to climb over the roof of a dingy house. Out of sight, he melded into Shadow and raced a meandering path through the fishing district as quickly as he could keep up his stealth.

*Damn Nem, I'm going to punch your handsome face next time I see you.*

He ran circles around the outer city to the Merry Gale. Lowering his cloak, he wove through the crowd of tipsy customers for a familiar barmaid. Marleen carried a tray of cheap beers with her trademark grin, exotic red hair fell in pretty locks to her bosom.

“Can you keep an eye out for me?”

Suspicion melted into a blooming smile as she recognized him. “Sure. Why don't you stay for a drink? If anyone's giving you trouble, the boys can take care of it.” Marleen gestured to a group of rowdy young men, downing ale like water.

She grasped the situation on the fly without judgment or questions. That's why he had always liked her. For a while, he thought it might be love, but they would end up a disaster living under the same roof. If only he had understood that a little earlier like she did, he could have spared himself a lot of heartache...

Flynn repaid the beaming expression. “Maybe next time. Just Sketch them down and keep away. They might be dangerous.” He slipped towards the backdoor. “Thank you for the help, Marly. I owe you one.”

“You *sure* do.” She winked. “I'll add it to your tab.”

*For Yatei's sake, don't blush!*

Flynn pinched himself to free his mind from stupid thoughts. Back into the labyrinthine alleys, he ran half a mile concealed in Shadow before halting to listen. Ten minutes, still nothing.

*What a shitty night.*

He should be relaxing on his couch with a full stomach, not perched on a shingle over a stinking alley. Someone was also going to have a bad day when he discovered who was behind this.

Flynn ran and waited twice more to be certain he had shaken off his pursuer. Or was there more than one?

Unless the governor himself was after him, he should be safe. Hunch gave him no warning when he headed back to his neighborhood. Flynn took one last winding path. He would find out who was messing with him, but he always had his best ideas on a full stomach, and he was famished.

The stink of fish and humans waned to the crisp azul trees as he walked into the residential district. When he had bought the house, the area was barely outside the slums. As the city expanded, the neighborhood started to house the booming middle class.

Freshly painted houses sprouted in ranks, noisy families moved in, and the streets got paved with lamplights at each corner. He had thought of moving, but the pedestrian community

offered a new kind of anonymity and more pleasant company. Not to mention his building had tripled in value. One of his best investments without even trying.

*True genius can't be hidden...*

A kid with one front tooth missing stood in front of him, two more little terrors chuckled behind the brat. Large deadly eyes that could melt any enforcer's heart pointed up at him. "Can you play with us, Finn? We need someone to be the evil troll."

*Uh, he sure practiced a lot...*

Hard work should be rewarded. Flynn crouched on one knee, wishing for nothing more than a meal and his bed. "Do you even know what a troll is?" He only had a vague idea himself, but as an adult, he could feign omniscience.

"Ehm..." Nimmy looked at his little companions for help and scratched his head. "An ugly evil monster. It eats people and it's big like you." He raised his arms to show he was perfect for the role.

*You little brat.*

"C'mon, kids." A stout woman came to his rescue with a patient smile. "Flynn must have had a long day. Let him rest. It's time you go to sleep."

Nimmy turned his pleading eyes at her. "But Ma'—"

"No buts." Her warmth turned to steel. "It's already late. And who taught you to make that look? Are these the skills they teach you at school?"

"They told us we must practice every day to raise our levels." Nimmy articulated with a proud look.

"Did they...?" His mother nodded. "Then maybe you should practice Cleaning Your Room more often."

Pride withered to horror, his little friends exchanged a look and disappeared into their homes. "That's not fair!"

"It's time to be brave." Flynn ruffled his hair and slipped in the kid's pocket one of the sweets he had bought in the upper city for Kien. His mother played along, feigning ignorance. "I'll play with you on my next day off."

Flynn walked the last steps to his house. He disabled two metal locks, three mana wards and closed the door behind him. In over two years of business, he had kept the best enchantments for himself. Within the walls of his house, not even a Fate scryer would be able to spy on him.

The ship tickets and a jar of copper mesars were on the kitchen counter where he left them that morning. He did one last check of the other warning wires covering every window and the stash below his bathroom tiles. Everything was in its place.

A relieved breath escaped his lips. Kicking off his shoes, he crashed on the couch and unbuckled all his knives except for five to be more comfortable. He really needed a vacation. Between the Republic's shady movements and the new bands of thugs, Higharbor was becoming stressful.

The excitement of living in the capital had long faded as he conquered every reasonable challenge Higharbor had to offer. He wanted to check the wild stories of the frozen peaks from where you couldn't spot a hint of sea, and the so-called metropolis on the mainland. The sailors were definitely lying about the size.

*I can't leave yet... Maybe I can prolong my trip, they always ask me to stay longer anyway.*

His stomach grumbled, reminding him he still had to eat. With a groan, Flynn stood up and lit his stove. He looked in his cold box and took out the few ingredients remaining. He quickly sliced some vegetables and fileted a redfin bass.

Turning to grab a pinch of salt, Flynn furrowed his brows at the chopping board. He was pretty sure he had cut the fish into four pieces, not three. Then again, he hadn't been paying too much attention. He yawned and scratched his nose on his wrist.

*I should sleep more...*

He threw the sliced vegetables into a pan. When he turned back to finish preparing his bass, a pair of violet eyes stared back at him.

"Meow."

A cat with lustrous silver fur sat on his kitchen counter, observing him with idle curiosity.

*What the fuck!*

Flynn jolted back, hitting his leg on the corner of the table. Biting back a curse, he raised his kitchen knives to defend himself. Hunch didn't offer any advice. The skill worked best with sapient races, but it would offer some sign if his life was in danger.

The majestic feline licked its paw and declared him unworthy of its attention with a lazy meow. It nibbled on another piece of fish.

*I didn't eat or drink anything the merchant offered. I would have realized if someone drugged me.*

His senses were sharp as always and his mana flow showed no alteration. He wasn't hexed, and he definitely wasn't dreaming. A silver cat stood in his kitchen and ate his dinner as if he wasn't standing there.

*It must have slipped inside when I checked the windows. That's it! I'm just too tired.*

While it was strange he hadn't noticed, people always told of odd things happening when the Lost Sister hung in the sky. He had often laughed at such absurd stories. Maybe the spirits were messing with him in retaliation.

"How did you get in here?" Flynn cautiously approached the counter, showing his open palms. Lightning Magic would serve him as well as any blade. "You're not going to bite me, are you?"

The cat didn't hiss or raise its silver coat, continuing to watch him with aloof condescension. Flynn took it as a promising sign, he rested his hand before its whiskers waiting to be touched first. After some tense seconds, the cat lifted its head to lick his fingers.

"Meow." It rubbed its neck on his arm, showing its fur was as soft as it looked.

"Fine. I'll forgive you for stealing my dinner." Flynn scratched behind its ear, eliciting a satisfied purr. "But you still owe me an explanation. How did you get in here?"

A sharp knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He wasn't expecting anybody. "You just stay—" The feline had disappeared.

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Kai had hoped the looks would stop after he bought normal clothes, but passersby kept being rude. "People really have no manners." The woman in that tavern had stared daggers at his back just for asking directions. Now, a kid was eyeing him from a window like he was some kind of attraction.

*Huh?*

A single glance sent the toothless brat scrambling back in fright. Higharbor had changed more than he expected, and not for the better it seemed.

*What am I doing wrong?*

He had been wandering for the better part of two hours. Admittedly, this wasn't the best plan he had ever devised: aimlessly strolling through the city following Hallowed Intuition. Despite its last specialization, the skill remained finicky as ever to use outside of combat. He had only trained it looking for shelter and treasures inside the Sanctuary.

It was the first time he used it to track a person. The whispers had led him in random loops throughout the entire outer city. He only persisted because he shouldn't have heard anything if there wasn't someone with a strong bond with him somewhere close.

*Unless I misinterpreted the description... No, it doesn't make sense...*

The portal had opened in a submerged ruin off the coast of Kawei. Zervathi had left him stranded in an air bubble, several meters below sea level, though swimming to shore had been quite pleasant without the fear of abyssal sea monsters ripping him to shreds. All the ships he had found in Eastwin headed for the capital. And unless inflation had run rampant while he was away, the only captain who hadn't turned him away, fleeced him.

"People have lost any sense of shame." He shook his head. "If this is a bust too, I'll look for a place to stay and leave in the morning. Hmm... I should probably stop talking to myself."

Inside the Sanctuary, it had been a way to retain his fluency for when he escaped, or maybe just his sanity. Losing the habit had proved harder than he expected.

"Who cares? People are staring anyway." Kai stopped in front of a two-story house. The white walls and blue overlays of the windows were a common aesthetic choice if a little anonymous. "What a mess of runes... it's definitely not Valela. And Lou should have better taste."

It hurt his soul to see such an assortment of random cloaking enchantments and wards. Like a kid who thought more was always better and poured his collection of watercolors on the white canvas. Sure, most of the runeworks weren't much themselves, but even the most incompetent enchanter didn't deserve to have their work disgraced to this extent.

*I almost hope Hallowed Intuition is wrong.*

But no. The whispers definitely told him that was the house. "Well, there is only one way to find out." Kai strode closer and knocked. Counting till ten with no response, he knocked again. "Hey, I can tell there is someone in here. Open up."

*So rude.*

He was about to shatter the puny magic on the lock for being an eyesore when the door finally opened.

"Flynn?" Kai looked up at the young man before him. Besides the obnoxiously tall lanky frame and the failed attempt at stubble on his face, he was still the same kid he had met years prior. "Damn, I was sure I had caught up with you."

The young man chuckled with a lopsided grin. "I should have known that strangeness and you always travel in company. Dinner's almost ready." He walked back inside, leaving the door open.

*Well... Nice to know I was missed.*

Kai stepped inside. "It's good to see you t—"

Flynn suddenly stopped still. "You're late. You said you'd be fine." His shoulders were shaking, though he didn't turn to face him. "It has been two years."

"Yeah, I know. I ran into some... complications. It's a long sto—" The words choked in his throat when two glassy green eyes met his gaze.

Flynn threw his arms around him. "I told them you'd be back." His voice cracked, and Kai could feel Flynn trembling against his shoulder.

"I missed you too." Kai returned the hug.