

Chapter 165 - Traveling

Islanders were defined by their bond to the sea, seafarers living where the waves met the shore. That was how Kai had always seen it before he came here.

Along the northern coast west of Higharbor, the Shallow Sea continued to be uncharacteristically deep, a labyrinth of low trenches and shallows. It was a challenge to traverse it without waiting for the high tide to come in, and even the most seasoned sailors didn't dare sail vessels larger than a boat. Combined with the jagged shore that offered few good docking spots, it wasn't a surprise that most settlements were established inland.

The village they left this morning, Mateili's Rest, had been founded by its namesake more than eight generations ago in the windy countryside. Centuries before the Republic had set its eyes on these remote islands. Talking in the common hall of the inn, more than one person had no problem admitting it had been years since they saw the sea. Yet they were no less islanders than him.

Kai continued to mull, ahead of him the twins were engaged in another argument with Ana. Their options grew thinner the further west they moved, but that didn't dissuade them from quarreling.

It must be a way of keeping themselves entertained. When they were children, they couldn't go a minute without asking 'How far?'. I guess this is progress.

Across rolling hills with tall yellowing grasses and thorny bushes, the occasional tree stood guard over the landscape. The group proceeded west on a series of winding dirt paths. The fading lines in the ground slowly reclaimed by the vegetation rarely saw the wheel of a cart or human foot.

Close to winter, fields of purple and indigo wildflowers filled the air with sweet fragrance whenever the wind blew. The land wasn't infertile, but far too rocky to be worth the effort for most people, especially when there was plenty of arable land further south.

It was a different scenery than any other Kai had observed in the archipelago. Drier, without the vibrant greens, but full of life and critters hopping and skittering in the underbrush.

From the summit of the steeper hills, they could spot the sea as a thin blue line on the horizon. With his keen Perception, Kai could also smell a faint trace of salt in the breeze, hidden beneath layers of earth and plants.

The Baquaire Archipelago might be a speck in the vast lands under the domain of the Merian Republic, but it held so many places that begged to be explored. With his gaze locked beyond the horizon, he had forgotten what lay at his feet.

We always want what we can't have. There is still so much I don't know here.

The largest three of the seven major islands were dedicated to Yatei, and the smallest three to Kahali, while the fourth was named after one of the mythical founders of the archipelago. Velu, the island where humans could sometimes meet the spirits. Of all of them, he had only been on two. And he hadn't seen much of Yatol, where he was born.

Not to even count the myriad of minor islets strewn around their bigger cousins. Most were little more than rocks that came and went with the tides, but that still left hundreds, some with permanent villages on them.

So eager to sail for the continent when he hadn't seen but a fraction of his own homeland.

I've got years before my fourteenth birthday, no risk of getting bored.

If he couldn't visit every place, he could learn about them in other ways.

"We really got lucky with the weather," Flynn muttered to no one in particular, shielding his eyes from the sun beaming in the cloudless sky. The top of another hill granted them a far view of their surroundings. "How far is the next village? There isn't a shack in sight."

Very smooth, Kai ignored his veiled hints. *My answer stays the same.*

“We’re about fifteen miles from the closest village, I believe,” Lou glanced at the trio arguing over the map. “I’d have to check to be sure...”

“It’s fine, I was just wondering. That’s quite the distance.” Flynn waved away his own question as if it didn’t hold any particular interest. “We’re basically in the middle of nowhere.”

You sneaky motherfucker. Walking in the middle, Kai sent a silent threat only his *dearest* friend would see. He was repaid by a brief smirk.

Lou continued to talk, unaware of the exchange of glances. “There’ll be more villages closer to the western shore, but this region is the least populated area of Yanlun. If we don’t count the Veeryd jungle anyway.”

“I didn’t know that. Did you, *Kai?*” Nothing but honest curiosity on his face.

“I imagine we’ll have to walk the same path on the way back.” Kai glared again. Would Flynn stop pestering him if he gave him false hope?

“Is there something I’m missing?” The bulky teen glanced between them, and Kai was more annoyed he had been the one to slip the act than afraid of looking suspicious.

“Nah, Kai just isn’t a fan of walking.” Flynn gave a friendly slap to his back. “It’s not efficient enough for him, he’d much rather run all the way.”

“Huh, that’d be a long run,” Lou nodded to himself, pondering the logistics of the proposal.

With a last sneaky wink, Flynn changed the topic to what kind of foods they could expect to eat tonight. "I think the bean soup would have been better with a bit of pepper. Have you tried the new place? The one they opened just north of Ring Road. They make the best spicy squid in the city."

Under Lou's watchful gaze, Kai could only follow suit. He didn't understand why Flynn was so eager to play with Fate.

I mean, he does bring some good arguments...

It was the first time they were this far from any settlement since leaving Sylspring, and the low charge of the artifact wasn't an actual problem. At worst, nothing would happen, and they'd know there was a minimum threshold of Fate to activate the Fulcrum. In either case, it would be a shadow of the night in Higharbor.

Flynn might have a point, partially. But he wasn't the one chased through the city by a string of coincidences, without any idea what was going on.

Maybe, just maybe, Kai was *slightly*... apprehensive about repeating the experience. He didn't like the prospect of losing control over the situation again, and the Fate Fulcrum was unpredictable by its own nature.

Well, the return trip will give me a better estimate if there is a minimum threshold. I'd be surprised if anything happened with a three-day charge...

Swept in the relaxed chatter, Kai enjoyed exploring the new smells and plants of the countryside. Buzzing bees pollinated colorful flowers, while plump rodents nibbled on roots and nuts in the underbrush.

He wouldn't mind running ahead to see more of the region. If he were alone, he could store his backpack in his ring and leisurely skip between the slopes. No one to judge him if he hopped after the hamsters to catch one.

I know, I know, being social is important, and complicated.

They caught sight of yet another village. Two dozen little houses with thatched roofs huddling around a creek. As they passed by, they returned the waves at the people working in the fields of beans.

Into the afternoon, glimpses of faraway villages became a periodical occurrence. It was somewhat unusual that none appeared to reach a hundred people. From what Kai knew, settlements of that size shouldn't have survived the culling of the Republic seven years earlier.

Was it too much hassle to relocate them?

The sea was miles away, and not even traversable by most vessels. The Republic couldn't simply load them on a boat and go, though it wasn't an insurmountable barrier. If the governor was determined to see it done, they'd have made them march through the island if necessary.

Once Kai thought the Republic only cared about freeing the best stretches of shore to sell, and maybe that played a part, but the full picture was more complex. Gathering the natives into towns was about control and wealth.

The Republic didn't have the manpower to govern or tax a population spread into a myriad of villages and seven major islands. It was easier to crush any rebellion if you had to look through a handful of towns rather than a thousand tiny settlements. Without anyone realizing it, the governor had stripped away the biggest advantage they had.

These villages inland are too isolated to have any importance. The sea connects people, without that there is no worry they might do something.

Kai regretted not stopping in one of them when he saw their destination. Before them stood a rocky hill, the highest they had met in their journey. That was all good he had to say. Grey Quarry, an uninventive little settlement founded by the Republic to mine stone. One look at the dingy town peeking over the wooden wall, and he knew to temper his expectations.

The last stop before reaching the Vastaire ruins further north. And, with sundown approaching, also their last option to sleep with a roof over their heads.

Kai could taste the stone dust on his tongue a mile before they reached the gate. The square buildings he could glimpse beyond the palisade reminded him too much of his prefabricated house in Greenside.

“State your name and purpose,” a balding guard interrogated, barring the gate with a sneer. The stench of bad breath and alcohol let Kai keep his distance.

The twins were right, no decent place can be called ‘Grey Quarry’ even if it’s the biggest town around.

“We come from Higharbor to visit the nearby ruins, sir, do you know them?” Ana stepped forward with a friendly smile and a squeaky voice. “We’re looking for a place to spend the night.”

The man sucked his teeth, spitting at his feet. “Do you have an official identification? We can’t let dangerous strangers inside in the middle of the night.”

Amazing. We had to find the frustrated guard who had nothing better to do than to abuse his power.

The horizon was still lit by a crimson sunset. It was hardly evening, let alone the middle of the night. Kai kept his mouth shut, knowing his wisdom would only lengthen the time between him and a bed.

Six kids must be an immense security risk to be let inside.

“Of course,” Lou put a hand on the twins’ shoulders to quieten them and collected the IDs. Official identifications were another perk of the scholarship. “I assume everything is in order?”

The guard didn’t hide his surprise at the papers, his look quickly morphed into distaste as he failed to find anything wrong with them. “Yes,” he grunted. “Do you also have enough mesars to stay at an inn? Vagrants aren’t allowed in our respectable town.”

“I can assure you we have enough, sir,” Ana chirped with a hesitant frown back at them. Even after the journey, a passing glance at their clothes would be enough to tell they weren’t hurting for money. Though that wasn’t the problem.

Who the fuck asks for a bribe from a group of kids?

From the way Lou’s back stiffened, he must have caught on too.

“I’d like to trust your word, but how can I be sure?” A greedy glint gleaned through his terrible acting. “It’s my duty to ensure the well-being of our little town, and I’m afraid I can’t let you inside after dark without a *good* reason.”

Subtle as a ton of bricks.

The twins’ hushed whispers grew furious, ready to share a piece of their mind if Lou didn’t stand in the way. The tall teen looked silently ahead, Kai didn’t need to see his face to imagine his observant gaze debating how to solve the situation.

I’m too tired to deal with this shit.

Kai checked his pockets for the smallest coin he could find. He’d rather throw a silver in the sea than in the hands of the guard. “It’s late, can you let us in this *charming* town?” He slipped a single copper mesars in the hand of the guard, cursing that he didn’t carry chips.

The man obtusely stared at the coin, making Kai wonder why he had bothered trying to be subtle.

“There are six of you.”

Are you kidding me?

Improvisation could barely contain his growing contempt and irritation. He searched his pockets for two more coppers. “That’s all my mom gave me.”

“Fine,” the man spit again, missing his shoes by an inch. “Don’t make trouble.”

Kai slipped inside the gate without looking back. “A true example of professionalism,” he muttered, not caring whether he had been overheard.

The streets were even dustier than he expected, painting the building's lower half in various shades of gray. His first impression wasn’t wrong, nine out of ten buildings were the same identical boxes they used in Greenside. The few people on the streets hurried along with bent backs and grim expressions.

What are the chances that this town has a decent inn?

“Why did you pay a bribe?” Ana steeped in his oath with an outraged look, Kai wasn’t sure at who.

“We needed to get inside.” He replied matter-of-factly and walked around her. The first inn's broken windows looked like it had seen a murder this same week, so he moved past.

“We should have called his superiors.” Her voice rose behind him.

Kai sighed looking at her idealist expression. “It wouldn’t have made a difference. If he was so open about it, he must not fear any repercussions. I’d bet his superior will take a cut of the bribe too.”

“Even if that were true, we could have called for the mayor. Not everyone in this town must be corrupted. We sh—”

“Enough,” Lou stopped her, holding her gaze, calm but firm. “Let’s look for a place to stay, we’re all tired. We can discuss this in the morning.”

Closer to the heart of the town, the building grew marginally better, though the gray dust was omnipresent. Kai could already feel it grating inside his clothes.

Guess there might be a place worse than Greenside.

A severe old woman with hair a shade darker than the stone greeted them inside the *Lucky Duck Inn*. The stark interior was as cheerful as its hostess. “How many rooms? Breakfast is not included if you pay for a single night.”

Kai would bet she hadn’t been the one to choose the name.

A single night.

They’d reach the ruins in the morning, and everything would be just fine.