

Chapter 163 - The Whims of Fate

Kai stared at the folded paper in his hand and fought not to feel like an idiot. Virya had actually left a note.

I almost wish she didn't.

"It's blank, I've checked with a backlight too," Flynn informed him. "Is there some secret ritual to read it? Do we need to spill blood on it and chant a secret incantation?"

Kai rolled his eyes, smiling faintly at the attempt to lift his mood. He was grateful Flynn never teased him where it hurt. "It probably needs my mana. The cube was also attuned to my essence signature."

"Oh... that's boring."

"Most magic is, we just like to pretend we're wise and mysterious to fool you peasants." Kai theatrically waved a hand while he separated a strand of mana from his channels and prodded the sheet. Rows of dense and precise writing glowed to life, spreading on both sides of the letter.

"That's not very impressive." Flynn looked skeptical. "I still don't see anything."

Kai gave him a mysterious smirk. "That's because you're a peasant without Mana Sense." The writing faded as soon as he retracted the strand. "It's some kind of invisible ink that reacts to my mana signature."

"Neat," Flynn squinted at the paper as if he could balance the lack of a sensing skill through sheer concentration. When that failed, he snorted his annoyance. "Now I get who you took after, your teacher is even more paranoid than you."

“Well, thanks.”

“It wasn’t a compliment. What does it say?”

“I don’t know, there are quite a few sentences.” Reading with Mana Sense was an unfamiliar experience. The letters rapidly moved in and out of focus if he moved his concentration. Not only had Virya left a note, but she had also fit a surprising number of lines on the small piece of paper. “Why don’t you go cook dinner, I’ll tell you everything while we eat. I’m still starving.”

Not that he could feel much hunger after the interrogation with Valela, but he’d rather not have Flynn hanging over his shoulder. Patience and silence weren’t some of his friend's virtues.

Not that I’m much better...

“Okay, but you better not leave out any detail.” Flynn punctuated with a suspicious glance. “You also owe me half of that silver we found. Your crazy teacher’s pranks aren’t very funny.”

“Sure, just leave me alone.”

Flynn blew him a kiss before disappearing into the kitchen. Blissfully alone, Kai sprawled on the couch. The wooden pieces of the puzzle lay inert on their coffee table where Flynn had left them.

Spirits, I feel like such an idiot.

All the trouble could have been prevented if he had checked first. The hollow pocket that had contained the letter seemed impossible to miss now. A physical reminder of his failure.

She could have put a clearer warning. How was I supposed to know the disk would activate with a light touch?

It was so like Virya to give him an artifact with no explanation and expect him to figure it out. Kai had not stopped to question it. He had spent countless hours working on the puzzle, lured by the promised reward. When a shiny artifact finally appeared before him, could he be blamed for not seeing anything else?

Am I making up excuses?

Next time he found an unknown magical artifact, he was going to take every precaution before touching it. Lesson learned. So perhaps Virya had done it on purpose, she let him put his hand on the stove to teach him how fire burns. One final loving lesson.

Nothing like a traumatic experience to make the lecture sink in. Damn, crazy witch.

Kai inspected the paper for the beginning of the message and tuned Mana Sense to read the minute calligraphy. No point playing 'what if', it was time to get some answers.

My warmest regards, Kai, I'm pleased you've found a way to solve this puzzle box within a year. Resourcefulness and flexibility are hard lessons to teach. Sometimes, to achieve an important objective, we must be willing to make sacrifices.

The object contained within this mana puzzle is known by most as a Fate Fulcrum. Through my centuries traveling Elydes, only one Fate Fulcrum has fallen into my possession, the one currently in your hands.

An entire book wouldn't be enough to explain everything there is to know about this artifact's history and purpose. If you're curious to research its origins, I won't discourage you, but I'd advise you to be discreet about your inquiries.

Many organizations would consider the very existence of this artifact heretical, and all would deem it too dangerous to leave it in the hands of a child.

At its most fundamental level, a Fate Fulcrum's purpose is simple: it gathers Fate from its possessor to funnel it in a burst. The process comes with some caveats. While the artifact can control the amount and direction of the release to a degree, it can't control the result.

Unbound Fate is inherently unpredictable. Beneficial, harmful and anything in between. You can picture throwing a hundred dice in the air: remote coincidences and outcomes will rain upon you, while you can't choose on which side the dice will land.

A higher Favor will skewer the odds slightly in your favor, but a single unfortunate roll is enough to land a blade through your heart. Like any tool, the outcome largely depends on the person who wields it.

By wisely regulating the parameters in your control, a Fate Fulcrum can be an invaluable asset to redraw the board and create opportunities. But every use always carries a risk that can only be minimized, never erased.

P.S. I'd advise you not to activate the Fate Fulcrum inside a densely populated area, if not as a last resort.

Despite his eagerness to read on, Kai stopped to ponder the new information before his thoughts escaped him. As usual, Virya had said a lot and left even more unsaid, hidden between the lines.

The mention of a 'sacrifice' in the first paragraph confirmed he needed an extra advantage to solve the puzzle. The mage might not have predicted an early profession, but she had expected him to pick up general skills to solve the puzzle and discard the ones he had painstakingly trained.

It's always like this with her, Kai groaned massaging his eyes. *A test, within a test, within a test.*

He had sidestepped the problem by taking Mana Child, though Kai couldn't tell if it was a stroke of genius, or pure foolishness. It had been a drastic decision, perhaps more so than discarding one of his prized skills. Time would tell if he had made the right choice.

A *Fate Fulcrum*. He took out the silver disk from his spatial closet. The cold metal reflected a faint golden hue, highlighting the mysterious script that covered both sides. Each sign flowed into the next in an unbroken chain.

It is certainly priceless.

An artifact that could affect Fate itself was beyond his wildest imagination. Kai had never heard or read even a vague mention that it was possible, and his teachers hadn't mentioned it either. In the archipelago, people barely knew how Favor worked, let alone ways to alter it. From the tone of the letter, it was unlikely the Merian Republic thought any different.

In his hands, he held the power to make coincidences pour down on him with a single *click*. The applications were endless. Yet, it was a double-edged sword. While he could skewer the odds in his favor, the outcome rested in the hands of Fate.

The question is how much control I have.

The remainder of the letter contained instructions on how to use the artifact in a few dry lines. And the answer was: not much. The Fate Fulcrum's ability to alter chances wasn't endless. It needed to gather Favor from him to charge.

All he had to do was keep it close. It worked in his spatial ring as long as it was on his person. The higher his seventh attribute, the faster it would gather. There was no other way to speed up the process.

He could check the charge with Mana Sense on one of the outer circles of flowing scripts. It was glowing faintly, like candlelight about to go out, and if he was reading it correctly, it was as good as empty.

Great. I blew whatever charge it held by accident.

Kai checked the letter again. There was no clue about how much Fate he had wasted, or how long it would take to recharge the same amount. Would it take a day, week, month or year?

Plenty of time to find a use for it I guess...

Kai wasn't particularly eager to jump back into the streams of Fate anytime soon. The so-called parameters he could control consisted of the three silver nubs along the edge of the disk.

Unsurprisingly, the one he had accidentally clicked was for activation. The one on the lower right controlled the amount of Fate channeled. And one on the lower left was to anchor the release of Fate to him or to the location where it was used.

Overall, not a huge amount of control. Then again, if this artifact was a reliable tool, he doubted Virya would have given it to him. The Fate Fulcrum sounded like the birth child of a mad genius, or the prototype of some heretical research. Though if it was possible to weaponize Fate itself, someone would have already conquered the world by now. Maybe this was the best that could be achieved.

She did mention Fate was unpredictable by nature, whatever that means...

The artifact was like throwing a poorly rigged dice, a bet with ultimately no way to guarantee success.

There was much the notes didn't mention. Lack of details on its workings, or how far could its effects reach and last. Only a small part of the flowing script appeared to have a purpose. Was the rest simply decorative or was it undiscovered?

Is it because Virya doesn't know either? Or did she give me the basics, and expects me to figure out the rest by myself...

Kai couldn't stop the growing feeling he had been cheated. He should have known the witch would never make things easy. Her gifts were never straightforward, and her reward for success was another test. Yes, he could imagine situations where the Fate Fulcrum could be useful, but it could also get him killed.

Dinner distracted him from his mounting irritation. Kai sat down in the kitchen with no appetite.

"That bad, huh?" Flynn raised his brow.

It's not his fault.

Kai took a spoonful of stew to stop a snappy response. He chewed grumpily, using food as an excuse to postpone his explanation. After he forced the first bites, his hunger gradually rose. They were supposed to dine hours ago, and his stomach demanded his due after a day of full work.

"It's not *bad*, just frustrating." He grumbled.

While Flynn didn't probe him about the artifact, Kai could feel him vibrating with curiosity. Scraping the bottom of his plate, he half explained, half ranted the contents of the letter. He was glad he didn't have to deal with this by himself.

Venting his annoyance noticeably improved his mood, and so did disbelief and awe on Flynn's face. If his friend hadn't witnessed the effects of the Fate Fulcrum tonight, there was no way he would believe a word.

"Can I see it?"

“I told you it doesn’t work right now, it needs an *unspecified* amount of time to recharge.” Virya might not be omniscient as he believed years ago, but she must know that for sure. She just chose not to share that information to make his life harder.

“I know, I just want to look at it.” Flynn extended his grubby hands with a pleading expression till Kai caved in.

He accepted the silver disk with a look close to reverence, eyes wide with awe. His long finger held it lightly as if he feared the artifact would smite him if he grasped it tightly. “I can keep it if you don’t want it.” He said with a cheeky smile.

Nice try.

“Not a chance.” He had worked too hard for it. Even if he found a common pebble inside the puzzle, he would keep it.

“You said you didn’t want it.”

“I said I was frustrated with it, hand it over.”

Suddenly Flynn didn’t worry about being delicate with his touch, and Kai had to pry the disk free from his hands. Honestly, he thought his friends would be scared by it.

Flynn always liked shiny objects and betting... Well, too late for regrets now.

“What are you gonna do with it?” Flynn asked.

“I haven’t decided yet, It’s dangerous. We were lucky no one got hurt tonight.”

Well, beside me meeting a stalker and almost having my skull cracked open.

If he understood how the artifact worked correctly, the coincidences it caused were neither good nor bad, just random events with a low chance of happening. Still, crowded cities were already prone to accidents without him turning the wheel and tinkering with Fate, and people were fragile things.

“We need to be careful,” Flynn agreed, though his tone made Kai suspect they had reached two different conclusions.

“I asked around. The front store was actually poorly built, and the vase that fell on you wasn’t properly secured to the railing. Flynn tapped on the table. “The disk just makes unlikely things happen, right? Maybe none of these would have happened tonight, but they were always a possibility. We couldn’t have found a purse of silver if someone hadn’t lost it earlier.”

He was considering what happened before I even came back...

Kai had already made these considerations himself, but he had no time to confirm them yet. “Even if you’re right, no one can predict every possibility.”

“Not in a city,” Flynn agreed again. “So we need to find an isolated place where something rare we want could happen. Like, I don’t know, we can go look for pearls and treasures at sea. Then *click*, you use the thingy and increase our chances to find something precious exponentially.”

“And the chances that an awakened beast will emerge from the deep sea to eat us.” Why was it that, for once, when he wanted to be cautious, someone else tempted him with a crazy plan?

“We’ll take the proper precautions and prepare an escape plan.” Flynn talked like the decision had already been made. “We can go when the tide is low. You can’t meet

dangerous beasts if there aren't any nearby. And the sea isn't the only option, there are plenty of places in the archipelago where there are no beasts."

He must have thought this through...

Kai followed the reasoning, the plan put order among messy ideas floating in his own head. Maybe it was what Virya meant about controlling the parameters. She wasn't just talking about the nubs on the disk but about the environment. The time and place where he chose to use the Fate Fulcrum.

It's not that easy, is it?

There would always be some threads he missed. The meeting with Valela was fresh in his mind, it was better if he restricted his reckless ideas for the time being. So he continued to play devil's advocate. "What if we get hit by lightning? The sky is pretty much everywhere."

"Just choose a sunny day." Flynn easily dismissed the objection. "Do you think the disk can affect the weather?"

"Huh, I don't know." Was there a maximum distance that the Fate Fulcrum could affect?

"Then we should test it and find out. You said you could decide how much Fate to release, we can start with a tiny one."

Kai considered the idea. He might need to use the artifact again, be it only to create a distraction. Better if he knew how it worked before then. "Even if I agree, and I'm not saying I am, the disk is empty, it will need time to recharge."

Flynn shrugged. "More time for us to plan."

Is it such a bad idea...?