

## Chapter 246 - Goodbyes

Kien's giggles filled the southern beach with a cheerful melancholy. The toddler chased a flock of pixies and a puppet dragon with outstretched fingers. Delicate mana constructs with wings of ice and fluid frames flew circles around him, leaving a trail of shimmering mist in the late afternoon air.

His eyes sparkled with wonder and delight. Each time one of the fairies tickled his nose, his laughter grew louder. He extended a chubby hand to grab the dragon's tail, only for his fingers to slip right through the water construct. Kien lost his balance and landed with his knees on the sand.

"Are you okay?" Kai asked, dissipating the puppets into thin droplets of water and ice.

Kien sat stunned by the fall, then clapped his hands together and giggled. "Again! Again!"

Kai sighed with a fond smile. "What's the magic word?"

"*Pleeease*, big brother." Two large aquamarine pools above a trembling lip looked up at him. At that moment, Kai would have agreed to any request.

*Spirits, he has gotten too cunning for his own good.*

He didn't fail to notice how Kien only called him *big brother* when he wanted something.

*I'll take what I can get.*

"Fine, one more time. Then we need to go home before Mom starts to worry." He shaped a new flock of fairies that had an uncanny resemblance to a particular god's vessel. Thus, the chase between the sprites and his little brother began anew.

"You're spoiling him." Ele sat beside Kai, signaling it was probably time to go. "He's never going to want to play with the other kids if he gets used to your shows."

Her hand rested on her belly. She still hadn't given him an answer about using the elixirs. With the increased trade and tourism, potions had become more widespread—if you could afford the inflated prices.

Kai sent an ice dragon to join the swarm of pixies. "What's the harm in a little magic? He'll have time to bond with other children when they also start talking."

*And when I'm not here.*

It was his fault for failing to consider the consequences of enhancing Kien's grade. Every other baby in the archipelago was born at the bottom of red. Being a couple of attributes higher was particularly noticeable with toddlers, though the difference would lessen with age. While no one would complain about the grade advantage once they grew up, he should have realized the issue sooner.

Flynn plopped down on his other side, cradling Hobbes in his arms. "I have to agree with Ele. You're bribing him with your magic tricks."

"Yeah, and the only reason you don't do the same is because Shadow and Lightning don't work as well. I've seen the sweets you slip to him whenever he looks at you with pleading eyes."

"I've got no idea what you're talking about." Flynn harrumphed. "That's plain slander."

"Are you worried you won't be his favorite anymore?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Hobbes has already dethroned me from that position. Isn't that right?" He scratched the silver furball's neck. "I'm just making sure Kiki doesn't get taken advantage of by sly and cunning individuals."

"Meow." The cat lazily licked his paw in agreement and sent a wave of smugness through the bond.

*I feel like I'm being purposefully targeted.*

Kai sent out a clacking ice crab to chase after his little brother. "It was you two who taught him Mana Sense. Now you can't complain that he's interested in magic."

"Well, you do have a point. I thought he'd get bored after the first lesson, but he must've taken your stubbornness." His sister sighed, throwing a glance at him. "How do you manage to control that many spells while talking with us?"

"By being a genius." Kai flashed the two a lupine grin. Despite his casual demeanor, moving so many delicate spells was touching upon his limits. "And Split Mind also helps."

*It's good training.*

"How do I get that?" Flynn asked, feeding fish treats to the purring cat.

"Hmm, I think you need to perform at least half a dozen tasks at once. But it's probably easier if you learn Multicasting first and use the Guide to upgrade it."

The sun was sinking behind the Veeryd jungle and left them secluded in that corner of the beach. They mused about various skills while Kien played with magic puppets. Each second was precious—Kai didn't know how many more afternoons they would have together.

“Well, I better go calm him down before dinner. Not everyone can be the fun brother.” His sister dusted off her skirt and bowed before Hobbes. “Could you help me convince Kiki to go home?”

The cat stretched in Flynn’s lap, watching the sand with horror and disgust. “Mrooow.”

“I won’t let a single grain touch your fur, I promise.” Ele extended her hands to let the cat jump in. She took on the thankless task of telling a hyperactive two-year-old that playtime was over.

Upon her arrival, Kai made his magic constructs fizzle into mist. Perhaps she was right, and he was spoiling his little brother a bit much. Knowing their time together was limited, Kai had tried to compensate with crafting memorable experiences.

“Have you decided when you’re gonna tell them?” Flynn mused. “We don’t need to leave immediately, but I think Ele already suspects something.”

*She was always very perceptive. Hmm... could she have a skill?*

The Republic couldn’t find out that he was alive, and his best lead to obtain a legitimate ID was in Higharbor with Valela. As a relatively new territory, official IDs were still being issued to adults in the archipelago. He might slip in if someone oiled the bureaucratic machine from the inside.

Kai couldn’t fathom how the little princess would react to his reappearance. If that failed, they would have to resort to shadier means and far shadier people.

“I’ll tell Mom soon.” He wanted to preserve their carefree life for a little bit longer. It wouldn’t be the same if his departure loomed over them. Spirits only knew when he could visit again, or how much Kien would have grown by that time.

“Just let me know when you decide. Valela won’t be back from the mainland for a couple weeks,” Flynn muttered while he rummaged through his pockets. Somehow, he always knew where everyone was. “I almost forgot. Here, catch.”

Kai grabbed the object an inch from his face. He was about to return the throw when he realized what he was holding. A cold silver disk with three nubs and concentric circles of runes flowing into each other. The symbols looked strangely familiar. Runic Scholar informed him it was of a similar alphabet to the one he studied in the Sanctuary, prompting Mana Analyst and Arcane Enchanting to pick apart the artifact.

The runes etched on the flat sides gave him a sense of disrupted destiny he couldn’t explain. His attention moved to the dense web of enchantments beneath the surface, the heart of the mechanism that could disrupt Fate.

Nothing.

Mana observer could barely make out the minuscule symbols when he let the rest of the world fall into shadow. Its workings remained far beyond his understanding.

*It was a long shot.*

Kai kept his fingers away from the nubs. The Fate Fulcrum shone with all the accumulated energy of more than two years, and he wasn't eager to call a calamity upon their heads.

"I kept it close in case of an emergency," Flynn said. "Though the charge hasn't changed much for the last year."

"Wait, you mean..."

"I don't think it can gather any more Favor. It's kinda comforting knowing even that *thing* has a limit. It helped me sleep at night."

"Mhmm..." Kai nodded. It made sense that Virya wouldn't give him an artifact of unlimited potential. The circle of runes showing the charge burned like a raging fire. It stored more Favor than he had ever consciously used, and likely enough to get him killed.

It was like holding a ticking time-bomb that could create as many problems as it solved. Kai stored it in his ring, relieved when the weight disappeared from his hand.

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"Mom." Kai walked into the kitchen, his steps unbearably heavy. The smell of freshly baked bread, grilled vegetables and honey filled the room.

Alana stood over the newly enchanted stove. She gave him a distracted look before returning to her three pans. "Yes, sweetie? I'm preparing lunch."

"Can we talk?"

*I've already postponed this for far too long.*

"I'm a bit busy, sweetie. Can't we do it this afternoon? You can set the table if you want to help."

Each time he tried to get his mom alone in the last week, she always found a way to slip away or delay. He opened the cupboard to grab plates and cutlery before stopping.

"It's important." Kai kept his tone as firm as he could make it. There was almost an hour before they usually had lunch, he couldn't loosen the grasp of his determination. "I'll wait here."

Alana turned off the fire rune, still facing the stove. Suddenly she looked so frail. "Can't you stay longer? It has only been a few weeks."

It had been closer to two months, though Kai didn't feel the need to point that out. "I have to go now, Mom. There are some people I need to meet in Higharbor, and they won't stay there forever."

An audible sigh left her and her shoulders slumped. Alana met his gaze with glassy eyes. She wordlessly glided to lay her arms around him. Not the crushing hugs she was used to giving, but a gentle embrace. Her body leaned against him for support.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"You don't need to apologize, sweetheart. You have been proclaiming you would travel to the mainland since you were no bigger than Kien." She lowered her hand to that height with a melancholic chuckle and stepped back to look at him. "I knew you wouldn't stay here forever. I just... Can you promise you'll come back to me safe and sound?"

"I promise," Kai swore without hesitation. "I won't disappear again, and I'll send you letters. Lots of them, till you'll be tired of hearing about me and grumble whenever you receive another one."

Alana lightly laughed. "I sincerely doubt that. A mother can never get tired of hearing about her children, even when they grow up and swim away to live their lives. This will always be your home. So you better visit, at least twice a year."

Kai smiled, he'd need to look at the logistics of traveling back and forth. "I'll do whatever's possible."

"Hmm..." His mom eyed his half-answer with a raised eyebrow but didn't insist. "When do you plan on leaving? The moons will bring a high tide in two days."

"Tonight. Flynn has bought two tickets on the cruiser for Higharbor."

"I see. Then we must hurry." Alana marched out of the kitchen, her pans already forgotten.

"Where to?"

She looked at him weirdly. "To the market, where else? You'll need proper supplies for your journey. And what if they don't have any of the foods you like on the continent? You know the stories, only Kahali knows how those people truly live."

“Mom, I’ve already bought everything I need. I’m sure people on the mainland eat just fine.”

“Don’t be silly.” She poked his ribs and chest like inspecting a disappointing cut of meat. “You’re all skin and bones. I know you never eat properly without me watching over your shoulder. Tell me how many supplies can you fit in that ring of yours?”

Kai suppressed a groan and surrendered to the inevitable. “About an average backpack. I’ve already stored plenty of snacks.” He could let his mom stuff him like a piñata if it helped her feel more secure.

The rest of the day flew in a flurry of cooking and packing an unreasonable number of meals. He had already said his goodbyes to Moui and Ele days prior, leaving them a bag of gold each. Both vehemently refused till Kai showed them the piles of mesars in his spatial closet and reminded them of Kien and the coming baby.

His little brother sat in the living room; he was the only one Kai had yet to speak with.

“You’re leaving?” Kien’s brows furrowed, trying to wrap his head around the concept.

“Yes, I’m going to travel to the mainland. Just like our big sister Kea.”

His eyes widened at the revelation. “You’re gonna fight scary monsters too?”

“Yeah, something like that. The continent is very big.” Kai stretched his arms to emphasize the point. “I’m going to explore the territories of the Republic and decide from there.”

“Can I come too?”

“One day. But first, you must grow big and strong like me, otherwise the scary monsters will gobble you up.”

Kien chewed his thumb for comfort, looking a little worried. “You’ll be back, big brother?”

“Of course I’ll be back. And I’ll tell you all about the great adventures and ferocious beasts that I’ve faced there. I’ve also prepared something else for you.”

“A present?” Kien exclaimed with a hopeful gaze.

“Yes. A present. I made it myself just for *you*.” Kai emptied his pockets, vainly searching for his gift. “Now where did I put that thing?” He reached behind Kien’s ear and took out his very own masterpiece in a whirl of snowflakes.

“Here it is!” Kai offered the cube to his brother with the solemnity of a sacred relic. He had spent weeks carving the wood and designing more than a hundred interlocking enchantments. Virya’s puzzle was the main inspiration, though his present was more similar to a Rubik’s Cube and only had seven simple riddles to solve.

*I wonder how long Virya took to build hers, perhaps I didn't give her enough credit.*

Kien glanced at the runes and shook the cube as if he expected more snowflakes to fly. "It's a wood box." He said dryly, scrunching his nose at countless hours of work and dedication.

*Why do children need to be so cruel?*

He forced himself to keep a jolly attitude. "Yes, it's a wooden box, but it's not just *any* wooden box." He leaned in to whisper, "I've poured all of my magic into this cube."

"It does magic?" Kien shook it harder.

Kai grabbed the toddler before he could slam his masterpiece against a chair. "Please stop. You see, the magic is trapped inside and to free it you must play a game."

"A game?"

He nodded. "A very special game. So you must use your special sight to play it. You remember the one that Ele and Uncle Flynn showed you?"

Kai spent the next half an hour guiding Kien through the first puzzle by connecting similar runes. He also made clear the magic hidden within would be very sad if the puzzle wasn't opened properly.

"Ready to go?" Flynn walked into the living room with two bags and patted his back. "I'm sure Kiki will try for a week before he breaks it open. What did you even put inside?"

"That's a secret."

Alana, Ele and Moui waited by the doorway for one final goodbye. After a quick round of hugs, they ran for the docks. They had a ship for Higharbor to catch and a princess to meet. Leaving the archipelago would be a tad bit harder than he led his family to believe.