

## Chapter 262 - Land

Kai and Flynn sat on the bed, the cabin was double the size of their own. A warm crystal illuminated a table and a chest to store personal effects. There was even an array to control the temperature, keeping the room chillier than outside.

*Did he charm the captain or pay for it? Huh... do I even care?*

Oraine slumped on a chair with his knee up. Even if he had left home without packing, his pocket change must be counted in gold. From the relaxed smile he wore, Kai would have never guessed they had been arguing less than an hour ago.

*I need to get some answers.*

Kai tapped his foot and shifted his gaze between the two teens, unsure of how to break the silence. Flynn had an innocent smile that meant he was silently mouthing words at Oraine.

*Too late for regrets.*

“So, Rain,” Kai tried to make his voice not sound adversarial and jumped straight to the point. “Where are you from?” The sooner he could escape this awkwardness, the better.

“Mat.” Flynn threw him a meaningful glance.

*I never said I'd pick your stray without asking questions.*

“He doesn't need to tell us everything.” Kai looked at the mysterious young man. “You've clearly got a *complicated* background and I need to know if it's coming to bite us.”

Oraine straightened his slanted posture. “I don't think my family will bother us where we're going. But if one of my mother's guardians finds me, I'll do anything to keep you out of it. May the Restless Devourer consume my soul if I break this vow.” He drew three fingers over his face.

Kai had never heard of a god with such an epithet, though that wasn't surprising. Belief carried power. Despite their tolerance of the local faith, the Church of the Seven Moons didn't allow proselytization of foreign religions.

*Or he's playing on our ignorance...*

“Thank you. You didn't have to swear such a heavy oath. But we appreciate it,” Flynn said, tapping his back.

“Yeah.” Kai bobbed his head.

*I gotta give a little trust to receive it. Reishi will know if it's real.*

"It was only fair." Oraine watched them expectantly and fidgeted with the bracelet of shells. When they stared back with a perplexed look, the look deepened into a frown. "It should already be obvious from what I've told you... You know I'm a siren, right?"

*What?*

Kai stiffened, and his mana gathered on instinct before he settled it down. He had his slew of suspicions, from a runaway royal to a shapeshifter crime lord. Still, his brain failed to formulate an appropriate response. To have someone admit they weren't human, and part of such a notorious race...

*Guess that explains the charms....*

"But you have no fishtail." Flynn pointed at the pair of normal human legs.

Oraine beamed with pride. "Yes, it was my first time morphing."

"Wait! You can just grow a pair of legs like this?" He snapped his fingers.

"It's not that quick or easy, but I'm glad they came out well." The siren stretched his legs, even their mana flow was indistinguishable from a human's. "It was my first time trying such a large morph at least. No one told me how... unpleasant it would be, but they're quite practical out of the sea."

Flynn looked ready to poke them to figure out the trick. "Can you grow your tail back? Can you show me?"

"Yes. And not now. As I said, it's not a pleasant process."

"Oh, sorry. I— I wasn't thinking." He leaned back on the bed, still looking dazed. "I'm *really* talking with a siren."

"As far as I know. I can show you this if you want." Oraine pointed to his right brown eye. Its shade slowly lightened till the iris turned an amethyst color. "How does it look?" He blinked at them.

"That's incredible." Flynn clapped his hands. "You can change anything?"

"No, it's only minor alterations outside my tail. And removing it's always faster."

"You mean that's your real color? What else did you change?"

"I didn't want to attract attention..."

*Okay, I'm out.*

"I've got a bit of a headache. I'll see you in the morning." Kai cleared his throat and retreated toward the door. The two barely gave him a distracted goodbye before returning to their conversation.

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The stripe of land and greenery in the distance made Kai breathe easier—the continent was within reach. If he dove into the waters, he could swim to the safety of shore. Farsea waited behind a ridge, just a few miles away.

That anonymous rocky coast wasn't where he had intended to go, but he had reached the mainland nonetheless. Fourteen years of waiting were coming to an end. He only had to contact Valela to get things back on track.

*Like the greedy fish said, enough gold can solve any problem. They must have a way to communicate over large distances. My troubles are on the ship.*

"Welcome back among the living." Kai turned to see Flynn stumble onto the stern of the *Melenia* with a patchy backpack. "Had trouble sleeping?"

"Morning," he yawned. "We talked into the night. Rain has seen so many interesting places and people." He hung an arm overboard toward the rolling waves and lowered his voice. "I don't think he's ordinary, even by *their* standards."

*Otherwise, he wouldn't be Mr. Perfect.*

A soft breeze brought a smell of pines and trees Kai had never smelled before. He would have liked to wring Flynn for any useful information about their fishy friend, but from the dark circles under his eyes, that'd have to wait. "When did you go to sleep?"

"Sometime after dawn. I think." The boy crossed his arms on the taffrail to rest his head. "I lost track of time. I just need a little nap. Sorr—" he covered another yawn. "Can you..."

"I'll wake you when we reach the dock."

"Mhmm... You're the best." Flynn slumped down on the floorboards with his bag as a pillow and dozed off in seconds.

*He's completely lost.*

Kai sat beside him to make sure he didn't roll over. This wasn't how he had imagined spending the last hours before landing on the mainland. Then again, he hadn't expected to get shipwrecked either. Or to have a siren in tow.

*That's too much adventure for a journey across the sea.*

His mind still swirled to decide how he felt about their new companion.

Having lived in the archipelago, Kai had heard all kinds of stories about sirens from sailors and merchants. Forbidden loves, men lured beneath the waves by songs, and crews who disappeared with only chewed bones left behind. Sailors liked to mix love and horror. He had no way to distinguish truth from myth.

Sirens growing legs were rare, but not unheard of. Kai had considered it a narrative device for shocking revelations, and fixing anatomical problems in passionate scenes with sailors. He had also heard sirens would turn into foam away from the sea—which clearly wasn't true. All the knowledge on Elydes was useless if he couldn't distinguish the lies.

The only source he trusted was Virya. The mage had mentioned other races in passing; her lessons about sirens could be summarized with cunning, fascinating and dangerous creatures—overall, best to avoid if he cared for his life.

*Too late for tha—*

"Hi." Rain walked up to them, his face glowing like any other day. He glanced at the snoring fool on the floor. "Is he okay?"

"He's just tired." Kai scooted over to make space for him. "You're an entire grade above him. I don't know about... *your family*, but he still needs rest."

"Oh." The siren looked down with guilt. "Sorry, I didn't think of that."

"It's not your fault. He's not a child." Kai was tempted to poke Flynn's face.

*See, now you left me alone with him.*

Passengers filled the deck and cheered at the closing land with eager chatter.

"I'll add it to your debt if you bother my crew." Captain Karin shouted. She also glanced at them but didn't approach.

*Bless the spirits.*

A thin bubble of mana enveloped them. Rain gestured toward a green shell on his wrist. "It's a ward to block sound. I didn't want Flynn to be woken by the ruckus."

“Uh... next time warn me before you use some magic.”

“I will.” The siren gave a pointy grin. “I couldn’t find my other privacy ward. Have you seen it by chance?”

*Damn, he knows.*

Kai reluctantly took out the obsidian pearl. “Here. You forgot it in my cabin.” Even with Runic Scholar and Arcane Enchanting it would take weeks to get anything useful from the unknown runes.

“Thank you for finding it. Why don’t you keep it? I’ve already got this.” Raine jiggled his bracelet of shells.

“Are you serious?” Kai admired the delicate web of golden runes, biting his cheek. “It looks expensive.”

*No, I can’t accept this bribe! No matter how much it shines.*

“I picked it from a drawer of old trinkets. My mother didn’t even realize it was gone. Here, let me show you how it works.” Rain casually summoned two dozen filaments of mana to control the pearl’s various wards. “It’s a bit of a chore to tune, but quite flexible.”

*Dammit.*

“I’ll take it then.” Kai discreetly pocketed it into his ring. The explanation would prove extremely useful to decode the foreign runes. “It’s very generous of you.”

“It’s really nothing.” Rain brushed it off. “I know you’d have rather stayed without me.”

“It’s not like that...” Kai decided to not insult him with a lie. “There have been many surprises between the pirates and the wreckage. And I just...”

“Feel as if your control is slipping away and you don’t want a new unknown in your life?”

“Yes.” Kai tilted his head. He couldn’t have put it better himself. “Is that another of your siren’s powers?”

“Just something I was taught,” Rain said with a rueful smile. “Mother said I always had a knack for understanding people.”

*Is there something he isn’t good at?*

“That doesn’t sound like a bad thing...”

“The better you understand someone, the easier they are to sway,” he said. Then he snapped his head toward him. “Not that I would ever do that to either of you.”

*Oh, fuck.*

“Hmm.” Kai forced himself to nod, grateful to be sitting so he couldn’t step away.

Rain leaned toward him, nailing him with his gaze. “I know you’re not familiar with sirens, but to enthrall someone who trusts you is an irredeemable sin for the Deep and people alike. I would *never* sway someone after I offered them my friendship.”

*Like you said, I’ve only your word to go off.*

“I understand.”

Rain sighed as if he could read his thoughts. “You won’t have to worry about it for long anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“That— Matthew, can I count on your discretion? It’d be problematic if people found out I was a siren, especially if my mother caught wind of it.”

Guilt jabbed him at being called by his fake name. “Of course.” Kai understood confidentiality better than anyone else. “I won’t breathe a word of it.”

“Thank you.” Rain looked at the waves foaming on the ever-closer beach. “There is a reason why sirens rarely go on land... Our innate gifts are inextricably linked to the ocean, especially our ability to charm minds. Close to shore we can still manage, but it’ll quickly fade if we move further inland.”

He gulped to hide the relief from his voice. “How far can you get?”

“It depends on how powerful a siren is. I’ve never been on land. I’ll be surprised if my gifts last for more than a few miles.”

*That does make me feel better.*

Kai was impressed that Rain was willing to reveal such a weakness. “Wait. You mean you’ve never been on shore before? Like ever?”

“I told you this was my first time morphing my tail.” The siren chuckled to his dismay. “Mother didn’t want to expose me to danger before I was able to defend myself. And I just got my profession this year.”

“You broke the Second Seal at sixteen?”

*Four years later than me.*

“Sirens can have long lives. We get it pretty early among the higher races.” Rain smirked at his puzzlement. “The ocean isn’t a forgiving place for the weak.”

“Hmm...” Kai narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t land more dangerous to you?”

“I— yeah, but—” The teen stammered. He clearly hadn’t contemplated this response.

Kai chuckled. “You prepared that line, didn’t you?”

“It’s just something people say.” Rain scowled and crossed his arms. “You have no idea of the dangers of the Deep.”

*I kinda do. That’s why I don’t like it.*

“And you have no idea of the dangers of land.” Kai poked his legs. “But worry not, oh mighty siren! This lowly human shall protect you.”

“Fine. Challenge accepted, young human.” Rain lifted his chin, assuming the air of a haughty king in the blink of an eye. “We shall see who saves who. For now, I’m leading by one.”

“For now,” Kai agreed.

The next moment the siren was back in his slanted posture and easygoing smile. “I’m glad I ran into you during the storm. I don’t know if I would have gone through with it if I were alone.”

*Spirits, now you’re making me feel bad.*

“And I’m glad I gave this a try,” Kai said. Despite his reservations, Rain had been perfectly polite and helpful since they met. He couldn’t say the same about himself. “It’s normal if you’re nervous about going on land for the first time.”

“Mhmm... that’s...” Rain shook his head. “I’m also excited. I’ll be fine.”

*Where did I hear that before?*

Farsea was within sight, a myriad of little houses covered the better part of the bay from side to side. When they said small, clearly, they meant for the mainland’s standards. The town must have been around the size of Higharbor.

Kai couldn’t wait to set foot on land.