

Chapter 238 - Reconnecting

"I'm good. You don't have to worry." Kai flexed his biceps in the hope they would stop probing him. He had been stuffed with food till his stomach was ready to burst. Used to burnt beasts and bitter roots, his mom's cooking tasted heavenly down to the last bite.

Despite repeated reassurances that he was perfectly healthy, his family wasn't willing to relent. Once Alana was certain he wouldn't starve, she sat beside him and took his hand hostage. She intently watched his every move, determined to make up for the years of lost contact in a single day.

Ele wasn't any better. After squeezing his ribs, she hovered over him, poking his body as if he were a fish on auction. "You have another scar here." His sister ran a cold finger from his neck to his upper back.

"Please stop. It's just a scratch." Kai jerked away and buttoned his shirt up. If he let this continue, they might ask him to strip next. "I don't even remember how I got that one."

He had received two claw marks, one talon and an ice blade between his shoulder blades. The advancement to Yellow had healed most of his scars, while the deepest wounds turned into thin pale lines criss-crossing his tanned skin. Without a proper mirror, he wasn't even sure how many he had.

Thank Yatei, they don't know how I looked before.

Jagged wounds and torn flesh weren't a pretty sight. In the Sanctuary, he couldn't afford to splurge on his healing concoctions for vanity. And he received far fewer scars once he had advanced his grade.

"He looks alright to me, hon'. Let him breathe a little, he's not going to disappear." Moui marked the sentence with a look that said *you better not*. The hunter stood like a sentinel by the window, stealing glances outside. He didn't trust the Republic would let him go easily.

I'm not sure whether the truth is better or not...

Countless brushes with death dressed in an abundant dose of desperation and fear. The petty squabbles of the military and politicians now seemed so insignificant. Kai couldn't bring himself to care. He wouldn't go around shouting his name from the rooftops, but he wasn't going to hide under a rock either. If any fucker thought they could take advantage of him, they were welcome to try.

"He's clearly been neglecting himself." Alana shook her head. "When was the last time you ate a decent meal?"

"Hmm, Flynn cooked me dinner in Higharbor."

“Those were some leftovers I threw together.” His friend watched him from the farthest chair in the kitchen, amused at his plight. “*Hardly* a proper meal.”

Kien sat in his lap with a sulk and puffed cheeks. The toddler was less than enthusiastic about a new big brother who soaked up all the attention.

Great. I managed to ruin my first impression.

How hard could it be to win over a two-year-old? The bag of sweets they bought in Higharbor should do the job, or he could enchant some toy.

He can't be harder than Kea... He'll probably forget by tonight. That's how children work, right?

Looking at the crowded kitchen, someone was still missing. “Mom, where is Kea? Is she not coming?” Despite their rocky relationship, Kai had expected her to hurry over—even just to punch his face.

Mom said the situation with her was complicated... Does Kea hate me?

His family exchanged a conversation through glances, everybody was in on it, but nobody talked.

“What is it?”

“You don't know?” Kien squeaked, eyes sparkling at the knowledge he held. “My sister is on the mainland. She went to fight monsters. And she's gonna tell me everything when she comes back!”

“She did what?” Kai searched their faces, hoping his brother had misunderstood something. No one spoke up, even Flynn stared at his feet with a guilty look.

Kien looked at their silent reactions with a frown. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, sweetheart. You're right.” Alana smiled with a hint of sadness. “Keandra left a few months ago to travel the mainland. The archipelago was too small for her...”

Dammit.

“How could—” Kai bit his tongue. Once his sister made up her mind, no one could stop her. Going to the continent had always been his grand plan. Perhaps if he had shut up about it, his sister might not have gotten the idea.

The mainland was a dangerous and messy place. While his own track record was rather *questionable*, Kea was more impulsive than him. His mind shuddered at everything that might go wrong.

In truth, her choice wasn't that surprising. She was never going to settle for a quiet life, though he wished he could have been there for her.

May Kahali watch over her.

"Kea matured a lot after you left." Ele tried to lighten the mood. "She knows how to look after herself, and she's traveling with a group of islanders."

Kai couldn't tell if she was saying that just to make him feel better. He had grown quite a bit himself, though the circumstances were quite different. "Do you have a way to contact her?"

"We do," Alana said with a sigh. "But letters take a long time to arrive, and it's hard to respond if she isn't staying in the same place. We mostly receive her letters now and then, usually once a month."

"Why don't you tell us more about you? Where were you?" Moui left his guard post by the window since no enforcers tried to leap through. He stood beside Alana, and she leaned against him.

"Dear." His mom held his uncle's hand over her shoulder. "Kai only just came back."

Oh, boy. Here we go.

"It's fine. You deserve to know what happened." He had only been delaying the inevitable. The reunion had gone as well as he could hope—except for Kea's absence. Now it was time for the stressful portion. "It's a bit of a long story."

Flynn took his cue to ruffle Kien's hair. "Why don't we go play outside? You can finish your sculpture."

"But I wanna listen to the story."

"It's just boring adult stuff, trust me. I can tell you a better one."

The toddler bit his lip, looking between them. "You promise?"

Flynn offered to shake his pinky. "On my honor. I'm a much better storyteller than your brother." He winked before leaving the kitchen.

With the innocent ears protected, Kai quickly inspected the room. There was a difference between not cowering before the Republic and being foolish. Those greedy assholes wouldn't let the bone go if they got a whiff of it.

The walls on the outer streets were enchanted to muffle sounds; the appliances in the house also had a smattering of runes. A couple cooling and heating enchantments, pumps for

water piping, an array to condense mana, and one to remove smells in the bathroom. Nothing suspicious. Kai decided to close the door to be meticulous.

“Is something wrong?” Moui asked with a note of alarm.

“Just checking the house.” While Kai wanted to be truthful, he didn’t want to share information that would endanger them. “The Republic wants to keep what happens at the Veeryd sites a secret. I can tell you, but you must not discuss it outside this house.”

“Of course, little brother. We’re not fools.” Ele smiled while Alana slammed her hand on the table. “I knew it was them. What did they do to you?”

Where do I start?

“Do you know of the beast attacks that spiked a few years ago?” Kai painted the situation he had found himself in two years prior with broad strokes. The need for a translator of the Vastaire glyphs, the spatial anomalies, and the infighting between the military and political wings. “We found a hidden realm connected to the ruins spread throughout the archipelago.”

Soft gasps circled the table.

“You’re not kidding?” Ele leaned on the table toward him. “You mean there is a *whole* realm separated from reality here, in our archipelago? Just like in the tales?”

“More or less.” Kai scratched his head. The reality of the Sanctuary was far grimmer than those legends depicted, there were no flying castles or waterfalls of gold.

Hmm, I might as well...

With a theatrical swirl of his hand, Kai summoned a long cerulean horn that shimmered like a sapphire. Since he was already this deep, he might as well provide proof. And why not play into their fantasies?

“How did you do that?” Moui blinked, slowly reaching to touch the horn. “Did this belong to a yellow beast?”

“I’ve got a spatial item, and yes. Though the drake was already half dead when I found it.” He had more impressive items stashed in his spatial closet, but those didn’t sparkle quite as much.

“You mean you landed the finishing blow? By yourself?” Ele stared at him with wide eyes. She didn’t have as many qualms, grabbing the trophy with a look of reverence. “Is this Water attuned...?”

“Yeah—”

“You mean you were trapped in this *realm* for two years?” Alana pulled him into a hug. “Oh, sweetheart. That must have been so scary.”

“It wa—” Kai gulped and chose silence before his voice could break. It was quite terrifying, especially during the first year when he lacked the experience, skills and had a lower grade than most of the beasts there.

“How could the Republic send a child to such a dangerous place? It’s deplorable.”

“Ehm...”

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Kai leaned against the cupboard, making the glasses inside *clink*. A heavy breath escaped his lips. His family had left to organize the feast to celebrate his return—and to gather their thoughts.

Admitting to his family he had chosen to be trapped was one of the hardest things he had ever done. It had also stopped a flood of ravenous yellow beasts from crossing and got him away from the Republic, but that only made it marginally better.

Well, I knew it wouldn't be easy.

Ele fell silent before excusing herself, saying she left her house in a hurry and didn’t want to worry her husband. His mom said it was *fine*, that she *understood*. Though Kai could tell it wasn’t as easy as she made it out to be. Beyond apologizing for what he put them through, forgiveness was out of his hands.

For better or worse, it was done.

He hadn’t gone into details about the Sanctuary or Zervathi. That was what the Republic would be most interested in. If his family knew nothing, they wouldn’t need to worry about a truth-teller knocking on their door. The existence of the hidden realm was a secret, but if it came down to it, he could spread flyers around town to make it public and solve the issue.

The governor can deal with the aftermath for all I care.

The floor creaked lightly when Moui poked his head into the room. “How’re you holding up? I know that conversation wasn’t easy for you either.” The hunter looked more relaxed since he learned about the whole situation.

“It was my fault for landing us in this situation.” Kai looked up at him, heart pounding. “Do you forgive me, Uncle?” He blurted out before his brain could think better.

Moui stilled with a pensive frown, then slowly nodded. “Yes. I think you’ve already paid plenty for your foolish decisions. And it wasn’t fair that you were put in those circumstances in the first place.”

“Uh, thank you.” Kai poured himself a glass of water to keep his hands busy. “What about Mom and Ele?”

“It’s not the same for them. I had my doubts about what happened, but they buried you, Kai. They grieved and buried you. Alana had only just stopped visiting your tombstone each week.” Moui leveled a heavy gaze at him. “I’m not saying this to make you feel worse. They need time to accept what’s happened. I’m sure they understand, but they can’t help how they feel.”

“I see.” He appreciated the honesty.

“Dad!” Kien scampered into the house with Flynn at his heels. The toddler proudly lifted a grumpy silver cat in his arms. “Look what I found. Can we keep it? Can we?”

“Mroow,” Hobbes complained about the indignity with a sullen look, strangely resigned to his fate. A mix of duty and protection flowed through their bond. From the smile Flynn was desperately trying to suppress, this wasn’t a coincidence.

Moui patiently crouched. “Kiki, I told you not to bring strays in the house without asking. That’s—” The hunter froze, staring at the violet cat’s eyes. His voice held on with a thin veneer of calm. “Put that down. Now.”

“Why?” Kien thumped his feet and hugged the furball tighter. “I wanna keep it.”

“Don’t worry, Uncle.” Kai chose to intervene before Moui made an enemy for life. “Hobbes is completely harmless. He’s my cat.”

“Meew.”

How did you even understand that? Are you peeking through the bond?

“Sorry, I meant I’m *his* human.” Kai corrected himself, bending to the whims of his overlord. If Hobbes was willing to play with his brother, he could satisfy his narcissistic quirks.

“But that’s, that’s—”

“I know,” Kai patted the bigger man’s shoulder.

Moui hobbled away with a pale look. It was impressive that he had seen through Hobbes so quickly. The diabolical cat’s camouflage worked differently from the basilisk’s invisibility. Space bent to make Mana Observer slip over him, even a casual inspection would reveal nothing more than an ordinary grumpy feline.

“Is this your kitty?” Kien slumped disappointed.

“Yes, but you can play with him as long as you like.”

“Can I?” His aquamarine eyes lit up.

“Of course. I’m sure Hobbes will be happy too.” Kai rubbed the furry belly, gritting his teeth when the pest scratched his hand. “He loves it when you squeeze him tight. Isn’t that right?”

It’s your duty as the older kitty.

Kien sauntered away with a gleeful giggle.

Ahaa, the sound of success. Another week and he’ll hug me too.

What were children when he could earn the favor of gods?

“You put him up to it, didn’t you.” Kai stared at the shady mastermind.

Without any witnesses, Flynn burst out laughing. “Did you see Moui’s face? That was priceless.” He threw an arm around his shoulders a little more seriously. “Anyway, how did *your* conversation go?”

“As well as it could, I suppose...”

“That good, huh? C’mon, let me show you around the house. Alana said you can have the second-best guest room.”

“Did she?”

“Her exact words.”

Flynn helped him settle in the room on the ground floor. More space, wardrobes and drawers than Kai knew what to do with. He was wondering whether to sort what to sell and what to keep in his ring, when a knock woke him from his daze.

“Can I come in?” Ele stood by the doorway with a slight heave, as if she had run back again.

“Of course.”

“I think I’ll go check Kien and Hobbes don’t have too much fun.”

“No, you can stay.” Ele nervously played with her braids. “I didn’t mean to leave like that. I—” Her eyes glistened as she searched for the right words.

Flynn gravely nodded, his hand lightly settling on her shoulder. "It's okay, you can tell him. He should know I'm your husband."

What—

Her hand smacked him faster than he could blink. "Don't be an idiot." His sister said with a half-smile.

"But that's why you like me." Flynn massaged his arm with a silly smirk and slouched in a chair. "Ouch. Why did you have to hit me so hard?"

"Cause you're a slow learner." Ele looked at Kai with a sigh. "And I married Sabe if nobody's told you."

Why did she have to pick that unbearable guy? If someone's too perfect, they must be hiding something.

"I had guessed as much. Anyway, you don't need to apologize to me earlier. You didn't do anything wrong."

His sister sat on the bed, bobbing her head. "It's just a lot having you leap out of the sea and back into our lives. I... I cried when they told us you were dead. We buried the casket, and I grieved you for weeks. Flynn insisted you were alive whenever we had drinks, but I couldn't believe it. Now I— I don't know. It's just a lot..."

She's a better sister than I deserve.

"I understand if you need space. If there is anything I can do to help, just ask."

"Mhmm..." Ele patted the bed beside her. "I think it might be easier if I knew what you were up to in that realm. How did you survive? What did you eat? How did you escape?"