

## Talisin and the Quiet Isle

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Talisin knew he headed toward a small, quiet land as he journeyed through the fog between isles of the Dream. No matter their size, every isle radiated an aura visible to experienced dream walkers like himself. The platinum fox's destination was subdued, a candle flickering in an open field. He felt he could scoop the isle up in his paws, that a single errant breath could extinguish it.

But he'd understood the nature of his unknown destination before he'd set off. The cards had told him that. A little place. A silent place. A place he should be. Although the cards didn't bind him, he valued their guidance, so he'd left the comfort of a lively isle for the isolation of a quiet one.

The fog thinned. Impressions of the nearing isle rolled over Talisin like waves, each more detailed than the last. The isle *was* an isle, a rocky triangle surrounded by water surrounded by the fog. That Talisin could envision it in its entirety confirmed how small it was. That he could sense no complex flares erupting from the aura confirmed how little *thought* there was. He harbored no delusions of finding companionship there.

A breeze breached the fog, causing the loose ends of the red and blue strips wrapped around Talisin's walking staff to flap about. He adjusted the deep blue poncho around his shoulders, nudging the folds of the fabric until the field of white stars stitched onto it were arranged in new constellations. Gentle warmth came off the poncho in response.

The way forward promised water, and Talisin wanted to avoid swimming the rest of the way. He ran his fingers over the string of colorful beads hanging from his belt and cleared his throat.

"The Wanderer peered hard into the dense fog, his single good eye seeking the faintest silhouette of land. One wrapped paw clutched the tiller, keeping the tiny boat heading straight and true, while the other paw gripped the boat's edge, claws digging grooves into the wood. Instinct guided him. Instinct, and hope."

A simple boat manifested around Talisin as he narrated the story. He mimicked every action he said, even scanning for the shore he could sense but not yet see.

"The Wanderer caught what little wind there was in his patched sail, praying the small holes in it wouldn't widen and leave him adrift. 'Just a bit further,' he said, speaking to his boat as if it were a struggling beast of burden. 'I'll replace your sail once we're home. And the rudder, too. No more knicks and cracks, but only if we reach shore!' He patted the side of the boat to encourage it."

Water lapped against the boat, breaking the silence of the fog between dreams. The breeze picked up, puffing the sail and whipping the messy tufts of white fur around Talisin's neck and head. He tightened his hold on the tiller. It'd been months since he'd last sailed a boat of any sort, let alone one without an engine or crew, but the muscle memory crept back to him.

Just like riding a bike. Talisin had heard the phrase spoken in certain isles. An apt comparison, considering his own experiences with bikes. Though learning how to ride the marvelous things in the first place had taken a great deal of time.

The boat rocked. "Focus," Talisin calmly reminded himself. "The Wanderer coaxed the sail into catching the wind, paws scrambling between ropes and tiller. The distant cry of seagulls perked his ears up and got his bushy tail smacking the planks behind him. At last, he saw fuzzy blobs through the weakening fog. The island. Sanctuary. Then he was out of the haze."

Talisin adjusted the ropes until the sail puffed out, lurching the boat forward. Vague shapes appeared on the horizon. A smile spread across his muzzle. But the seagulls didn't cry. The fox chastised himself for carelessly exceeding his capabilities. He didn't know this isle, and he didn't know what birds inhabited it, if any did at all. Optimistic words couldn't alter an ecosystem.

Talisin left the fog behind, giving him his first clear view of the land. The island that made up the isle of the Dream was a golden brown mound speckled with the green of vegetation. Splotches of gray stood amongst the green and brown, stretching from the shore to the peak of the hill. Stone buildings, none more than a couple stories tall. Ruins.

"A quiet land indeed," Talisin whispered, turning the tiller to guide his boat to shore.

Clouds covered the sky from horizon to horizon, a muddled mixture of whites, grays, and blues. The dark blue sea brightened to a brilliant turquoise closer to shore. The weather was mild, teetering on the edge of being cold when the wind hit just right.

The docks of the crumbling village had collapsed into the sea long ago. Bent, rotting pier posts jutted from the water. Talisin made his way toward them, leaning over the side of the boat to keep an eye out for debris in the shallows. He glimpsed the skeletal frames of small wrecks buried in the sand beneath the waves.

Stitches ripped along a patch in the sail. The boat's momentum slowed as the wind blew through the sail rather than pushed against it.

"Almost there," Talisin urged the boat on. He'd manifested something barely seaworthy to conserve his strength. No use in creating a flawless new boat

if the exertion of altering the story of reality made him pass out afterward. He only needed it to get him to dry land.

Talisin turned the sail away from the wind and altered course to angle himself at the shore. The boat slowed to a crawl. It shuddered as its hull dragged along something in the shallows, then again as it banged into the large rocks along the water's edge. As rough as the arrival was, the boat remained in one piece. Talisin pulled himself from the boat and moored it to the trunk of a narrow tree that'd stubbornly thrived in the soil near the rocky shore.

Arrival was—as it always had been—the easiest part of Talisin's journey. The cards had led him to the tiny isle of the Dream, and he needed to uncover why. Potential reasons were as plentiful as the stars on the platinum fox's poncho. There could be an obligation to fulfill or an important experience to be had. Something might need to be saved or possibly destroyed. A story to take in and share with others. He might only be there as a witness.

Talisin decided the high ground was as good a place as any to begin his understanding of the isle. He set off down the jumble of uneven stones that had once been a road. Plants had sprouted in the gaps between stones, separating them like an ice floe cracking apart in the sun. The buildings he passed were merely hollow shells, lacking roofs, shutters, or doors. Walls had collapsed in on themselves, turning to jagged fields of rubble.

Once the road curved uphill, the walk became a hike. The old steps hadn't survived their abandonment, worn down by roots, wind, and rain until they resembled miniature rockslides. Talisin braced himself with his staff, wary of loose stones shifting under his boots. He'd traveled rougher terrain before, but the only difference between a nasty fall on a hill and a nasty fall on a mountain pass was the view you had as your consciousness faded.

High-pitched tweets echoed through the ruins as small round birds darted from stone to branch, branch to bush. Signs of life delighted Talisin. They confirmed the land was quiet, but not dead. The land would live on long after the remnants of its former inhabitants became indistinguishable from mere rocks. Sometimes, that was the way things were.

Talisin clenched his staff until his knuckles burned.

Vibrant overgrowth made a maze of the deteriorating village. Talisin fell back on educated guesses and gut instinct to choose his path forwards. Whenever he found the road meandering downward, he'd backtrack and try again. Trial and error didn't frustrate the fox, at least as long as sunlight continued to filter through the clouds above. At his core, he was a wanderer, and wandering rarely meant traveling a straight path.

The rubble road eventually led Talisin to the peak of the hill. The old inhabitants had flattened the top for a temple, granting the subject of their

worship a commanding view of the village and sea. Devotion hadn't spared the place from ruin. Three columns of the circular temple remained standing. The rest had toppled over, bringing the roof down with them. A mound of rugged stones marked where the temple's core had stood.

Talisin ran a paw up and down the grooves of a standing column. The rough stone chilled his fingers. The elements had bleached the column bone white. Faint flecks of orange and red hid in the column's pores. Perhaps the temple had looked like a roaring fire in its prime, blazing atop the hill. His good eye drifted to the black stains that stretched up the backside of the column. A much more literal burning beacon, in the end.

Talisin couldn't tell if accident or arson had brought down the temple. It may very well have fallen after its builders were gone. Still, he circled the ruin once in search of the white and blue sigil of the Many-eyed Archivist. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found nothing at all, and marked off one potential reason the cards might have sent him there.

The ruins stirred Talisin's curiosity and made his dead eye tingle. The origins of isles of the Dream fascinated the platinum fox. Few were known for certain, the truth buried generations in the past and warped by mythology and lies of convenience, but there were hints even a casual observer could pick up on. The land itself, for example.

Nothing stood out to Talisin as fantastical. Water was blue, clouds gray, plants green, and he guessed a single, pale moon hung in the sky above. The place was as mundane as things got in the Dream; it was the purest reflection of the Waking World, like a mirror held up to reality. Only the distant, eternal wall of fog marked the island as belonging to the Dream.

Unconscious collective effort tended to form such mundane isles. People of a thriving society projecting their pride so fiercely that it bore fruit in the dream. Or people of a collapsing society projecting their memories of better days with such desperation that they achieved the same result. Talisin's long-lost home isle had come from a mix of both. Second chances, gone for good. Nothing lasted forever, not even in the Dream.

Having obtained all he could from the collapsed temple, Talisin walked away. The town didn't look like a town from his vantage point. Plants concealed paths and courtyards, while trees rose within the walls of old homes. If he stared too long, it all blended together into a lush, rocky hillside.

A single, large building stood out among the rest, more intact than anything else Talisin had seen. All four walls and its roof had endured. If any of the village's past had survived destruction, it'd be there.

“Is my purpose somewhere in there?” Talisin asked the deck of cards tucked away in his pack. “Or is this another reminder that some places don’t even persist in memory?”

No answer, of course. The cards were meant to guide, not explain. Forces outside his understanding. But life benefited from the occasional mystery, so he accepted their silence.

Talisin retraced his steps down the steep hillside. Once more, he played a guessing game of which path to take. A path could look promising for a long while, then curve in the opposite direction or come to a dead end. Buildings had collapsed over the old roads in certain spots, creating piles of stone treacherous to cross. Views not blocked by walls were blocked by the thick canopies of trees intent on reclaiming the land. But he grew closer and closer to the large structure.

Along the way, the fox investigated any building that caught his eye and seemed safe to enter. They were as decrepit on the inside as on the outside, floors covered in wreckage or growth. Time had compacted furniture into unrecognizable lumps of rotting wood. Dusty pottery shards blended in with the dirt the wind had blown in. Warped cooking pots lay overturned in hearths.

There were skeletons, as well, though few in number. Bones were scattered about, some crushed and others gnawed on, none properly laid to rest. Talisin couldn’t tell whether the dead had fallen to injury or disease. He couldn’t tell if they belonged to the original inhabitants or invaders. Some could very well have been travelers like himself, done in by poor choices or happenstance.

So many questions Talisin wasn’t equipped to answer. He’d visited isles of the Dream where people with magic or technology or divine intuition could piece together such puzzles with the tiniest bit of evidence. A plethora of wonders existed in both the Dream and the Waking World, and Talisin was grateful to have witnessed them.

After a great deal of casual exploration, Talisin reached a broken, rusted gate that welcomed him to the large building he’d spied from the hilltop. The building appeared in worse shape up close. Swathes of the stucco coating the walls had worn away, exposing irregular stone bricks and crumbling mortar. Tiles had slid from the roof and shattered on the cracked pavement below. A grand portico at the front of the building had collapsed, blocking the entrance with rubble.

The first-floor windows of the building were tiny squares barely on eye level. For as lean as Talisin was, he knew he’d never squeeze through. But at least they offered him a view of the interior’s condition. What little light seeped in pushed aside the shadows just enough for Talisin to make out smashed tables and chairs. And, on shelves against a far wall, he thought he saw books.

Talisin's good eye widened, and his dead eye chilled behind the tuft of head fur hanging over it. He knew without a doubt that his reason for being there was in that room, written in ink on the pages of whatever books survived. He needed to find a way inside.

With a rejuvenated sense of urgency and purpose, Talisin circled the building in search of an opening wide enough for him. The windows remained mercilessly small and intact. Trees had yet to encroach on the structure; no roots had undermined the walls for him to take advantage of. He dared not narrate weakness into the existence of the building. Too subtle, and all he'd do is crack a few bricks. Too strong, and the whole thing could come tumbling down, annihilating the last relics of a vanished society.

A full loop around the building turned up nothing. The only way in was through the front, and a mountain of broken stone did its best to seal the place like a tomb.

Talisin's tail whipped from side to side as he thought over his limited options. The windows of the second floor appeared wider, but he lacked the means to scale the walls and didn't trust his ability to make a ladder from scratch. He saw no way to use his gift on the building effectively without causing wanton destruction. The fox stared long and hard at the debris before the entrance, and he laughed. Perhaps he was overthinking the situation.

Talisin leaned his staff against the wall and gingerly scaled the pile. Shattered bricks slid away from his boots like fleeing beetles. He grabbed the topmost chunk of stone, and simply chucked it behind him. It cracked into two pieces on impact. Then he grabbed another stone and did the same. As imposing as the pile looked, it wasn't solid rock. It wasn't a boulder rolled before the entrance. It was hundreds of small stones hardly bigger than his fists.

Stone by stone, Talisin pulled apart the mound standing between him and history.

*Crack!*

*Crack!*

*Crack!*

The stones bounced and broke. Though Talisin's paw wrappings protected his palms from the rough edges, the repetitive strain still caused his fingers to ache. He panted as sweat trickled down his brow. The fox was no stranger to physical labor and spurred himself on by recalling far more challenging tasks he'd endured in the past.

"Easier than mining or working on a ship. Or that cattle drive," he huffed between throws. Not that he regretted the memories. Even the harsh times gifted him with valuable lessons. "Ha! And don't forget: you'll get soft if you don't exert

yourself now and then.” Certain isles of the Dream had proven a tad too relaxing for his own good.

Steadily, the pile dwindled, revealing more of the wide entrance. Stones shifted and groaned under Talisin in rumbling protest of his digging, but he countered his uneven footing with cautious narration.

“The mound of debris had stood in the silent village for countless years, resistant to wind and rain. The Wanderer was an unwanted presence, an invading climber it wished it could shake off with the fury of a true mountain. But the mound was too sturdy to fall apart. Too proud—as proud as rubble could be. It’d already failed once when it’d come tumbling down ages ago. Never again. It would remain stable, even as the Wanderer gradually shaved off its peak.”

Fewer stones slid away from the pile, lessening Talisin’s fears of getting caught in a miniature landslide. He toiled away, removing piece by piece, layer by layer, until he’d excavated a large enough gap between the door frame and rubble to pass through comfortably.

Talisin sat upon the shortened peak of the pile, catching his breath and resting his sore paws. A fresh layer of dust coated his pants and the tip of his fluffy tail. More would accumulate once he entered the building—plenty more—but he didn’t mind. A little grime was worth learning something about the quiet land he’d wandered into.

His short break finished, Talisin maneuvered around the top of the pile and descended into the building.

The entry opened into a small atrium dulled by abandonment. Murky rainwater filled the shallow square reflecting pool in the center. Fallen roof tiles and bits of stone jutted from the pool like jagged islands. Partially sheltered from the elements, the columns of the atrium retained a glimpse of their orange coloring, painted in a way to mimic flames. Patchy, faded frescoes on the walls depicted scenes at sea, bonfires, and what Talisin guessed was a sun deity.

Talisin examined what remained of the art, his first real insight into the people whose grave he’d wandered into. Though he lacked context for the scenes, he appreciated them nonetheless. Someone had to, before they eroded away into unrecognizable smears.

Beyond the atrium was a spacious great hall covered in shadows. Wooden chandeliers lay in shambles on the floor, their candles broken and unusable. Talisin opened the satchel at his side and dug out a black cylinder with a curved glass lens at one end. It was a souvenir from a fairly advanced isle of the Dream, a fantastic example of magical ingenuity based on an invention from the Waking World. A beam of light sputtered from the glass lens when he pressed his thumb down on a small metal button. The automatic torch pushed back some of the dark, allowing Talisin to continue his search.

The room with the books Talisin had spied on from outside was easy to find. The fox walked around the smashed furniture, only briefly letting his light linger on the skeletal remains bunched in a corner. Unfortunately, fate had been as unkind to the isle's books as it had its former inhabitants. Most lay strewn on the floor before the shelves, with their bindings ripped apart. Wildlife had chewed holes in the pages, and leaking water had smudged the ink into blobs. But the books that'd clung defiantly to the shelves were still legible, albeit written in an alphabet and language unfamiliar to Talisin.

Every seasoned wanderer had a way of managing the myriad languages of the Dream. Talisin's was an uncomfortable necessity. The fox opened an intact book to its first page and stared at the text. He pushed aside the messy tuft of fur on his head that concealed his dead eye. The eye was a cold, unmoving lump of smooth marble with a blue crystal iris far brighter than that of his good eye. Small veins of crystal radiated from the iris like tiny streams. The stone eye flickered twice, then began matching the movements of his good eye.

Talisin blinked, and the words and grammar of the language on the page were suddenly as familiar as his native tongue. He placed the automatic torch on the shelf to provide light while he read the saga of a mythological hero he'd never heard of, whose legend may very well have died along with the village. And as he read, his dead eye flickered, and the Many-eyed Archivist greedily absorbed the new tale from afar.