

Chapter 263 - Varsea

Kai walked down the wobbling gangway onto a dock of firm gray stone—likely compacted by an Earth shaper. After almost two weeks aboard, the phantom impression of the rocking ship made him sway with every step.

We really made it.

Excitement thrummed in his chest. Despite the accidents, he stood on the mainland, the same place of awe and mystery he had dreamt about as a child. Hundreds of foreign faces shuffled around the dock. Only half sported the lighter features he associated with the Republic. There were plenty of thick accents, colorful hairstyles and strangely cut gowns he had never seen before.

Vendors shouted the quality of their goods from the left end of the port. Dockworkers lifted crates and barrels larger than them, chattering in a slurred cadence. Across the streets, a kid pointed at the Melenia before being dragged off by his mother.

Kai took a deep breath to savor the moment. At red-3, the ambient mana gave him a feeling of fullness. Then the smell of sweat, brine and grime caught up to him, making him grimace.

Not the cleanest town.

“Get out of the damn way!” A portly man shoved him aside.

Or polite.

Kai moved beside a rotten crate to not bother more passersby. Little had gone as planned during this journey, though that made him all the happier to have moored.

“Look how many people.” Flynn strolled down the gangway, holding his bartered bag over a shoulder with one finger. The nap had turned him back into his lively self. He looked over his shoulder at Rain. “Are you good?”

The white-haired boy stumbled on land with a somewhat greenish tinge. He stared at his feet on the firm ground, looking ready to puke. “Is everything always so... still?”

“Usually. Unless the earth is shaking, but I don’t think you’d like that either.” Flynn clapped his back. “I’ve never been to a place like this... this town is huge.”

“Land settlements are known for their large population,” Rain mused. “This one should be avera—” He pressed his lips shut, holding a hand over his mouth.

“Well, let’s see for ourselves.” Flynn glanced at both. “Do you have any preference?”

The siren shook his head and threw a mournful look at the sea.

“We need an inn to pass the night.” Kai craned his neck to look around. “And a way to contact Valela.”

“I think I’ve heard of a place for that.” Flynn strode with all the confidence of a local, and all the knowhow of a drunk. “C’mon, nothing better than some walkin’ to settle in.”

Varsea got noticeably quieter once they stepped out of the docks—though not much cleaner. Tall buildings of white limestone and shops with enchanted windows lined the streets. Further up on the left, a rowdy market began. Runes were present wherever Kai turned, from buildings to clothes to the stove a woman used to sell a fish hamburger with fried onions and a bluish sauce.

“Who wants to eat something? I’m starving.” Flynn leaped to the stall, rummaging through his bag for coins.

The saleswoman smiled at his eagerness. “Best burgers in Varsea. Are you new in town? You must try them with some fresh cider.” She gestured to a keg. “You won’t regret it, I promise.”

“We’ll take three of those then.” Flynn quickly hit it off with the stall owner while the food sizzled on the grill. He smoothly inquired about the best places to visit and what to avoid.

Kai was half sure the vendor charged them extra, but he could not find it in himself to care once he bit into the bread. Flavors exploded in his mouth, making him sigh in satisfaction. On the ship, he had only eaten dried jerky and boiled vegetables.

“I’m good, thanks.” Rain raised a hand to refuse the burger and only sipped the apple cider. He looked paler than usual, pacing along the street.

Guess he wasn’t lying about never being on land.

A single conversation couldn’t rid all the awkwardness between the two of them, though Kai had stopped feeling the need to watch his back around him. He would never make new friends if he wasn’t willing to take a chance.

It is much easier to trust someone when I’m stronger than them... Flynn had a point on that.

“Meow.” Hobbes sauntered on the cobble street, pleased to be on land.

Kai crouched to scratch his neck. “Where have you been?” In the last few days, the furball had refused to leave the ship hold except to steal food at night.

The cat threw a side-eye at Rain. “Mew.”

“Wait?” He lowered his tone. “You knew he was a siren?”

Hobbes’s violet eyes regarded him with a mix of contempt and resignation as if he couldn’t believe his human was so thick. A series of impressions slipped through their bond. The cat had known it was better to keep his distance from Rain, even if not why.

“You could have told me something. Why did you come out now?” he grumbled, uncaring of the judging gazes of the passersby.

I’m arguing with a cat. So what?

“Mroooow.” The silver feline pushed more jumbled strings of meaning toward him.

Kai used Split Mind to make sense of them. “So he’s not a danger anymore?”

“Mew.” Hobbes licked his paw and rubbed his head against Kai’s hand, demanding a tribute.

Fine. You spoiled little cat. What do you want?

Kai picked up his Majesty to not let him dirty his paws crossing the two meters separating them and the stall. “Can I have one more of those? Just the fish, please.”

“Mrow.”

“Sorry. I meant two of them. Only one cooked.”

“Mrow.”

“Alright... three total.”

The woman didn’t question Kai’s conversation with the furball and gave him what he wanted. “That’ll be three coppers, dear. You have a very beautiful kitty.”

“Thank you.” Kai pulled the coins out of his pocket and exchanged them for the feline’s little feast.

“I missed you.” Flynn tried to scratch the cat, only to get his hand scratched instead. “Ahi,” he pulled back, hurt more by the rejection than the claws. “Why are you mad at me?”

“Mrow.”

“He’s envious you didn’t pay him much attention on the ship.” Kai narrowly avoided getting his own claw mark.

“Is that yours? I didn’t know you had a familiar...” Rain met his Majesty’s gaze, his pale smile quickly turned into a frown. “What kind of breed is he? He must be quite...”

Hobbes turned to his food with a hiss, leaving the boy in a stunned silence. Pride pulsed amidst disinterest and also proved the siren was no threat.

The mighty siren got knocked out by a mound of ground.

“I don’t know his species.” Kai petted him.

“He’s a very special boy,” Flynn sulked. “Let’s go visit the shopping district. We need to replace the clothes we lost in the wreckage.”

They followed the vendor’s direction to turn into another street. It soon became clear Flynn’s main goal was to find any food that tickled his Majesty’s interest and regain his favor.

Varsea’s market gave him a sense of nostalgia for home. While the goods were different, the vibrant atmosphere was the same. Loud bargaining and foreign smells filled the streets.

Kai quickly found a hunched graying man selling mana herbs from the back of a cart. The selection was wider than he expected from a random seller, and the prices higher too—similar to Higharbor.

“Do you have the money to pay?” The vendor squinted at his tattered clothes.

I do need a wardrobe change.

He flashed a couple pieces of silver. While there was nothing over Orange on display, he was always interested in experimenting with new plants. “What does this do?” He pointed to a heartleaf, one of the most common ingredients to brew healing potions.

“It’s used to close wounds,” the seller said, curt but truthful.

Hmm... I should probably buy a cauldron first.

Two spatial bags worth of luggage had gone down with the *Intrepid*. Even if money wasn’t a problem, it would take time to buy everything back. Kai picked a few herbs with an affinity to Water and Earth to study, playing on his ragged appearance to haggle down the price.

When he returned to his companions, Hobbes was already purring in Flynn’s arms.

Bought by his stomach. He didn’t even last to the second stall. He made sure to keep his thoughts to himself.

Rain perused the stalls. While he still avoided looking at any food, his face looked a tad healthier. He curiously picked up a hand-carved squirrel with pine needles woven into the tail and two black beads for eyes. From the look of wonder in his eyes, it might as well have been a live unicorn. “How much for this?”

“Just fifty chips for you.” The girl behind the counter beamed. “What’s your name?”

“Oraine. Hmm...” The siren tilted his head ever so slightly. “Does this work?” He pulled an orange coin from thin air.

Yatei have mercy!

Kai rushed over to switch the piece for a silver mesar. “Forgive my brother. It’s the first time he’s come to the market.” He gave the confused girl an apologetic smile. “Please. Keep the change.”

Rain followed him away from the stall, squirrel in hand. “From your expression, I reckon I did something wrong... Is that not how human transactions work?”

“You gave her a piece of Orange chromium!”

“Yes, it was the smallest coin I had. I’m not familiar with the Merian Republic’s mundane coinage.”

Didn’t you say you didn’t have time to pack? Broke my ass!

“That’s worth ten gold coins. A million times what she asked.” Kai pointed to the coin in front of his face. One half sported an elaborate crest while the other a tailed siren wielding a trident—another give away for his origins.

“Mhmm... Foreign coins shouldn’t be too uncommon in a port town. But I’ll be more careful in the future. Thank you for looking out for me.” Rain dipped his head.

Kai suppressed his impulse to strangle the boy. “You’re welcome.” He was quite certain the siren didn’t get what was the issue, and the middle of the street wasn’t the place to discuss the topic. “And, *please*, don’t flaunt your spatial artifact.”

Of course, he has one too.

His casual demeanor morphed into a fiery glint. “I’m not afraid of thieves. I can defend myself.”

“I’m sure you can, Rambo.” Kai patted his shoulder. “*But* you’d have to reveal your powers or involve the guards. You didn’t want to attract your mother’s notice, right?”

His platinum brows furrowed, jaw clenched. “I see your point. I’ll try not to be so obvious when I use it.”

Spirits! He’s going to be the death of me.

“Did I miss anything?” Flynn deposited a slightly rounder Hobbes on the ground.

“Just a lesson in human customs,” Kai said, laconic. “Where are we going next?”

With their emperor gone in a silver blink, they went to find a tailor towards the wealthiest districts in the northeast side of Varsea. The roads grew wider, and people dressed nicer. Ignoring the wary glances from the passersby, they decided on a shop with golden scissors on the sign. Compared to the gaudy gowns and suits they saw in most, it also displayed everyday clothes that wouldn't make them look like peacocks.

The door clinked with a crystal chime when they entered.

“Welcome to Madame Le Garde. All the best clothing for—” The middle-aged woman behind the counter faltered when she saw their appearance. “Oh, dear. Did you three fall into a ditch?”

A skill brushed their mana, so delicate and light Kai wasn't sure it happened till he noticed Rain's glower.

Hopefully, that's not some kind of war declaration for sirens.

“Our ship was sunk by pirates,” Flynn said brilliantly.

“Blessed Moons, that must have been awful. Please come in.” She warmly waved them in, pulling a measuring tape from her long gown. “Let me see what I can do for you, young men. Were you looking for anything in particular?”

“Well,” Flynn looked at the articles on display. “We need some clothes for staying in a town and for traveling the road.”

“I see. Then you've come to the right place,” her smile widened. “May I ask how much you intend to spend? Just so I can *tailor* my advice to your needs. Forgive my pun.”

The mention of money put a chink in Flynn's boldness.

Next time think twice before spending everything to spoil Hobbes.

“Will ten gold be enough?” Kai stepped forward to kill two birds with a single stone. He placed an orange chromium from his own stash on the counter. Nothing better than a practical example to teach the siren the value of money.

Madame Le Garde beamed like the sun. “That's plenty, dear. Leave it to me. No one will bat an eye if you tell them you're the son of a patrician.” She rang a bell behind the counter. “Mason, we have clients.”

A lanky boy stumbled from the back of the shop. He gave them a skeptical look down his crooked nose, but after a word from Le Garde, he was all smiles too.

The tailor took measurements of every inch of them before bringing out racks of coats, shirts, undergarments, breeches and more pieces of clothing Kai couldn't put a name to. Madame Le Garde appeared to possess every color and type of fabric. And that was just the beginning.

"I don't think this is necessary," he said while the woman used a palette to see which colors suited him best. "That coat already looks wonderful."

"Don't be silly, dear. Anything not tailored to an individual is not real clothing." She gently swatted away his hand, her face wrinkled in revulsion. "What will people say if you come out of my shop wearing some old garment with fraying enchantments?"

Spirits, I should have just picked something at the market.

Alas, hindsight couldn't correct the past.

Both Flynn and Rain looked to be enjoying themselves. The human enthusiastically asked about every garment to repair from the mainland weather; what was more appropriate to journey in the wild and to go out in taverns. The siren, instead, was fascinated by every fabric and trinket, especially if it was worn on his own legs or feet.

This is going to be a long afternoon...

Aside from being a shrewd businesswoman, Madame Le Garde took pride in her work. To her, good was just another word for disappointing; she wasn't going to settle for anything less than perfect. After some not-so-subtle hints about their haggard appearance, she sent them to shower in the apartment above the shop. If she had known how to give a haircut, Kai was certain she would have done that too.

The warm water washed away days of brine and sweat, giving him the will to endure three more hours of standing like a mannequin covered in fabric and pins. It would take a couple days to finish tailoring and enchanting every piece, though she allowed them to leave with some prototypes that 'wouldn't make her mama roll in the grave'.

I'm free!

Kai stepped onto the paved road. The cool breeze of evening tickled his neck, showing he had indeed escaped to safety. Having clothes tailored to him was pleasant, he could barely feel the soft fabric on his skin. Not at all easy with his Perception. Though he wasn't sure any comfort was worth the hours of tedium.

"We still need to buy boots and backpacks," Flynn mused. "I also need to replace the daggers I lost in the wreckage."

At the mention of boots, Rain perked up. "You think there are still shops open?"

"Please, not today," Kai growled. "We still need to find a place to stay."

"Oh, that's not a problem. Madame Le Garde was kind enough to warn an inn we'd be coming in later. It should be just a couple streets from here." Flynn turned to see his flaming eyes. "*But* there is no hurry. We can visit those shops tomorrow. We still need to send a message to Valela."

"You've already found a way?" Kai said stunned.

"Of course," Flynn grinned cockily. "Madame Le Garde gave me the address of the local *House of Mirrors*."