

Chapter 136 - Forward

The smell of blood wafted over her, Valela stood on the elevated platform, unblinking. Down below, the judge read the list of crimes of the next convict in a loud, cold voice. Pirating, pillaging, murder, and two dozen minor offenses.

The sentence was always the same: death. For once Val had no objection to the justice of the Republic.

Public executions weren't common, no more than once or twice a year, but she had seen her fair share. Her presence was meant to be a bridge between the Republic and the islanders, and her father brought her to witness since she was six.

Some begged and cried, others waited their turn in silence, having accepted their fate. The executioner carried out the sentence with the same efficiency for all of them, waving the two-handed greatsword like a feather. The gleaming milky metal cut through each neck in a single, elegant slash. Drops of blood slid off the blade like water on a waxed canvas.

Val thought the executioner was a man due to his height, though he might as well have been a tall and muscled woman. He donned a plain white robe that covered him from head to toe, a pristine mask with no holes hid even his eyes.

The justice of the Seven Moons didn't have a face, it just executed the will of the gods with swift efficiency. Each strike hit the exact same spot in an indifferent arc.

Cheers rose from the crowd as heads rolled to the ground. She stood in an honored position on the dais with her father, on the right of the governor's family. An unusually high number of councilors had come to witness, some forced to take a seat below the platform.

The left side was almost as crowded with senior officials, though most were watching with stony and bored expressions.

Val dared a glance over her shoulder. Lady Cressida sat beside her husband with an icy smile, wearing a dark blue dress like a moonless night to represent her mourning for the victims. She was certainly sorry and angry, probably not over the dead.

Valela had often suspected the woman planted her people to influence the mood of the crowd. This time the cheers were probably genuine. Everyone had heard of the heinous crimes that had happened in Sylspring, and of the prompt, firm response of the Republic.

What most didn't know was the extent of those crimes. Three hundred seventy-three dead, almost a thousand injured and tens of gold mesars in damage, maybe more. The inspectors were still assessing the destruction to property and infrastructure. Part of the loot had been recovered with the captured ships, but nothing could bring the dead back.

Adrian flashed a smile at her, his hazel eyes brightening up from the highest step of the dais. He was about to whisper a word when his mother glanced at him. His expression became impassive in less than a blink. Val turned before Lady Cressida could meet her eyes.

Since the boy got his profession, he had begun to *casually* appear wherever she was, eager to show off his new capabilities. Her father told her to lead him on enough to keep him interested. No more than that. She could find a better marriage prospect on the mainland.

He was more bearable than his older brother, no doubt. Emanuel thought anyone not from the mainland was beneath him, even though he probably barely remembered it himself.

Just one more year.

As soon as she got a profession, she would be off. With a letter of recommendation from her teacher, Lady Gelia, she had a good chance of landing in one of the academies in Meria.

A small commotion woke her from her considerations. A convict tried to break loose. With enchanted chains on both hands and feet, he didn't get a step before two enforcers grabbed him and forced his neck on the block for the executioner. His screams were cut short with another elegant slash.

It surprised her how Lady Cressida had allowed them such an easy end. One word to the judge could have easily convinced him to apply a harsher execution or never reach the trial in the first place.

The woman never showed emotion in public without a purpose, but Val remembered her storming through the town hall the night the news reached them. Simmering with rage, like the sea before the storm. How she'd deal with the culprits through gritted teeth.

Cressida had given orders to every officer in sight. And they had scrambled to obey, no matter if they outranked her. It was no mystery who truly held the power among the upper brass, but usually, her words came through her husband.

Her fury wasn't for the dead. Sylspring had been one of the jewels of the archipelago, second only to Highharbor. The damage to future earnings could be even higher, worse yet if the voices spread.

The islands had little to offer. Peace and safety had always been two shining pillars holding up everything else. If they fell, it risked bringing down everything else with them.

With the captains already slain in the raid, catching the fleeting vessels had gone smoothly. Everyone who talked about the accident also talked about how promptly the Republic had dealt with it. An isolated accident that would never be repeated.

They couldn't contain the news, but they could spin it in a less damaging way. The last pieces clicked into place.

Today's display was meant to show the governor had everything firmly in hand. The pirates were just common criminals and were dealt with as such. Treating them any differently would give them importance. Show that this wasn't just a routine execution to make an example.

After the last head rolled, the governor stood up to give a brief speech about justice, so did her father and a slew of other councilors who didn't have the gift of brevity.

Pirates in the archipelago...

People would have laughed in your face just for mentioning the possibility. Everyone knew there had never been pirates in the Shallow Sea, the simple idea was close to a contradiction.

Could it only be a single unfortunate coincidence as the Republic was so eager to proclaim?

Don't be a fool.

On that her father was right: an uncomfortable truth never vanished just because you didn't like it. The archipelago was changing and burying her head in the sand wouldn't make it any less true. It would only stop her from seeing the dangers and preparing.

The only way to not get swallowed was to ride the wave. If it wasn't a knife deep in her stomach or a pirate raid, it would be something else.

That was the consequence of the choice her father made more than ten years ago. His support to the newly instated governor in exchange for the promise to give an islander the spot when the time to step down would come.

It wasn't as brilliant a plan as she thought as a child. They would never succeed without Cressida's help and resources, which the woman never missed to remind. To be named governor, even of an annexed, marginal territory like the archipelago, there were several conditions to satisfy.

The endorsement of the previous governor would go a long way, that wasn't the main reason why they needed their help, though. The higher someone climbed the more restrictions the Republic put. To be considered for the role, the man *or* woman needed the necessary power.

She needed to step completely into Green, in both race and profession. An idea as absurd as pirates in a place where Yellow was considered the absolute peak. A chasm that had never been crossed by any native in oral or written memory.

That was the reason for all her father's sacrifices, and her duty.

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Five ships bearing the Republic's hawk had moored at the dock in Sylspring. Before anyone could understand what was going on, crews of workers had swept through the town, repairing buildings and cleaning debris where there wasn't enough to rebuild.

As fast as they came, they were gone, leaving behind a pristine town, that only lacked the people to fill it.

Announcements resounded loud through the streets, for any who might have missed it letters were delivered to every house. The governor saw their suffering and wanted to extend his generosity to rebuild what was lost. The fleeting pirates had been arrested and put to trial. Justice had been made, as seven heads displayed in the main square showed.

The pirates had been pushed into the Shallow Sea by a storm and decided to raid their town by happenstance. It was an unfortunate coincidence, but there was nothing to worry about.

It was unlikely to happen again, to tell the truth, it was nearly impossible. But the governor had taken measures to prevent the possibility of another *accident* anyway.

There was no mention of the rebels. The Voice of the Ancestors had grown far more secretive in recent years. Anyone who took a trip through the outskirts with their ears wide open would discover they still enjoyed some sympathy among the population.

At least they did before the raid. If people knew what the rebels did, that could change many people's minds. Kai had imagined the Republic would jump on the chance to blame them.

*Do they care so much about the perceived safety? Maybe they simply don't want to announce it without culprit or proof...*

The Republic swept the matter under the rug, erasing any sign of what happened. A day later, the enforcers and other public officials, who had been rabidly investigating, began acting as if hundreds of people hadn't died a week ago.

Even people on the streets quickly joined in. Talk of what happened became taboo in town, with only whispered mention of the accident.

*Is everyone going mad?*

He was heading for the southern gate when a sudden thunder announced a tropical rainstorm. After two weeks of drought, the rain swallowed Sylspring. As if the skies also wanted to wash the town clean of any remaining sign of the raid. Apparently, the weather could be bribed too.

In the streets some people hurried to take cover, others continued their day unbothered.

Kai welcomed the embrace of the waters, the slight cold was pleasant after the heat of the previous days.

Outside the walls, he headed for the cemetery, ignoring the mud that sucked on his shoes. It was the first time he ever came here after the funeral the Republic had organized for everyone who died during the raid. Surrounded by the crowd of people, he hadn't stayed long.

Rows and rows of identical granite tombstones dotted the landscape. Crowns of flowers had been swept around by the storm, floating in large ponds.

There wasn't anyone else, just him alone in the field. With a quick cast, the rain flowed around him as if it hit an invisible dome.

*There are so many...*

His eyes stopped counting after a hundred. Islanders or mainlanders, they were all the same in death.

*And for what?*

Kai wandered among the graves, reading the names of those who hadn't been as lucky as him. Some officers and tourists had their remains sent back to the mainland, but not many.

His feet stopped in front of a tombstone. There had been a few words for him at the funeral, but Kai hadn't expected to find him here. The same granite as everyone else, with just some simple floral decorations to distinguish it.

*Zerith Wyleim.*

Someone who had tried to make a difference and paid with his life. A man in his rank could afford to be sent home if he had expressed the desire or if his family cared.

*Why are you here?*

Kai stared at the damp ground the grass hadn't had time to reclaim.

Death was such a weird concept. One moment people were and the next they were gone forever. All the things that could have been piled up as regrets. How could people even pretend to go on as if nothing had happened?

The rain had reduced to a drizzle. Kai stopped the spell and began to cast another. Weeds and flowers began growing over the burial until the earth was completely covered.

*I know that without you there would have been many more tombstones. I won't forget you.*

He had been too weak to make a difference, but it was time to change that. He had promised Reishi to give it proper thought and he did. Perfect solutions didn't exist. There was no need to hesitate any longer.

**\*Ding\***

**The Guide has judged you eligible to break your Second Seal early.**

**Be warned this change is irreversible and will take effect immediately. Do you still wish to proceed?**

Yes.

**\*Ding\***

**Congratulations, the Second Seal has been broken.**

**A multitude of paths stand before you. It's for you to decide which way to travel. Choose wisely.**

Kai expected to feel something, a jolt of energy, a mana tingle, anything. He was exactly the same as a few seconds ago. He wasn't any smarter or an inch taller. Those two lines were all.

**\*Ding\***

**Do you wish to select a profession?**

*Well, this is all the change I need. I do, show me what you've got.*

In a blink, seven pages filled his vision.

## Kai's Profession Choices

Profession: **Sword Apprentice**

Main Requirements: **Swordsmanship – Advanced lv10+**; **Defeat 10+ opponents stronger than you with a sword.**

Description: ***You've wielded your sword from a young age and never let go of its hilt. Embark on your journey to become one with the blade and cut down your foes.***

Attributes: **1 Strength, 1 Dexterity, 0.50 Constitution per level.**

Boon: **None**

Skill slots: **1**

Profession: **Splinter in the Dark**

Main Requirements: **Assassinate a stronger target without getting caught; Ambush and kill 10+ enemies stronger than you; Improvisation lv1+**

Description: ***You've masked your true strength under a veil of deception and lies to let your enemies underestimate you. Hidden in plain sight or in the shadows, no one will suspect your true capabilities until you strike.***

Attributes: **0.5 Strength, 0.5 Dexterity, 0.25 Mind, 0.5 Spirit, 0.5 Perception per level.**

Boon: **None**

Skill slots: **1**

Profession: **Promising Herbal Alchemist**

Main Requirements: **Alchemy lv40+; Herbology – Advanced lv40+; Modify 10+ recipes**

Description: ***You have expert knowledge of herbs, of how to process and combine them to brew something superior to the sum of their parts. You are no stranger to finding and harvesting your ingredients or growing them with the help of your magic. Push your limits, build on what you know to expand the boundaries of your knowledge.***

Attribute: **0.5 Dexterity, 1 Mind, 1 Spirit, 0.25 Perception per level.**

Boon: **1**

Skill slots: **2**



Profession: **Mana Child**

Main Requirements: **Mana Sense lv50+; Mana Manipulation lv50+; Runes lv20+; Less than 12 years of age**

Description: **You've delved into the arcane from a very young age, and never stopped digging to uncover the secrets of the Essence of the World. As your skills grow, you won't grow complacent but continue to widen the scope of your knowledge.**

Attributes: **1 Mind, 1.5 Spirit, 0.5 Perception per level.**

Boon: **1**

Skill slots: **2**

Profession: **Blessed by Waters**

Main Requirements: **Blessed Swimmer lv30+; Water Magic lv30+; Blessing of Kahali**

Description: **Embraced by the waters and recognized by the Great spirit Kahali, you're at home among the waves and beloved by the sea. The Shallow Sea is your treasure trove and your companion to explore.**

Attributes: **0.25 Strength, 0.5 Constitution, 0.5 Mind, 1.5 Spirit per level.**

Boon: **1**

Skill slots: **2**

Profession: **Veeryd Progeny**

Main Requirements: **Nature Magic lv30+; Blessing of Yatei; Defeat 10+ Red beasts and 3+ Orange beasts.**

Description: **Accepted by the land of the islands and blessed by the Great Spirit Yatei, you have no fear for the wild and untamed Veeryd. The jungle is your hunting ground, offering you shelter and its bountiful resources.**

Attributes: **0.5 Strength, 0.5 Dexterity, 0.5 Mind, 0.5 Spirit, 0.5 Perception per level.**

Boon: **1**

Skill slots: **2**

Profession: **Favored Son of the Isles**

Main Requirements: ***Blessing of Kahali and Yatei; Favor 30+***

Description: ***Son of a distant world and adopted by the Great Spirits of the Baquaire Archipelago who have bestowed their blessing upon you. Become one with the islands and sea, read the will of the Great Spirits in every wave and blade of grass.***

Attributes: ***0.5 Constitution, 1 Spirit, 0.5 Perception per level.***

Boons: **2**

Skill slots: **2**