

Chapter 166 – Remnants of a Past Age

Coming out of the dusty town, a line of carts headed west to load their cargo at sea. The crates glowed with chains of rough spatial enchantments.

The stones paving the streets of Higharbor had to come from somewhere...

The ivory rock stolen from the Vastaire ruins was easily recognizable across the upper city. It adorned mansions and important public buildings, shaped into statues for the heroes of Meria. The monumental docks welcoming people into the capital were the most blatant example. Yet it remained a limited resource.

Importing from the mainland was expensive, and there were no marble or alabaster caves in the archipelago. The geography of the islands was flat except for the occasional hill like the one Grey Quarry had been built on. Ordinary constructions and houses had to settle for more modest materials: granite, limestone or basalt. None of them were fancy rocks, but they got the job done for the rising middle class of Higharbor.

“Well, that place sucked.” Oli grimaced at the rocky hill behind them. “I’d rather sleep in a barn than go back to that dusty inn again.”

“I can still feel the stone powder in my clothes,” Uli rubbed his shirt with a scowl. “I told you we should have stopped at a village before the town.”

“Then we’d be miles farther from the ruins. No, we should have walked further up and camped under the stars. We’ve brought tents anyway.”

“It wasn’t *that* bad,” Ana muttered with little conviction.

The twins gave her a long look and spoke as one. “Yes, it was.”

Ana hung her head low. She appeared to have forgotten about the bribe. Perhaps Lou had calmed her righteous rage for justice while he wasn't looking.

Would it have been better to argue with her?

The group wasn't as brainwashed as Kai had first feared, still, they never voiced any criticism directly at the Republic. Not even the twins who had made their dislike apparent. It was always the rude people, the corrupt guard, the general neglect of the town, never the institution governing over them.

"Why would anyone live in a place like that?" Uli and Oli got a shiver of repulsion, agreeing in their dislike.

Well...

"I don't think they had much choice in the matter."

Heads turned towards him, mostly with perplexity. He couldn't undo years of biased instruction, but that didn't mean he had to shut up.

To not falter under their attention, Kai pulled on Improvisation and his forgotten political bone. "I talked with the cook at the inn last night. The town was just another tiny settlement before the relocation. Most of the people who live there now had little say in choosing their new home."

Now he had the attention of the whole group. Flynn gave him a mindful look while Lou wore his impassive mask, his thoughts were anyone's guess.

"Why don't they just move to some other place if they don't like it?" Uli asked with a frown, echoed by his brother. "They don't have to stay there if they want to move someplace else."

Ana nodded emphatically. "All citizens are free to move to any approved settlement within the archipelago." Her words carried the tone of a rehearsed line.

"I think you're underestimating how hard and expensive it is to move." Kai kept his voice mild. If they had told him that while his family was stranded in Greenside, the answer could have been a *little* different. "It can take weeks or months to find jobs in a new town. You also need a house, food and other essentials. Not many people can afford that, especially if they've got a family to take care of."

Change was always scary and hard for most people. Till the discomfort surpassed their personal threshold, the misery they knew was better than the uncertainty of a new place. He suspected the quarry miners had to sign some kind of contract to make things harder, though the people at the inn were tight-lipped on that.

"Many probably did leave," Lou broke the tense quiet. "The streets were quite empty for a town of that size. I heard working in the quarry pays well. But yes, they should invest more to keep the place livable."

They?

"Do you remember how tall those ruins were? Are these as big?" Oli wondered out loud after a brief silence. In a blink, they went down memory lane on their trip as children.

"They should be bigger," Kai answered vaguely.

"Larger than the temple of the Seven Moons in the upper city?"

"See for yourself and tell me." His father's notes contained some rough sketches of the ruins and many, *many* observations. The journal in question rested now in his backpack, easily within reach.

Why should I ruin the surprise?

There were no more villages on the way. No islanders would build close to the ancestral places, and the Republic hadn't broken that unwritten rule. The ground turned less rocky and the vegetation denser. There were different kinds of palm trees, eucalyptus and bushy shrubbery with leaves ranging from faded purple to deep emerald.

The greenery slowed down their march till they found a path cutting through. The group was brewing in anticipation, their pace hastened with each mile covered. When the ground gently sloped towards the coast, Kai knew they must be close.

Mana Sense picked up the edge of the greenery, he turned off the skill to not spoil his first impression. He wanted to see the remnants of a past era with his own eyes.

Excitement made his heartbeat pump in his ears, his own expectations timidly rising. He had been little more than a toddler the last time he visited the ruins.

Will they seem smaller now I've grown up?

Kai let the group walk ahead to enjoy their reaction. With a final slant marking the reach of the high tide, the dark ground turned into pale sand. The twins hopped down without hesitation.

"Blessed Moons."

"Shit."

"What are they like?" Ana discarded her dignified poise and scrambled after them. Her face soon mimicked the twins', eyes wide, jaw hanging open.

The remaining trio hung back, sharing the amusement. "After you," Kai waved them forward like any proper guide should. With a nod of agreement, Lou and Flynn confidently strode forth. Their cool demeanor crumbled into awe.

They are so cute. Sometimes I forget they're still kids. Time to see what the fuss is about.

Kai locked his gaze on the ground and jumped over the slope. He wanted a complete view when he looked up. His feet crunched on the sand.

When his steps were swallowed by looming shadows, his nose rose and he was five again. A forest of towers soared from the sands like colossal white bones against the crystal sea. Some ended in broken peaks covered in ivy, others in elegant spires ascending the skies.

Kai craned his neck as far as it would go to catch their entirety. The rough drawings in the journal had not done them justice. They were majestic, towering far higher than any building in the upper city. Ivory bridges connected the structures with thin arches.

How arrogant he had been to think his doubling in height made any difference before these pillars of bone.

Well, shit. I don't remember the ruins in Whiteshore being this high or vast...

The skyscrapers on Earth were made from glass and steel. There was something inherently imposing to stone, a weight that the sleek buildings of his previous life couldn't compare.

The ivory towers defied gravity with their very presence. With their jagged lines, the broken peaks were still standing firm after eight millennia. The wind whistled, and the waves crashed vainly against the farthest pillars, hundreds of meters away.

He was insignificant, their scale humbled him. Kai basked in the shadows of a faraway past, in something greater that was now gone, that had left its skeleton behind.

Were they even more impressive in their prime?

Falling back to reality, he wasn't surprised to find the twins were missing. Their backpacks and shoes lay abandoned in the sand, drawing a trail to their laughing figures amidst the forest of stone.

For an instant, Kai feared to see a tower crumble like when they were children. But no deafening crash broke the peace. No sneering enforcers walked out of the ruins announcing they were to be demolished. It was just them and these ancient giants.

"They are bigger than I thought," Lou absently said. The four of them leisurely advanced, drinking in the sight. "How many buildings are there?"

"Eighty-seven," Kai jumped on the chance to share his knowledge, his father had personally counted them. "At least those still standing, there might be more broken or buried under the sand. What? I know my stuff." He shrugged off Flynn's judging gaze.

"Are they stable?" Lou threw a worried glance at the twins climbing a broken tower. "I remember the ones we saw at Whiteshore were intact."

"They are as safe as they come. Whatever broke them happened millennia ago, before humans reached the archipelago. I don't think you can damage them without Stone Magic or specialized skills and tools."

Looking at the jagged spires with missing chunks, his imagination ran wild. These hadn't been damaged by a demolition crew. What was powerful enough to break them like that? Was it linked with the mysterious disappearance of the Vastaire civilization like his father had speculated?

"Are they also idiot-proof?" Ana asked, looking at the twins squeezing inside an empty window.

“Depends how thick their skulls are.” Kai gave his professional opinion. “There might be something else that could break those stones after all. Though it’s more likely that they’ll get lost inside. Most of the buildings are linked underground.”

“I’ll keep an eye on them.” Ana sighed and stalked towards the tower, shouting after Uli and Oli. “Wait for me!”

“Should we set up camp?” Kai asked.

“Yes, Mister Fun, let’s go set up camp.” Flynn teased.

Lou offered no back up, ruffling his hair with one big palm. “It’s good you’re trying to be responsible.”

What does that mean?

“Fine, we can deal with it later. I’ll meet you here for lunch.” Kai took his notebook and pen and thrust his bag to Flynn. “Don’t let it get wet, and scream if you need help. I’ll know it was you.”

Is this enough ‘fun’? I just wanted to take care of the boring stuff first.

Kai strode towards the ruins, twirling his dad’s enchanted pen. Ivory pillars surrounded him on all sides, broken boulders created hurdles on the disjointed walkway. Rellan had walked these same paths years ago. He couldn’t get the grin off his face.

I didn’t expect them to be so vast. Where do I even begin?

The written pages could never do them justice. To think he had worried they'd get bored. A week would never be enough for a complete exploration. More so if the structure continued underground, and he had to dig through the sand.

I need to plan this out.

He had memorized the map his father drew, but he was having a hard time reconciling those messy strokes with reality. The ruins extended in all directions, and a flat paper couldn't properly represent them.

Kai wandered the ruins till the discordant information fit together in his head. When he was confident to tell his way around, he picked one of the structures he knew had access to the underground complex.

The doors had long sunk into the ground, but there were broken tops and windows like the ones the twins used. Taking advantage of his small size, Kai squeezed through a hole close to the ground. The sides of the entrance were smooth and sharp as if the masons had just finished laying the stone.

He poked his head inside to look around, he was close to the ceiling. The floor was about two meters down, not a problem if he wasn't entering headfirst. Kai hooked his legs on the window to shorten the jump and landed on a handstand, flexing his arms to absorb the impact.

His landing echoed in the chamber. Alas, there was no one to cheer his grand entrance. Standing upright, Kai analyzed his findings.

An unblemished white room except for a thin layer of sand and a few hermit crabs skittering away. No glyphs or signs of any kind on the flawless walls. The ruins were definitely more impressive from the outside.

There was a hole in the floor and one in the ceiling that gave access to the adjacent floors. On the wall, a regular series of square punctures in a rising arc might have once housed the stairs. Evidently, they had not been made from the same durable material.

Kai turned his attention to the passage on the floor, another similar jump. The majority of the Vastaire's writings were discovered underground. That was where he had the highest chance to find something his father had missed.

The height wasn't a problem, he should then be able to make his way up even without Empower. Hopefully, the twins wouldn't be *too* reckless in their exploration. Ana might struggle to cover the distance without a rope, though the holes of the stairs aligned with the entrance to climb up.

Kai hopped down, landing in a crouch. The layer of sand was noticeably thicker, and the air was humid. Sadly, there were no glyphs on the walls of the chamber or any other meaningful findings.

Any interesting pebble or splinter must have been looted thousands of years ago.

There was no chance to find anything that wasn't etched or chained into stone. Unmoved by logic, a corner of him couldn't help but hope he would get lucky.

Something's odd.

Kai took a second to put his finger on it. The mana was marginally denser, the difference was close to unnoticeable even with his high skill level. Such tiny changes could be due to natural fluctuations.

Is it because we're underground?

Eager to prove his theory, he headed for the passage and groaned. The next level was partially flooded.

Of course it is, you dimwit, we're below sea level.

He didn't want to ruin his new notebook, or his dad's pen. His eyes fell on the silver ring on his finger. He had promised himself not to use it unless absolutely necessary, but there was hardly a safer place than this. Apart from them, there was no village or person for miles and miles.

A strand of mana linked him to his spatial closet, where an item in particular screamed for his attention. Chewing his cheek, Kai took out the Fate Fulcrum. The sun was shining, there were no awakened beasts or people for miles, and he would only be using a *tiny* charge.

There might be a way to increase his chances after all.