

## Chapter 253 - Departure

The *Intrepid* floated like a behemoth among the vessels moored at the ivory port. White sails furled around its five masts and a meshwork of interlaced enchantments covered its dark hull. The runes were woven so tightly, Kai struggled to decipher anything.

It was a true seafaring ship, capable of sailing the open ocean without fearing marine horrors. Offshore, the sea became a patchwork of shifting mana regions that extended in all three dimensions. The boundaries were less distinct than on land, though deeper waters were always more dangerous.

Navigators spent their whole lives and professions guiding their vessels around dead zones. Kai trusted they knew what they were doing; they'd all be on the same ship after all.

*It'll be fine. It's just water.*

The route between the archipelago and the mainland had been charted to be one of the safest possible, according to the travel guide he read. Considering the soaring hawk on the back cover, it might not be the most impartial source.

*There wouldn't be any tourists if people died getting here.*

Kai grabbed his spatial bags and joined the line of people ferried to the massive vessel. Fourteen years of waiting were coming to an end. He was leaving the Baquaire Archipelago, his whole world. While he'd miss his family, he was ready to leave.

*I've waited long enough.*

Keeping his composure against the excitement ballooning in his chest was harrowing. His muscles and magic begged to release the euphoria, but the same effort a red human would put into skipping would make him jump a meter into the air.

"Ready to embark?" Flynn clapped his back and joined the queue beside him, carrying Hobbes under his arm.

"Mroow." His imperial grumpiness gave him a disgruntled glare, greatly displeased he had to embark like common peasants.

*We talked about this.*

"Meeew."

*Would you have rather hid for the whole journey?*

“Didn’t we agree to meet on the ship?” Kai glanced over his shoulder. With the crowd of people and clamor of sailors around the port, no one should be able to hear or see anything, still... “Better not to take risks.”

“I’ve checked, no one is following you. You’re not that important *yet*.” Flynn winked. “I hope you packed everything. This is the last chance we’ll get to see home for a while.”

“I’ve got everything.” Kai fiddled with the silver ring around his finger. With the money inside and the official ID in his pocket, he could buy anything he needed even if he lost his luggage. “What about you?” He lowered his voice. “You know you don’t need to leave the islands just to accompany me.”

Guilt had been racking up in the last few days. Flynn had had a life before he swooped back from the dead and monopolized him with his problems.

“Yeah, because *you* are the only reason I might want to see the wider world, all its mysteries, foods and people.” Flynn rolled his eyes. “Glad to see your ego is still intact.”

“I— I had to ask.” Kai stammered, face heating up. “You’ve run around Higharbor to set up my cover story and organize the journey. It’s already more than I could ask for.”

“*Mat*,” Flynn let out a heavy breath, solemnly putting a hand on his shoulder. “Yes, you should definitely pay me for my amazing work with exclusive access to Hobbes’ fluffy fur.” His seriousness cracked into a smile. “And yes again, I’m perfectly capable of telling your pretty face if I don’t want to do something. While I might have amended my timeline to fit with yours, I had long planned to leave even without you.”

“Oh... Well, I appreciate your help.”

“And I’m happy to give it. Remember I’m the big brother.” Flynn puffed his chest. “You’d be completely lost without me.”

“Right...”

*Now who’s the egomaniac?*

A guard checked their papers at the end of the queue and ticked their names off a list. “Matthew Reece Veernon. And you are Flynn Soveili... and pet.” She gave a single glance at Hobbes before she covered a yawn. “Here. Have a nice journey.”

“Planning on it.” Flynn grinned.

Aboard the boat that would ferry them to the *Intrepid*, they joined families with squealing children, richly dressed merchants, and a smattering of bright-eyed young people.

Kai took a seat at the back and lowered his tone as four beefy sailors started rowing. “Not that I’m not grateful, but why aren’t we taking an airship? That would take a quarter of the time, if not less.”

“Have you any idea how much those tickets cost?”

He shrugged. “A bag of silver?”

“Maybe if you travel within the archipelago.” Flynn shook his head. “To reach the mainland, you need a specialized carrier. That’s a couple of gold mesars for *each* person without the extra cost for luggage. Even then, we’d have to wait months or pay ten times that since tourists buy two-way tickets and only the fanciest cabins remain available.”

*He sure did his research.*

The outrageous price barely made Kai lift an eyebrow. “Does the cost matter? I can afford to pay for both of us.”

“Rich people stay rich by not wasting their money.” He lowered his tone. “And *you* could afford it, but Mat? You’ve seen Cyrus’ crumbling house. The man wasn’t exactly good with money, and you’ve insisted on donating most of his assets to charity.”

“You know I couldn’t take his money,” Kai said. Not after he had already stolen the name. Valela had promised to use the funds to finance a school project that would provide free education for children, much better than a handful more golds to add to his pile. He only hadn’t considered that Matthew couldn’t freely use Kai’s fortune.

Flynn scratched the morose cat. “I get why you did it, but it also means we can’t waste our limited funds on a luxury trip.” He gestured to the looming ship. “C’mon, I’ve always dreamed of sailing on a true ship. Have you seen how big it is? The *Intrepid* is unsinkable.”

*Hmm, where have I heard that before?*

He forced a smile. “Yeah, it’ll be fun.”

A pulley carried on board the people who didn’t want to climb the rope ladder. Kai stepped on the polished wooden planks of the deck, feeling somewhat reassured by the size of the vessel. The *Intrepid* was so large, it was almost like being on land.

A man with a plumed salmon-colored hat and an impressive mustache loudly cleared his throat, waiting for the congregation of passengers to pay attention before continuing his speech. “G’morning, fine gents. I’m Gestulf Rabelyn Nathumeli, captain of the *Intrepid*. I welcome you...”

Besides a substantial number of boasts and welcomes, the captain warned them not to bother the crew or break the ships’ rules, such as no Fire Magic, no throwing food at sea, *and* no tampering with the runic arrays. Each infraction that put the ship at danger would be

severely punished. Behind his affable air, the captain's words were law, jury and executioner at sea.

*Where did the furball go?*

Kai reached through his bond but was rebuffed. Hobbes was already at work spreading mischief through his new kingdom. It was surprising the cat had stayed put for long enough to board.

*Just make sure you don't get seen stealing food.*

Hobbes slapped him with a wave of affront, indignant at the notion a cat of his caliber might get caught by a bunch of lowly humans.

"I wish you a pleasant stay aboard my ship. May fast winds lead us all to our destinations," the mustache man concluded. A team of sailors showed the passengers to their cabin to let the crew sail out of the port without hindrance.

The mana grew denser while the temperature lowered a couple of degrees inside the bowels of the ship. Runes surrounded him in all directions while glowing channels distributed essence where it was needed.

The only human construct that might have compared was Reishi's ship, though it was a fourth of the size. Kai couldn't even begin to fathom the time it had taken to enchant such a massive vessel with such a cohesive set of arrays.

"Fancy," Flynn commented, running his hands across the glossy wooden panels. "The tickets were worth every copper chip."

"Uh, how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I had Valela pay for them as a business expense." He grinned.

Kai regarded him with a flat stare that couldn't scratch his thick skin. There was no point trying to make the fool feel shame, so he focused back on the pulsing enchantments.

*The captain just said no tampering with the arrays, what about just looking?*

It would take some time to puzzle out the cloaking, and he had to be cautious in case they could detect him snooping around.

*There is no hurry, I can peep when I'm alone.*

The group of passengers quickly thinned, disappearing into their cabins. Theirs were at the end of a narrow corridor, sharing a wall. If anyone found out they were on the ship together,

it would make sense for naive little Mat to travel with a guide, and Flynn had also worked for Valela.

*No one will know about me outside the archipelago anyway.*

“Hmm... not bad.” Kai mused to himself, putting down his bags. He could touch the opposite side of the cabin if he spread his arms, though the ceiling allowed him to stand without bending, and his bed had a real mattress. That wasn’t something to take for granted.

More interesting yet was the panel covered in colorful runes to control temperature and lighting. Flynn had warned him they would charge him for each use, some amateur travelers had gotten very pricey bills at the end of their journey. Kai was more interested in learning how the whole system worked and if he could reproduce it.

*I’ll figure it out.*

Something told him he would spend a lot of time here on his journey. Rummaging through his ring for a mango cookie, his attention fell on the project he had spent the last weeks brewing.

*Uh... no time like the present.*

Locking his cabin, he knocked on Flynn’s door. The lanky boy swiftly opened, leaning not to hit his head. “Did you miss me already?” He grinned.

*Why does he have such a slappable face?*

“I wanted to give you something.”

“Wait... You got me a *gift*?”

*Is it that surprising?*

“I figured now was a time as good as any since we’re leaving the archipelago. But I can still hold onto them till your next birthday”

“Them? As in more than one? Now sounds like a fine time.” Flynn’s eyes sparkled. He stepped aside to let him inside. “Please, be welcome to my humble abode.”

The cabin was an identical copy with the bed placed against the opposite wall and his luggage half stored in the chest in the corner. Flynn shut the door and bounced on his bed with a wide grin. “What is it? Does it shine? Or is it something to eat?”

“Kind of.” Kai said to let him stew.

“You didn’t need to get me anything.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I didn’t get you any present.”

“You’ve helped me pull my life back together. That’s a dozen times more than enough.” Kai sat in the little space available. “I did promise to not forget your birthday again.”

“That was, huh... more than two years ago. And I think you’ve got a pretty good excuse.”

“Yeah, I was stuck in the Sanctuary and missed two birthdays. And after I came back, I thought I might as well brew them into proper elixirs.” Kai held two vials in his hand. One glowed with a blueish white, while the other was a smoky black.

“Oh, they’re shiny! Well, one of them anyway.” Flynn observed them curiously. “What are they?”

“Elemental enhancers.”

Flynn furrowed his brow at the name, his jaw slowly hanging open. “You mean...”

“Yup, you drink them to increase your affinities, I’m not sure by how much. They’re for Shadow and Lightning. I imagine you can guess which is which.”

“I— Have you any idea how much these are worth?” His voice rose an octave.

“It’s rude to look at the price of a gift, but probably more than an airship ticket or ten.”

“I can’t—”

“If you say you can’t accept them, I’m going to shove them down your throat.” Kai threatened with a smile. “I’m not joking.”

Flynn clutched the vials to his chest. “I’m happy to take them. It’s just... I’ve heard about these things from merchants, they’re not something you can even buy usually.”

“Well, I’ve found quite a few treasures in the hidden realm. And you don’t need to feel bad, I’ve also consumed my fair share.” It had been a waste to take them without refining them into elixirs, but the Sanctuary didn’t allow him to be nitpicky.

Most raw elemental enhancers were unique, and any alchemist with the knowledge to brew them in the payroll of the Republic. Not that he could show them to anyone without calling down a crowd of thieves and robbers. He would have never managed to refine them alone without Favored Son of the Isles—particularly the boon and skill Yatei bestowed. Gifts of the Earth granted him an intuitive understanding of how to find and use any natural treasure, while Natural Prodigy helped him pick up things much faster.

Flynn looked at the dark vial. “You can also use Shadow.”

“It’s not my main element. I found that inky root in the last month, so I decided to keep it. A few points more wouldn’t make much difference.”

*Not compared to a divine blessing anyway.*

Flynn watched him with obvious skepticism. “You said you didn’t know how much this would increase my affinity...”

“Hmm... Reishi thought it was between three and four points before I made it into an elixir. The lightning one was a bit better.” Seeing his continuous hesitation, Kai scribbled on a page of his notebook and ripped it for him. “Here, you can have this one too.”

“What’s this? Seventy, sixty-six...” Flynn read confused.

“Oh, I forgot to add the names.” Kai quickly fixed his intentional mistake. “Now you can always carry a piece of my genius with you.”

**Major Affinities:**

- *Water: 68 > 70*
- *Nature: 60 > 66*
- *Space: 38 > 62*
- *Earth: 51 > 57*
- *Shadow: 46 > 50*

He had been lucky that the Sanctuary could produce suitable treasures for all his affinities, though he had only found one for Water away from the murky sea. Being his highest element, it was also the hardest to improve, and most resources had no effect. Space was the easiest for the same reason. Zervathi’s blessing, Hobbes’ bond and a sparkly iridescent fruit had made his affinity soar.

Watching shock and envy creep on Flynn’s face as he made sense of the numbers, Kai grinned. “How’re you going to watch my back if you’re weakling?”