

## Chapter 151 - The Upper City

His mouth hung agape, muttering a numb 'oh'. There must be some better, more appropriate reaction buried somewhere in his mind. Kai couldn't find it.

They were alive and well. His heart lightened as he discarded the grim possibility.

*Or alive at least... I should have known they'd get into trouble. I did teach them how to learn and train skills when we were kids.*

Maybe it was arrogant to think that those basic instructions were the reason why they got into the scholarship program. The Republic might not be as picky or demanding as Virya, but they didn't choose anyone for their indoctrination program.

"I don't have all day," a middle-aged woman grumbled, pulling Kai back to the present. The queue for registration had moved, just two more people were ahead of them. He scuttled forward with an apologetic look.

The distant and vague prospect of meeting his childhood friends had suddenly sprung up much closer than he imagined. Flynn observed him with a studious look, keeping his silence.

"Are you sure it was them? It has been years, they must look very different now." Kai couldn't help himself, though he knew it was a stupid question.

"I don't think there are many twins named Uli and Oli. I only talked to them once or twice, but they had a *certain* reputation for getting into trouble with the teachers. I also heard the names of the other two, though I can't be completely sure."

*Yeah... that's the twins. At least they'll get better professions and prospects. They can't believe the bullshit the Republic teaches them after they forced us to relocate.*

Flynn had told him enough of those classes at Hawkfield to make him worry. It had been close to seven years, half their lifetime. More since the time as babbling babies didn't count for them.

People changed, children more so. It wouldn't be weird if they were complete strangers and forgot him. Spirits knew what might have gone down since they last said their goodbyes on that ship, and he made a promise he couldn't keep.

*I should have found a way to visit them sooner.*

The end of the queue saved him from more brooding. A bored clerk took their ID, wrote down their names and asked a series of routine questions. When did they land in Higharbor? Where were they from? How long did they plan to stay? What did they plan to do?

From the look of total disinterest of the man, none of the answers seemed to matter. Kai was happy to let Flynn take the lead, only speaking when he was directly questioned.

He needed time to untangle the jumble in his head. Jumping into the worst-case scenario without enough information was a bad habit he wanted to get rid of.

*I need to get out of my head.*

The beaming sun welcomed them outside the stuffy office at the foot of the hill. "Do you know where they are now?" Kai asked, shielding his eyes with a hand.

"They're still in the program..." Flynn shuffled with the papers of their registration. "Each class and year has slightly different schedules. They'll probably be in Hawkfield during the summer, but they'll come back here in a few weeks, months at worst. There must be more kids in the program who know better, we can ask around."

*It has been years, a few more weeks won't make a difference.*

Kai nodded, glad he'd have more time to prepare, and guilty for the relief he felt. "There is no hurry, we still need to find a place to stay." When he heard Flynn knew them, he feared they'd find them that same day, maybe waiting outside the registration office.

"As you command, Your Majesty." Flynn bowed, gesturing to the hill. "Shall we go visit your summer palace or do you wish to fetch your carriage?"

*Where did he even learn what a carriage is? There aren't any in the archipelago.*

Kai marched toward the hill ignoring him and hiding the smile on his face. "Stop being an idiot. You can pay for lunch today."

"Wait, Your Majesty! I ask forgiveness if I caused offense, it's not proper for a servant to pay. What will people think of you?"

"I'll manage the shame, and you can afford it. You've earned as much as me betting with the crew."

Flynn caught up to him, cutting his shenanigans. "It wasn't bad. We could go play again tonight. I heard Highharbor has the best betting dens."

*A Thousand Ways to Lose Your Mesars in a Day, a book by Flynn Rilei.*

"If making money was so easy everybody would do it. The only winners are the dens, trust me." A crew of sailors was one thing, but he wouldn't go against a bunch of professional gamblers even with his Favor. And their play was unlikely to work a second time.

“You don’t think we are good enough to do it?” Flynn tempted him like an imp whispering on his shoulder. “We could make so much silver.”

*Begone spawn of darkness! I will not be tempted.*

“I’d rather quit while I’m ahead,” Kai fended off all his attempts to convince him. It had been fun, true, and he wouldn’t mind betting again in the future to test his Favor. But it couldn’t become a habit, a single winning streak didn’t make them professionals.

Grumbling, Flynn accepted he wasn’t going to be moved on this. Crossing an invisible line, the higher mana density washed over them, marking the boundaries of the upper city. There was probably an array like in poshtown, though the increase was much sharper.

*It must be ridiculously large, even if it’s not as powerful as the one at Virya’s estate.*

The upper city stood over not one but two hills overlapping against each other. The lower one was a fenced ground for the private residences of high officials and diplomats. Kai spotted some rare patches of lush green and trees peeking over the iron gates. The governor’s own palace was up there, where he lived with his wife and three kids.

Somehow, he had never thought the man could have a family, children even. And that they were probably not that far from him right this moment, enjoying the wealth they pilfered from the island.

*Don’t let him ruin the day.*

Kai hurried after Flynn up the highest peak that housed the critical infrastructures of Higharbor. That included the airdock where the zeppelin landed and the public and private offices of the Republic.

A large ivory dome glinted on top where the local council, headed by the governor, met to manage the archipelago. The same halls where the relocation had been passed.

*Maybe visiting the upper city wasn't such a great idea after all.*

Kai didn't know how the legislative process worked and didn't care to learn. The people who ruled over his life could be just a little further up right now. He didn't realize his teeth and fists were clenched till Flynn hurried him on.

"It's a big lump of rock, isn't it? Do you want to go take a look? You need special permission to enter, but we can look outside and make fun of who comes out."

"No, I've seen better lumps of rocks," he didn't trust himself to go anywhere near that place. Putting a face to those people who ruined his life in Whiteshore would only serve to make him madder. Better they remained nameless shadows than actual people. "Let's go see the shops, I'm hungry."

*Great, now I'm stress eating.*

"Me too, we hadn't had a proper breakfast in *ages*," Flynn agreed enthusiastically, dragging him to a baby blue shop with glazed and fruit confections on display. "I always wanted to try this one."

The smell of sweet baked goods that wafted out of the door was heavenly and made him forget his dark mood for a moment.

"Good morning, misters," a young man with dark hair and pale skin welcomed them. His smile noticeably stiffened as he scanned them from head to toe with a critical eye. "Can I help you?"

Kai stared down at himself, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. A quick deliberation concluded he was dressed perfectly fine. He had even washed and changed at *The Golden Pearl*. His beige trousers and green shirt were a bit wrinkled since he stuffed them in a bag, but there were no holes or stains he could see.

*Great, capital snobbery.*

No one had given him a second look even around poshtown. Kai was ready to stomp out of the door with his tenuous mood about to shatter.

“I’ll take a couple of those cloudberry thingies, also two...” Flynn ordered without giving the employee a second glance. He threw the exact coins on the counter and left with a smile.

“Whaff?” He stuffed one of the fruit confections in his mouth and offered him the bag, “Take your pick.”

Kai bit into a cream puff harder than was necessary. The dough was warm and fluffy while the filling had a strawberry aftertaste. He couldn’t help but let out a pleased moan. Probably the best thing he had eaten since Dora left.

“He was being an asshole for no reason,” he complained, going for another.

“Yeah, most of them are, especially in Higharbor,” Flynn agreed, chewing his third tartlet. “You can spend half your life being irritated or ignore them.”

*Or I can get unreasonably wealthy, buy that business and fire him. Is that an overreaction?*

Most of the passersby who strolled the wide roads had the pale complexion of the Republic. More than he had ever seen in one place. The natives were less than a quarter. Either dressed in plain clothes on an errand or bright silks and necklaces of pearls. As if they hoped to hide their identity behind the layers of lavish wealth.

On a hunch to confirm Reishi’s words, Kai activated Mana Sense. The sheer quantity of enchanted clothing nearly blinded him. From simple rough cooling runes to intricate tapestries of hundreds of glowing lines woven into the silk.

“Did you see something interesting?” Flynn asked.

“Yeah.”

The whole city was pulling him out of balance. It wasn't the suffocating crowded chaos or Old Port, but it was just as weird. A world of stone and marble with hardly any green apart from decorative flowerpots. It was starkly different from everything he had gotten used to in the previous eleven years on Elydes.

*If I adapted to getting reincarnated, I can do this too. It just takes more than a day.*

“We should probably go get lunch then, my treat.” Flynn continued to walk and joke without a care. His acting was flawless. “You can pick the place.”

*No way he'd offer so readily to pay.*

“Let's get off this hill, I'm sure there are plenty of fine places in the inner city.” Kai reciprocated the grin. “I'm not sure your wallet could take the prices up here.”

“You're very wise, Your Majesty.”

He rolled his eyes. “Lead the way, my faithful servant. If you continue to do well, I'll consider giving you a day off next month.”

“Such moving generosity.”

“I know, I can't help it.” Kai strolled down the hill.

He was relieved to sense the mana density fall. Away from the governor's presence and the pompous atmosphere.

The streets were still paved but had weeds growing at the seams, and he could spot the dirt path of the alleys. The people themselves were a more casual mix of origins. Though they walked with their high chins and straight shoulders, they didn't have the same judging eyes—for the most part.

*Guess the capital is still the capital.*

The inner city was a more comfortable halfway step between the opulence of the gilded hill and the rest of the archipelago.

Browsing around the streets, Kai quickly settled on a clean restaurant that promised the best fried seafood of the archipelago. He didn't know if that was true, but the spicy fried squid was the best he ever tasted. Crunchy breading, tender inside and not too oily.

*I missed this so much. Food does make everything better.*

After they ordered a second round, Kai fought off Flynn's attempts to steal from his plate with a tiny crab pincer. Narrowly avoiding getting his hand impaled, the thief snatched the last piece of shrimp and threw it into his mouth.

Kai let him enjoy his victory, he couldn't have eaten another bite for all the gold in Higharbor. The second plate had definitely been a mistake, and his stomach was close to bursting.

*But it was so worth it.*

They went for a walk in the shade of the building to help digest before retiring in *The Golden Pearl*.



“What do you want to do?” Flynn asked, sitting in his room.

“Find a place to rent.”

*There must be something like that in Higharbor. A cheap inn could also work, though I'd prefer a place without the constant coming and going of people.*

Flynn shuffled in his seat, staring at his feet, “I mean, after that?”

“I'll need to train my mana skills and profession.” The cube was the main priority, and it didn't require much space, any private room would do. He could also go to the upper city to recharge his reserves when he ran low.

Finding a place to train Blessed Swimmer and Swordsmanship would be more annoying, though he heard there was a beach on the northern side of Higharbor.

*The city kids need to have some kind of training ground, maybe they're renting those too?*

With the craziness he had seen in the upper city, one more talented kid shouldn't attract attention. “What do you plan on doing?”

“I— I'm not sure. I'll probably find a job. I didn't really think about what came *after*.”

“Now you've nothing but time to decide since no one is hunting you down, probably.”

*That sounded more encouraging in my head.*