

Chapter 167 - Underwater Exploration

Kai stashed his silver disk and clothes inside his ring and jumped to the lower floor. The knee-deep water was hardly of any help in the landing. But if it wasn't enough to cushion the fall, it was enough to drench him thoroughly.

Damned cold water.

Away from the sun, the icy droplets sent shivers down his arms and back. Scant rays of light penetrated from the opening in the ceiling. The polished ivory stone reflected the light coming from the windows two floors up.

A school of tiny yellow fish tickled his legs in their panic to flee to the deeper chamber. The mana density had increased yet again, though it didn't reach any degree that warranted worrying about. Water and Shadow particles swirled around him, with a minor presence of his other major elements and the occasional stray Space mote he snatched for himself.

It wasn't enough to birth a beast, and even if some mollusk or crab got lucky to awaken, a red-tier animal was hardly a threat.

Kai used his enchanted crystal to better light the chamber as he mulled over the plan taking form in his mind. If he wanted to use the Fulcrum, he had to take thorough precautions.

Tapping his fingers on the pale walls, Kai activated Inspect and Mana Sense. Rocks in nature often had tiny fractures where they might break, the stone of the ruins was flawless inside and out.

This aligned with the theory his dad wrote in his journals. Rellan had believed that due to the way the Vastaire built their structures, the stone could be broken but not damaged. Unless a force surpassed their durability threshold, they remained immutable through the millennia. Unaffected by weather and time.

The Fate Fulcrum made unlikely events bubble to the surface, even if the chance they would occur naturally was minuscule. But those events had to be possible.

It's a theory. I'm not an expert in magic constructions, and neither was my dad...

He would verify their stability before proceeding. He didn't feel comfortable betting on any life but his own. And a collapse was only *one* possible danger.

With five teenagers climbing the towers, his biggest worry was to find them splattered on the ground. A few slippery droplets falling at the wrong time and place, or a sudden gust of wind could make them lose their grip.

Or an osprey mistaking them for prey, a vine coming loose, a swarm of angry bees...

Without knowing the limits of the artifact, his mind could conjure an endless number of ludicrous scenarios.

That's why I need to test it away from people.

No matter how unlikely the deadly circumstances were, he was not going to take any chances. His best bet was to activate the Fulcrum when the group was away from the ruins and any potential mishap.

The release of Fate had lasted about half an hour in Higharbor. Given the smaller charge he would be using, this one might be even shorter. Perhaps he could activate the artifact at night while his friends slept in a safe area. They might not realize anything odd happened.

Should I ask Flynn if I missed something?

His friend had been the one campaigning to test the silver disk, but Kai didn't want to encourage him towards anything reckless. It might be better to keep him in the dark till all

was said and done. He had already told him he planned to use it during the return trip, so Flynn shouldn't suspect anything.

Though I'd be super mad if the positions were reverted, and he decided for me. He knows the potential dangers of the artifact...

Stuck in a flooded chamber underground, Kai decided to set aside the matter and carry on with his exploration. Either case, he needed to become more familiar with the ruins before he used the artifact. He might have overlooked a potential danger.

Even if the spirits smiled at him, there was no way to ensure the random coincidences brought him something useful. The artifact might need to gather more Fate, there might be nothing to find, or a thousand other possibilities. It would be useful as a test, but he couldn't wager all his hopes on it. His dad had visited many ruins, it was possible he might have missed some hidden glyphs.

Enough stalling, waiting won't make the water any warmer.

Taking a deep breath, Kai dove into the frigid waters towards the next chambers. The world turned silent and darker, lit only by the enchanted crystal in his fist. Its blue light reverberated in the twisted tunnels. Thanks to Blessed Swimmer, he was always at home in the sea.

Wait! Does this mean the water is linked to the sea, or is the proximity enough?

The edge of the ruins bordered the waves, but he hadn't checked whether they were directly connected. If so, the upper floors might empty with the low tide and make his exploration more convenient.

With the oxygen ticking down in his lungs, Kai focused on his surroundings. The chamber he was in brought some variety, with two passages branching on opposite walls beside the one leading deeper into the room.

Where do I go first? Eenie meanie miney moe.

Kai picked a corridor at random, swimming in slow regular strokes for efficiency. He tried to match the confusing maps with what stood before him. Rellan had drawn them for his personal use, not imagining someone else would need to decipher his scribbles decades later.

The pale ivory tunnel extended into darkness. Sand and debris had filled a noticeable portion of the ruins, halving the once spacious passages. Scampering crustaceans and mollusks hid under the sand, scared of the foreign light he carried, while schools of blue and green fishes swam curiously toward him.

It was harder to extend Mana Sense through denser materials. Scouting the waterway wasn't a problem, he could get a rough picture of the complex dozens of meters ahead. But the tiny details buried under meters of sand and gravel were a different story.

At least I'll see any beast from a mile away.

Most inanimate objects contained a fraction of the mana living entities possessed. While Kai couldn't directly perceive them, he could identify their silhouettes with the flows of mana around them. Each material bent the streams of essence in slightly different ways.

He opted to move slow and steady rather than to hurry and later wondered if he had missed a glyph buried on the floor of a chamber.

In a corner, a red crab threateningly clacked its pincers at him. Kai waved back a friendly greeting as he floated over the little guy. A forest of deep blue kelp with a faint luminescence filled the next corridor.

Behind the plants gently swaying in the current, a series of side rooms opened on both sides. Their doors were mostly buried, leaving only a small opening he could squeeze through. Kai poked his head inside for anything immediately visible and checked them with his skills from outside.

This is going to take a while, I should have filled the ring with air.

One after the other, Kai methodically moved through all the chambers. About a third of the towers had access to the underground system, most of them were in the highest buildings located in the central cluster.

When he moved too far from his initial entrance, he found a closer breathing chamber to resurface and note down his progress. A simple Water spell ensured he didn't get his notebook wet.

The complex hadn't been purposefully built to be a maze, but being flooded and half-buried complicated things. Diving in dark tunnels brought back memories of his underwater hunt with Ele. He had been forced to leave Sylspring before he could visit Mama Clam again.

She must miss me dearly. I bet she must have prepared another pearl for me.

He regularly exchanged letters with his family, though there were things that couldn't be expressed through words. Now that he was done with Virya's puzzle, he should find the time to visit. But it'd take a week on sea counting the back and forth, and his mom wasn't going to let him go easily once he got there.

He didn't want to take advantage of Reishi's patience. The merfolk had been accommodating with their Alchemy business, and Kai planned to give it his full focus for a few months, especially after he had taken time off for this trip.

So many things to do and so little time.

Without the sun to keep track of time, Kai fell into a rhythm. He dove into the cold waters, explored the dark chambers, scared the crap out of some little critters, resurfaced and repeated.

He found an etching on the wall in a half-buried room. A short text praising some ancient monarch with a name he couldn't pronounce, and the Blessing he or she bestowed on the Vastaire. It had already been recorded and translated by his dad, but it proved the squiggly doodle on the maps marked the place of his writings.

Most of the etching referred to obscure historical events and figures that made no sense to him. The writers rarely gave any context since their meaning must have appeared obvious to them. There was also the chance he or his father had gotten something wrong in the translation.

Kai broke the surface of the water, taking deep breaths. A patch of reddish algae growing against the ivory walls proved it was a new chamber he hadn't been in before.

I should go see how they're doing before they start worrying. Would it be suspicious if I walked out with dry clothes?

Lou already knew about his Water Magic, but the twins and Ana didn't. Then again, they weren't the types to look for a strange explanation like magic when he could have left them in a dry chamber. And he didn't really like having salt in his clothes.

I've not brought enough shirts to change them every day.

Taking a run-up, Kai leaped for the opening in the ceiling. He overshot a little, hitting his ribs on the passage. With a curse, he managed to grab hold of the floor and pull himself up.

A jump later, he popped out of a window and landed on the pale sand, just a shade darker than the ruins. The warm rays of the sun banished the chill of the underground waters from his bones. Noon and lunch must have passed by a few hours.

"Found him!" Lou announced, striding towards him.

Shit. Kai gave him a sheepish smile.

"We were looking for you." The teen sighed. There was no anger, just the look of an exasperated parent.

“Sorry, it was hard to tell time down in the flooded underground.”

Lou kept his gaze for a second before shaking his head, “It’s fine. I know the Vastaire ruins were important to your father, but try to warn us if you plan to go out on your own. If I didn’t know you, I would have thought you drowned.”

“I will,” he promised. It was hard to argue when Lou used his reasonable tone. “By the way, have you prepared anything for lunch?” His stomach rumbled at the thought of food.

“There was when I left, but I can’t guarantee it will still be there. C’mon, I’ll show you where we’ve camped.”

“Did you fall off while climbing?” Ana joined them on their way back to camp.

“No, sorry for worrying you,” Kai noticed they were heading deeper into the cluster of ruins and not toward the greenery. His suspicions were confirmed when they stopped before one of the central towers. “You set up camp *here*?”

Up close, he had to crane his neck to watch the massive ivory pillar before them. In its prime, it must have been the highest one in the ruins, but now the pinnacle was broken in a clean cut.

“Uli and Oli insisted it was the only sensible choice.” Ana began to climb with little ceremony, making use of the regular holes that once held the fixtures of the building. “It’s sheltered from the weather and safe from the tide. So it’s not a terrible choice...”

While Kai couldn’t dispute their logic, it felt odd to sleep and cook dinner inside the ruins, as if they were violating a sacred place. Following Ana, he entered a spacious room. Their bags were lined up against the wall, and an impromptu fireplace lay extinguished.

“Did you get stuck in a room unable to climb out?” Uli asked with weird enthusiasm.

Hello to you too.

“No, I—.” Kai tried to explain but was interrupted by Oli.

“Did you fall off a tower, hit your head and lay unconscious on the beach?”

Did I miss something?

“No. I didn’t realize how the hours flew by.”

“Oh...” both twins slumped, disappointed. They scowled at Flynn who lay sprawled by the hearth, enjoying the sunlight peeking through a window.

“I told you he was fine. He forgets about everything else when he’s focused.”

Kai furrowed his brow. “Did you bet on what happened to me?”

“Absolutely not. What gave you that impression?” Flynn grinned brightly. “But even if we did, and I’m not saying that’s what happened, I was right. You can’t blame me for it, you can be a bit forgetful.”

I’m not sure that’s how it works.

“Here, I’ve kept your lunch safe.” Flynn offered him a pot to distract him.

“It’s empty.” Kai pointed out the obvious. All that remained were a few crumbs of what might or might not have been a stew.

“What?” He widened his eyes and pulled a hand over his face in shock. “I’ve no idea how that happened!”

“Hey!” The twins stood up. “You said we couldn’t have it because you were saving it for Kai.”

“No, I said I would keep it safe.” Flynn corrected them, his dramatic surprise already gone. “And I can assure you, the food is *extremely* safe right now.” He patted his belly.

Uli and Oli shared a glance, slowly advancing towards him. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Since Lou had mentioned how the food had been left unguarded, Kai had already resigned. He perused their supplies to cook another meal while the twins chased after Flynn. His traitorous friend fled out of a window, granting him the gift of silence.

Busy mapping out every nook and cranny of the ruins, five days fled him. His dad had been extremely thorough in his exploration. Kai didn’t know how Rellan had managed to spot every detail of interest, no matter if it was buried below meters of sand.

I should ask Mom what his profession was.

After inspecting many towers, he hadn’t found any signs that could forecast a collapse in the ivory structure. That still left his other worries. There was something weird about the mana density within the ruins.

While the increase wasn’t significant, it was there. It grew the deeper he went in the chambers and reached his peak in the center of the underground complex. Rellan had dismissed it as one of many mana oddities. Small pockets of higher concentration weren’t unique. The Essence of the World was always in motion and ever-changing.

Kai couldn't accept that there was no answer, and he also couldn't find any other explanation. It was incredibly frustrating. He had tried to follow the flows of mana through the maze of corridors, but those streams just looped onto themselves without any detectable source or origin.

Lou asked to come with him once. No one else had shown interest in exploring the icy waters below the ruins. The soaring towers with their jagged tops held more appeal, granting incredible views of the coast. The twins made it their mission to climb every peak.

Despite Kai's worries, they were great climbers and had managed to complete their mission before the week was over, leaving them temporarily aimless. With just a few subtle hints, he convinced them to volunteer for a supply run in a nearby village. And Ana obviously couldn't let them go alone. Spirits knew what they'd buy by themselves.

From the window in their camp, Kai observed Flynn and Lou jogging away along the coast. His friend had shown no surprise when he revealed what he had been planning. Convincing him to keep Lou busy had been harder, but he had ultimately agreed.

With a thought, a silver disk reflecting multiple colors appeared in his hand. It was finally time.