

Chapter 147 - Past and Present

Ventura leaned in with a smile too white on her red lips. Two blonde curls escaped from her pink feathered hat, framing her face in a way that must not be a coincidence.

“Don’t worry, hon’. It’s normal to be a little afraid, but this is an easy journey. I gave my word to take care of you till Higharbor, and I intend to keep it.” She booped his nose.

The only worry I have is you.

Kai resisted the temptation to swat away her hand. He’d be on this ship for days yet, better not to offend the captain of the *Ventura* on his first minute aboard.

Damn confusing names.

“I’m not scared.”

“Of course you’re not, hon’. You’re a brave young man.” Ventura flashed another smile that said she didn’t believe it for one second. “Is it your first time on a proper vessel?”

The question stumped his thoughts, bringing back long-buried memories. “I’ve taken a ship before.”

How long has it been?

Whiteshore, a lifetime away. After the governor took away everything they ever knew and forced them to relocate to Greenside. Kai missed whatever Ventura was saying, though it didn’t seem to require an answer.

“Warn one of the crew if you’re feeling seasick, and don’t wait till you start emptying your insides on my deck, hon’.” The woman was already marching to shout orders to her crew.

Waves buffeted the hull of the ship in the rising tide. Men and women with tanned skin and bare feet cast off the ropes tying them to the berth, pushing against the pier with long poles to guide their way out of the docks.

“Are you okay?” Flynn threw him a worried look. “Getting me a way to Higharbor is more than enough. You’re still in time to stop the ship if you want to stay here.”

Kai pushed down the morose mood, this journey wasn’t an exile like the last. “I’ve told you I want to go a dozen times already, I’m not changing my mind. We’re stuck together. Try to stop the tears of joy.”

Recalling Reishi's warning, Kai had the growing suspicion Flynn might have been the one to inform the merman about own his past. Reishi was well-informed about trade and politics, but not about the rebels.

Why is he being so weird about this?

Hesitation and uncertainty were not something he ever associated with Flynn. The boy brimmed with the confidence of an old fisherman at sea. Kai had thought it was due to the *truthteller's* threat looming over him, but with the *Ventura* sailing for deeper waters, they were now safe. The Republic would have already stopped them if they suspected something.

“How’re *you* doing?” Kai peered at him, trying to pierce his self-assured visage.

Spirits, I’m so bad at this.

“I’m great. We’re leaving Sylspring behind for Higharbor, a *proper* city.” The cunning smirk was back, burying whatever anguish he had beneath a sea of smugness. “I was just checking if you were getting homesick. Don’t fret, with me here you don’t have anything to fear.”

Kai rolled his eyes. “I already feel so much safer.”

“It’s my duty to look after you.” Flynn clapped his back, speaking with the cadence of an old mentor. “As long as you listen to me, you’re going to be fine. Come, I’ll show you to our quarters.”

The cabin they had to share reminded Kai of his room in Greenside, just smaller. Two beds occupied all the space and one of them was a hammock. The ceiling brushed against his hair and forced Flynn to bend down.

Overall, it was better than he imagined. He had passed his first journey at sea stashed on a crowded deck for a day and a half, his expectations weren’t exactly sky-high. With how sudden their journey had been set up, Kai thought he’d have to sleep with other sailors or in the cargo hold. This beat both options by a mile.

A knapsack with Flynn’s things slumped in a corner. It was maybe a fifth of his own luggage. The boy looked with an amused smile, as Kai struggled to fit the bags his mother forced on him inside the cabin.

“Traveling light, your Majesty?”

“Shut up, plebeian.”

Flynn gave him a mock bow. “My deepest apologies, your Majesty. Forgive this humble servant, I’m sure you couldn’t survive without bringing your fifth favorite scarf.”

"You're forgiven, I'm feeling merciful today," Kai gestured with a pompous wave. "I couldn't part with my snacks. I guess a hardened man like you doesn't need such trivialities."

The smirk was wiped from Flynn's face in less than a blink. His eyes darted to the heavy luggage as if they had turned into solid gold. "Maybe I was too hasty in my conclusions."

Kai stood up to protect his bag, his body filling most of the cramped cabin. "Keep your grubby hands away from my things."

"I just want to see what you brought," Flynn threw him the pitying look of a mistreated puppy. "You said we were friends."

This is so not fair.

"Fine. But tell me if you take something, and don't touch my other things." Kai flattened to the wall to let him pass. "All the food is in the left bag, it needs to last the whole journey."

"On my honor," Flynn put a fist on his chest in some kind of military salute. He knelt before the bag like it was a holy relic, slowly unlacing the straps that kept it close.

Kai shook his head. He knew better than to leave him alone with his snacks and was soon proven right. "Didn't you say you were just looking?"

"I'm saving it from spoiling," Flynn bit into a ripe peach, a new import from the Republic. A few drops of juice ran down his shameless chin. "I'm also freeing more space in our cabin, you should thank me for my sacrifice."

"You're truly a hero."

"I know." He nodded, mumbling the words with a full mouth.

A salty breeze welcomed them on deck. The vessel had made it out of the bay and was gaining speed as its light pink sails swelled with the wind. A flock of seagulls cawed in the sky, escorting them like a guard of honor.

Sailors moved with intent spurred by Ventura's commands. No one dared to dally longer than a breath in her presence. Getting a good share of annoyed glances from the busy crew, they stopped in an empty spot on the quarterdeck.

The ships gently rolled over the waves while the pastel buildings on shore rapidly shrunk. Flynn leaned on the wooden railing beside him, contemplating the horizon in a rare silence.

From the moment Kai learned of the *truthteller*, his life had fallen into a blur of activity. He had to choose his next steps, organize his departure and win over his family. It had been hardly a day, and he was already leaving Sylspring. Spirits knew when he would be back.

Watching the shore fade before his eyes, the reality of the situation began to sink in. It *wasn't* homesickness, he hadn't spent enough time in Sylspring for that. There wasn't a sense of mourning like when he left the estate. Yet, as the urgency of his hasty departure fell away, Kai was left with a sense of hollowness he couldn't quite place.

That touristy town might not have been home, but he was comfortable there. He knew what to expect, how to navigate its streets and people. Now, for the first time in years, he had little idea of what waited ahead, and couldn't run away to the estate if things went badly.

When was the last time...? Right.

The last time he sailed a ship on the open sea, he had traveled from Yatol to Yanlun. Not the faintest idea of what was going to happen to his family. Kai distinctly remembered the fury and powerlessness, raw and unbridled like only the emotions of a child could be.

Four little children sprang up in his mind: Lou, Ana, and the twins Uli and Oli. As close to friends as he got before Flynn and Reishi. Their faces were blurry in his memory, an

innocent and fleeting summer dream. He remembered promising a crying Ana they'd meet again *soon*.

Greenside had quickly beaten out of him any idea of keeping that promise, pushed his thoughts away from the foolish delusion of a child. His childhood abruptly ended the day he boarded the Republic's ship. No point looking back at what would never be again.

Yet this second journey at sea was different. He wasn't a helpless child at the mercy of fate. He *chose* to be here. He might not know what lay ahead, but he was more ready than ever before. Skills in his status, silver in his pockets, and a profession on top.

I'm different.

Sylspring was little more than a colorful jagged line on the horizon. The sea turned into a darker shade of blue as they headed for deeper waters.

"Thank you," Flynn broke the moment of contemplation, though his gaze remained on the frothing waves. "You didn't have to go so far to help me. I truly appreciate it."

"Don't mention it." Kai kept his voice steady, glad the other boy couldn't see him blush. "And I told you that Sylspring was becoming too stuffy with the investigation anyway."

"Maybe, but you took a risk by helping me. You'll get implicated if people come looking for me."

Now you're being an idiot.

Kai turned to look at him until Flynn reluctantly met his gaze. "Consequences like those you paid for helping me escape from those jerks?"

At the time, he'd been so mad at him for his involvement with the rebels that he had ignored the price it cost his friend. Swept in the chaos and death that ensued, he spent no time to ponder the results of Flynn's actions.

Always an excuse... Guess we're both idiots.

"I—" Flynn scrunched his brows. "I wouldn't have stayed with them anyway."

Kai gave him a flat look. "Can you stop being an idiot or do I have to throw you into the sea? Even if that were true, you did more than simply cut bridges. It's not a contest, but if it was, you'd be winning."

It was his turn to look away, Kai focused on the rolling waves the ship left behind. Silence stretched once more.

Great, now I'm definitely blushing.

"I guess, I'm the best then," Flynn muttered.

From his tone, Kai was ready to bet everything he owned his smirk was back. "You're pretty decent."

"Don't worry, kid." Flynn patted his head with mock reassurance. "You won't have to fear anything as long as you follow me."

Spirits, what have I done? I take it back!

"Don't call me *kid*." Kai glared at him. "And you're not in charge."

“You are three years younger than me,” he pointed out, looking down at him to highlight their height difference. While Kai was just hitting his growth spurt, Flynn was in the middle of it, standing a full head over him.

“I’m the one who got us this trip.” He hated how shrill his voice sounded in his ears.

“And I’m the only adult. What are you going to tell the enforcers when they ask you where your parents are?”

“Why would they do that?”

Flynn gave him a triumphant grin as if he had stepped into an unseen trap, “Because... Higharbor is closer to the Merian Republic than the rest of the archipelago. Kids are not supposed to wander the streets of the upper city without a family member or a guardian.”

“You’ve already been to Higharbor?” An accusation rather than a question.

The boy’s smile grew wider. “They brought us there a couple times during my *education*. I also had to suffer through lessons in proper Merian *civility and decorum*.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Kai had suspected Flynn omitted a few details to his advantage, though it couldn’t be an outright lie either.

“When exactly did you want me to tell you? Before or after you decided we were going to Higharbor and left me to organize the trip? It’s not like it would have made any difference.”

“Huh... That’s...” Kai vainly tried to find a counterargument. There weren’t any that would hold. “Fair point.”

The pleased look on Flynn's smug face would tempt a saint to slap him. "Don't worry, *little brother*. There won't be any problem as long as you listen to my wise advice."

I guess two brothers traveling together would attract less attention.

"Will people even believe it? We don't look that much alike." Kai rested his forehead on the railing as a patronizing hand descended on his shoulder.

"I know you're not as handsome as me, but you can be my less dashing sibling. Trust me, no one will suspect a thing."

The dark churning waters hid the seabed of the Shallow Sea. With the winds blowing in its sails, the *Ventura* cruised with surprising speed. Flynn would likely survive the fall, though there was a chance he might not be able to catch up to the ship.

That would mean a bunch of angry sailors. *Ventura* might even ask him for remuneration or make the rest of the journey unpleasant.

Pity, maybe tomorrow...

Kai removed the offending hand from his shoulders. "I need to work on my skills, don't disturb me." Without giving him a chance to respond, he disappeared into their cabin, shutting the door.

The undulating motion of the ship and the bustle of the sailors outside posed another challenge. He had long learned to push distraction out of his mind even without Attuned Meditation. After two hours of mana exercises, Kai took out Virya's cube.

He had solved sixteen layers thus far. The intricate puzzle of sliding pieces and runes required to thread his mana into three strands to find three complementary solutions. His mind strained to juggle the different tasks, conscious that even the tiniest mistake would mean starting over.

There was progress, albeit painfully slow. Past were the days when he could complete a whole layer in one sitting. He managed to stave the worry since Inspect allowed him to remember every inch of conquered ground, and take up from where he left.

I'll get my extra attributes.

Lost in the glowing lines, the day flew by. He was close to completing the seventeenth layer. A coconut barely missed Flynn's face as he entered without knocking and distracted him.

The clicking pieces announced his success as the puzzle reset. A step closer to solving this hellish contraption. He barely held back a shout, hitting his hand on the low ceiling in his triumph.

Nursing his hands, Kai walked out to stretch his cramped legs. Something was different. Loud voices, wooden buildings and people, lots and lots of people on land not far from him.

"Welcome to Old Port, hon'," Ventura's thumping boots came up to him.