

Chapter 269 - Luck

They had left the main road to wade through the fields, heading northwest for Limgrell. Kai had hoped the diversion would quieten the whispers. And it did—for a handful of minutes—then they came back, ominously murmuring.

The direction and nature of the threat were too vague to deduce anything. Either the source of danger was weak, or some other skill was interfering with Hallowed Intuition. Given how widespread such skills were according to Daniel, the odds leaned toward the latter.

Is it the creepy couple or some other disgruntled guy I sent away?

With all the adventurers that gathered for his contract, there were too many candidates. Varsea had made clear how much he still had to learn about the mainland. He'd rather avoid a confrontation with an unknown foe if possible.

We might still lose them in the fields.

The ears of rye swayed and rustled in the wind, tickling his face. From a distance, Kai hadn't realized the height of the crops. It'd take considerable effort to achieve the same with Nature Magic, but he doubted mages were responsible. He had never considered what mundane jobs like farmers might achieve in the higher grades.

They could have also modified the seeds before planting, or used some kind of magical GMO...

Years ago, he had read about professions that could induce beneficial mutations in Virya's library. The book had focused on cattle and poultry, though it should only be easier with plants.

"Keep low." Daniel opened a way through the rye ahead of them. "Farmers don't like it when you stomp through their crops. Some can get pretty mad."

"How mad are we talking?" Flynn swatted an ear of rye out of his face and hunched forward. His height put him at a disadvantage.

"Well... it depends. I got shot with a bow twice when I was sixteen." The man chuckled, lifting his sleeve to show a round scar on his bicep. "I did also steal some apples that time. Usually, they just unleash their guardian beasts against you. You just have to sprint when you hear the bark."

Flynn stumbled on an uneven patch. "What do you mean by *beasts*...?"

"Just watch your feet." Daniel ignored the question with a smirk. "If they're well trained, they'll stop at the edge of their master's plot."

They walked on the free terrain along an irrigation canal, keeping between rows of wheat that had yet to be harvested. Everyone was ready to dart at the shout of an enraged farmer or their pet. No matter how far they meandered, the whispers kept tugging at Kai's thoughts.

Here's where hope becomes self-delusion.

"We're being followed."

Daniel stopped by a two-meter ditch. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." He spread his senses over the golden ears of crops, vainly trying to wring more information out of Hallowed Intuition. "I don't know who it is, but they don't have good intentions."

The man cursed under his breath. "They must have waited for us by the gates, or have someone with a yellow tracking skill." His fist clenched around a dagger strapped to his leg. "Blasted fates! We have to pick up the pace and hope to lose them when we reach the Lervyn Woods."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just wait for them and deal with it?" Rain shrugged, not looking particularly worried. "None of those *men* would be a problem."

"You're presuming they didn't bring any friends." The scarred seeker scoffed, already marching through the fields. "The prize from three patrician kids without an escort will push many people to less savory activities. Any of those men could have also sold the information to one of Varsea's gangs."

Where is my Luck when I need it?

"We aren't patricians." Kai augmented his legs to keep pace.

He only had a vague understanding of what the title meant. It differed from a rigid caste system since it wasn't endlessly heritable and anyone could attain it, but he had never learned all the legal details and benefits. The governor's family was the only one with that status in the archipelago, and he had avoided them like the plague.

"Who else throws around gold and reaches Yellow at your age?" Daniel threw them a skeptical look. "If you wanted to keep a low profile, you shouldn't have worn clothes worth more than a year's wage. Yeah, anyone with a brain can tell."

Hmm, going to Madame Le Garde might have backfired...

"We really aren't," Flynn protested. "And I'm not Yellow yet."

The seeker gave him a once over with a look full of silent implications. “Maybe you have a different name for it where you’re from, but money and privilege smell the same. The fact that you’re foreigners just makes you better targets since there is less fear of retaliation.”

Always rob the tourists, only more violently...

“I thought anyone could raise their social status in the Republic,” Rain mused, unaffected by the awkward mood. “You just have to advance to Green, or be born in the family of someone who had.”

“Yeah, that’s what the senators love to say in their speeches: ‘We’re all given an equal chance, you *just* need to work hard’.” Daniel spat with obvious bitterness. “How many people born at the bottom of Red reach that grade? One or two in a million? I don’t know your story, but here, the patrician families hoard gold and opportunities to keep their status.”

I’m here, you know? Your one-in-a-million role model, limited edition!

Kai considered arguing his case. The scions born surrounded by riches and tutors had been the bane of his existence since Virya had told him about the wider world. Now that he had clawed his way up from the bottom of the rung, being mistaken for his nemesis was quite vexing.

What are the chances that he believes me? According to canon, Matthew was born at Orange...

“We’re technically from the Republic too.” Kai gestured to himself and Flynn. “From the Baquaire Archipelago. The islands were annexed...”

“Sixty-one years ago.” His friend helpfully provided, between one breath and the other. “The governor threw a celebration for the sixtieth year in Higharbor. It was last summer, while you were still living with your father. Not that you missed much. Apart from the free food.”

“Huh, the *Baquaire Archipelago*?” Daniel scratched his scarred lip, running the long way around the shed on a hill. “One of my previous clients tried to use a ticket there instead of paying. Said it was a steal. Fine beaches, crystal sea, and well... Maybe I should have taken it? Is it as nice as they say?”

“Way better.” Flynn threw himself in a detailed description of the scenery and food while they jogged through the fields. Ranting about their respective governors also helped relieve the stiff atmosphere.

“No beasts. *Anywhere*?” Daniel appeared to find the notion as strange as Kai found having awakened animals everywhere.

They had run into a chubby mouse chewing on a row of turnips. The beast skittered away when it heard their steps—quite a different behavior from what he was used to. They

doubled back around a farm when a woman spurred a *Daisy* to chase a flock of awakened sparrows, the howling bark following them for miles.

The farmland stretched with no end in sight, and so did the murmurs relentlessly prod his thoughts. Winding their path around the cultivated slopes made no difference to their stalker.

“Are you worried about the pursuers?” Rain jogged beside him, closing the line. The muffling ward bent to cover just them while letting the outside sound pass through. “I thought it’d be more relaxing if we didn’t have to watch our words.”

“Mhmm, yeah.” Kai tersely said. “I’m fine.”

He’s trying. Don’t be an asshole.

“I’m worried about my sister.” Kai stomped over the ground with more force than necessary. “I thought having high Favor would help me avoid this type of nuisance. First the pirates, and now this.”

“Hmm... Fate always fails you when you need it most. That’s what my uncle used to say.” The siren leaped over a ditch with casual grace; no one would suspect he had had legs for less than two weeks. “Is your Fate particularly high? Obviously, you don’t have to answer unless you want to.”

Where is he going with this?

“I’d say it’s definitely above average. At least by human standards.”

“Uhm...” Rain ran a hand over the cut stalks of barley. “And have you been taught how to use it?”

His heart skipped a beat, then it pumped faster. “What do you mean *use it*? You can’t actively call down Luck, right?”

Tell me I didn’t use the Fulcrum for nothing.

“No, of course not...” The siren stared at the new pair of boots he was wearing before nodding to himself. “But there are ways to apply it more... *effectively*. Without a high Fate, it’s hard to learn how since its effects are fickle. That’s also why most weaker races have scarce knowledge of it...”

“You don’t *have to* tell me if you can’t.” Kai almost choked on the words, hating every single one of them. From how much Rain struggled over each sentence, it seemed the right thing to do.

Please, tell me everything!

"It's okay." The teen bobbed his head again—perhaps to convince himself. "I've only been sworn on the secrets discovered by my house. Though, I'd be grateful if you didn't spread this around."

"Yes!" Kai said a little too eagerly, his face heating up. "I mean, you have my word. I won't tell anybody without your permission."

"It's not that serious," Rain watched him with an amused glint. "Sharing knowledge about the Guide with rival races is frowned upon, but I don't think humans are among those."

Too weak to count, yay!

"What do you know about Fate?" the siren began.

"The more the better?" Kai felt like he had shown up for a test without studying. "And there is no way to guarantee a result, no matter how high."

"That's... correct." Rain's encouraging smile reinforced the impression. "Let's use an example. You mentioned the pirates earlier. Aboard the *Intrepid* there were hundreds of other passengers, who tied their own Fate with yours. Not to mention the raiders working against you."

"Hmm. Are you saying I must beat the combined attributes of everyone to have an effect? That would make Favor useless in almost every situation."

"Not exactly. One person with fifty Fate will be more effective than a dozen with twenty, but not of a hundred. I'm sure some bored elf must have measured the exact odds." Rain waved off the notion. "That is how the seventh attribute works when everyone is a passive *passenger*. Their odds are measured against each other, and against the material facts of the world."

"Is there a better way to do it?" Kai pointed out like a good student, using a speck of Nature Magic to push aside a thorny shrub. The farmland had grown sparser, interspaced with patches of wild trees and large pastures with grazing cattle.

"Indeed." Rain curiously watched the moving vines. "Imagine that instead of a passenger, you are a sailor directly influencing the speed of the *Intrepid*. Or even better, the captain who decides where to steer the vessel. Your actions would have a much larger impact than anyone else, and the same would go for your Fate."

"Oh..." Kai slowed down his running to not surpass Flynn and Daniel ahead of them. Like most realizations, this one also sounded obvious once it was pointed out.

"Fate works best when you're the one deciding what to do and how," the siren explained. "I imagine you weren't the one who picked the *Intrepid* to cross the ocean?"

“No...” Flynn had bought the tickets for him. And now, it was Kea who had pushed him to go to Limgrell and hurriedly hire a guide on Rain's suggestion. “So... we'd have a better chance to lose our stalkers if I were the one leading?”

“Yes, our odds would be better. Though you also have to consider Daniel's skills and knowledge of this region...” He turned to gaze at a grazing cow. “If you piloted a ship with no experience, you might lead it straight in a storm. Luck is never a certain thing.”

Kai mutely ran, lost in a sea of possibilities, hundreds of choices that might have led him on a different path. While he had suspected Favor worked best when random chance was involved, it was entirely different to have verified knowledge spelled out for him.

“Thank you for sharing this.” He still had to repay the siren for saving him from drowning, and his debts kept accumulating.

“Oh, it's nothing. Friends are supposed to help each other, right?” Rain showed his pointy smile. “And I'm sure some other human would have told you sooner or later.”

Yeah, not a chance. The Republic would make me sign my soul away for it. Mhmm... Virya must have known. Damn her and her experiments.

“It means a lot to me.” The seventh attribute was one of his biggest assets. Now, he finally knew how to make better use of it. “I won't forget it.”

They marched without stopping for lunch or rest across ever-sparsier fields. The strips of untamed terrain grew wider between isolated farms, till the signs of human habitation disappeared completely. Throughout it all the whispers continued undeterred, weak and constant.

The sun had descended on the western horizon at their back, quicker than he was used to in the archipelago. Kai noticed the shift in the ambient mana before his eyes spotted a dark treeline over a ridge.

Daniel stopped with a mix of relief and apprehension. He dried the sweat off his brow on a sleeve. “Those are the Lervyn Woods. C'mon, we must lose those bastards before dark.”