

Chapter 260 - Troubling Conjectures

A breeze swept the prow of the *Melenia*. Kai stretched his hands over the hull in defiance of his fears. Blue motes swirled around his fingertips, creating barely a tingle.

Captain Karin had said they were in a Red-1 area—pitifully low by most standards. He still had to wrap his head around the idea that beasts could be everywhere around them and that it was considered normal.

How do they let their kids outside if an awakened creature could swoop down at any moment?

Perhaps that was why people chose to cross the Vanean Sea to relax in the archipelago. There hadn't been a point in classifying the ambient density at home since every area outside Veeryd was Red-0—unable to awaken or sustain the weakest of beasts.

Mom was right. We were blessed.

Being born at the bottom of Red had always irked Kai, though there were clear advantages he'd taken for granted.

At least before the Republic extended their grubby hands...

The Spirits knew how the islands would look in a decade, or a century. It was strange to think he'd live to see it. Humans at his grade could comfortably reach a couple hundred years if they advanced young. He'd probably live even longer if he managed his... calculated risks.

Problems for another day.

The *Melenia* would dock in Varsea the next day. He knew nothing about the port town except it was almost one hundred miles north of Arphusa, where they had originally intended to land. All the plans, routes and contacts they had carefully arranged had to be scrapped—not at all the gentle landing he had envisioned with Reishi and Valela.

I must find a way to contact them.

"You don't like the ocean." A melodic voice mused behind him.

Kai turned to find Oraine studying him with a half-smile, his pale locks disheveled by the wind. Despite only wearing a plain cotton shirt and pants, he looked like he had walked out of a fashion show—at least he wasn't that much taller.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Oraine leaned on the railing beside Kai. He looked so at ease it was hard not to share in his mood. "Flynn told me a lot of stories about you while you were recovering. I've been quite eager to meet with you."

Great. I've got another stalker.

Kai fumbled in place, debating whether to dip with an excuse. "I wouldn't believe everything, Flynn likes to exaggerate." There were no whispers of warning.

They say curiosity killed the cat. Does having a magical link to a familiar count?

"I like the sea." He blurted out in response to the earlier statement.

The stupidly handsome face tinged with puzzlement. "You do?"

"I grew up on an island by the beach."

"Oh, I didn't explain myself properly." Oraine bobbed his head in sudden realization. "The shore is quite different from the deep ocean. It'd be like comparing corals and pearls. They're completely different."

Okay... definitely not from around here.

"I see. And how did you end up on this magnificent vessel?"

"Same as you. Boarded the wrong ship, got attacked by pirates and stranded by a storm. An interesting week altogether." Oraine chuckled.

"What about before?" Kai gave him a once-over. "You look like someone who could afford better than the *Intrepid*."

The only item of value Oraine wore was a bracelet of seashells—Kai bet it hid a cloaked enchantment. Either way, no one who reached Yellow ★★★ at sixteen could be poor.

"Unfortunately, I didn't consider all the logistics when I left." Oraine watched the waves with a rueful smile. "My mother already had the next seven centuries of my life planned out. Every day was like being smothered by the sun until I couldn't stand it any longer."

Powerful and loaded parents, check. Rebellious teenager, check.

"You run away from home?"

"Something like that." Oraine bit his lip. "Sorry, I'd prefer not to talk about my family. They're a whirlpool of endless deceptions."

Kai nodded, he could understand that.

Before he realized it, hours flew by, and he was swayed from his investigation. The two chatted about everything, from life goals to their shared love for seafood—they agreed that

crustaceans were far superior to mollusks. Aside from a few evasive answers, Oraine was nothing but pleasant and easy to talk to. He laughed at Kai's jokes, carefully listened to his responses, and respected his boundaries in return.

Damn, he's good.

It was already self-evident the young man had an unconventional upbringing and might be from a foreign kingdom. Yet, despite a few strange sayings and experiences, Kai wasn't any closer to guessing his identity. All places outside the archipelago were equally exotic to him.

Perhaps that woman had just misremembered...

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"Yeah, I'm sure. He boarded together with my family." The girl lifted her chin, lips pursed in annoyance at the repeated questions. "Oraine's not someone you forget easily. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've chores to do. That witch is going to charge me silver if I don't scrub the kitchens."

Her honey hair swept over her shoulders as she marched below deck, cursing Captain Karin's exploitative blackmails. The *Melenia* was perhaps a third the size of the *Intrepid*, and the fifty wreckage survivors had spilled into every free spot.

Kai and Flynn went to the taffrail around the stern to let the waves cover their words.

"That's the fourth person to change their story. Something's off," Kai said.

They had waited for Oraine to retire to his cabin before continuing their investigation. The more passengers they talked to, the more people suddenly remembered seeing or talking to him on the *Intrepid*. Some even mentioned knowing him for months prior to embarking, adding details with every retelling.

If Kai hadn't known better, he'd have suspected the entire ship was pulling an elaborate prank. He wouldn't let anyone play with his mind, or Flynn's. His friend was already known to fall for people fast and could be an easy target.

"Everyone was shaken after the pirates and the storm. They might have confused Rain with someone else when you first talked to them?" Flynn's tone lacked much of his usual confidence. "I've chatted with him more than anyone else, but I still don't remember seeing him before the wreckage."

Rain...? You've already got a nickname for him?

Kai scratched his brow, looking for any bias in his own suspicions. It was *technically* possible everything was just a series of unlikely coincidences—the Fate Fulcrum had proven how far those could reach. “Do you think I’m jumping to conclusions...?”

If Oraine was some kind of mind mage, he would have had every opportunity to manipulate his memories during their conversation. The fact Kai didn’t trust him any more than he had this morning sowed some doubts.

Was it some elaborate scheme? Or does he just have ridiculously high social skills?

“No, you’re definitely right. Rain’s hiding something.” Flynn perused the sea with a lost gaze. “But it doesn’t mean he’s plotting some evil scheme. You should know better than anyone that people are entitled to their secrets, *Matthew*.”

Touché.

“He did slit the throat of a pirate when he pulled me out of the sea.” Kai drummed his fingers on the taffrail. The images of the man intent on strangling him were slowly growing clearer. “And he must have also killed other raiders in the wreckage.”

Not typical teenage behavior, that was for sure.

“And is that a bad thing...?” A rogue wave splashed against the stern, sending a salty drizzle into their faces.

“No...” Kai dried his face on a sleeve, ignoring the burn in his eyes. “But he did lie about it. And he’s messing with people’s heads. If he wasn’t on the *Intrepid*, where did he come from?”

Flynn raked a hand through his hair. “He couldn’t be part of those cultish pirates if he killed them... Maybe he was a prisoner on their ship and escaped in the chaos?”

“Mhmm...” Kai shook his head. “The chaos was only on the *Intrepid*. Remember their leader was at Green. He must have sailed away as soon as the storm got bad.”

“Where else could Rain be? There were only two ships.” Flynn watched the clouds with a thin grin. “Unless he fell from the sky.”

None of this makes sense...

Both fell quiet, each trying to make heads or tails of the situation. There were too many unanswered questions hanging around Oraine for Kai to let it go. What type of person was comfortable killing people and convincing strangers that they were old acquaintances?

Should I just ignore it? Two more days and we’ll be on the mainland...

The breeze ruffled Kai's hair. Leaving a mystery unsolved went against his deepest nature, though he had to admit that it might be the wiser choice in this case. After getting almost strangled and drowning, he could appreciate the benefits of a more cautious approach.

"Maybe I should just speak with him," Flynn blurted out.

"What do you mean?"

"I could ask Rain for an explanation. That's the easiest solution. There could be some obvious explanation that we're missing."

"Absolutely not. You're not going to tell a potential mind scrambler you know about his secrets!"

"Now, *you* are the one being dramatic. Rain's not going to harm me."

"How do you know that?" Kai whispered. "You've met him less than a week ago."

Skills like Acting made this level of deception trivial. For all they knew, Oraine's affable demeanor was a front to hide his thirst for blood.

"What do you propose we do then?"

Kai wet his lips to force out the abominable word. "Nothing."

"Nothing...?" Flynn sounded even more surprised than him.

"Nothing." The word burned his throat. "The *Melenia* will dock tomorrow. We pay the captain and go our separate ways."

It's the smartest choice. I only take calculated risks, and this one isn't worth it.

If Oraine was truly a mind mage, the *best*-case scenario was that he charmed them to forget, the worst case... Kai shuddered. To have their whole personality rewritten and become a puppet with no will. He had no idea if that was a possibility—probably not at their grade. The scant information he possessed on such magic came from footnotes in Virya's books, but not knowing the exact power and limitations only made it scarier.

Another day and we won't need to meet aga—

"Matthew," a voice squawked, elderly but distinctly female—the terror of every survivor on board. Captain Karin strode toward them, her lips pressed into a severe line. A wide-brimmed hat hid her mop of gray hair and weathered face. "You look chipper today. Feeling better, aren't you?"

"A little—"

"I've already paid for him." Flynn glowered.

"You've paid to let him sleep in a cabin and for his food. Transport on my ship isn't free. I've already incurred numerous costs to provide for your sad lot. To not even mention the lost opportunities for this detour."

Flynn clenched his jaw, spitting fire from his eyes. "I've already given you a gold mesar!"

"Such a cheap price to save *two* young lives." Karin scratched her crooked nose with two fingers.

"I've already given you all I had."

I thought Flynn was exaggerating, but she really wants to milk every last piece of copper from us.

"I'll pay you when we get to Varsea," Kai said. "I've got some family there. I'm sure they'll lend me a little money for your troubles." That was an excuse as good as any to hide his ring.

"Family?" Karin watched him skeptically. "And I imagine you're willing to put that on paper?"

"Of course. I should be able to gather twenty silvers." Just because he was rich, there was no need to throw away his money. That should be more than enough to buy a place on this ship.

"Do I look like a mendicant to you?" The captain scowled. "I'm entitled to compensation by the Republic's law. Your lives are worth at least one more gold."

"Do we look that rich to you?" Kai gestured to his bedraggled clothes from the storm. "You can have those mesars in your hand as soon as we land."

"Eighty silvers.

"Fifty is the most I can do. I've not seen my cousins in Varsea in many years. They won't part with more than that."

"Deal." Karin spat into the sea. "I'll prepare the papers." She marched off.

"Why did you agree?" Flynn growled once she was out of earshot. "She's fleecing us 'cause we can't fight back."

"It's true we would have died if it wasn't for her ship," Kai said. "Now we've paid our debt. When we land, we can forget about her too."

And this whole cursed trip.

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The *Melenia* gently rocked under the moons. Kai stretched his arms, yawning. The captain had turned even a simple signature into a complicated affair. He was eager to close his eyes and wake up on land.

I'm not giving her a chip more.

Kai stepped into his cabin, ready to slip into his dreams, when he noticed someone was already present.

"Hi," Oraine sat on the lumpy cot, his pointy canines gave his smile a playful edge. "Sorry for disturbing you so late. I've heard you've been asking questions about me."

Oh, fuck...

Any speck of drowsiness had fled his mind. Kai summoned Water mana to his fingertips, ready to defend himself.

"There is no need for that." Oraine looked at him, amused, as if he were a puppy who had performed a particularly difficult trick. "I've just come to talk."