

Chapter 116 - Sisters

Kai wanted to smack himself for not realizing it sooner. “When did it happen?”

“Exploring the underwater cave gave me the last push I needed,” Ele beamed proudly.

~Even counting a day to rest and prepare, she must have already enhanced her race yesterday. Damn idiot.

As usual, Kai and Kea had sucked all the worry and attention, while Ele waited politely by the side.

“We need to celebrate.” Orange ★★ at seventeen was an impressive achievement. The most exceptional islanders didn’t manage it before twenty. For those who only focused on their profession, they were usually closer to their thirties.

“Come on, we need to tell everybody.” Kai grabbed his sister’s hand, but Ele remained rooted in place. They were in the same grade now.

“I think Mom and Moui already know.”

“Oh... right.” Of course, they did. He was the only one too swept up in his own problems to notice.

To be fair, the last two days had been incredibly stressful. The talk with his mother and dealing with Kea monopolized his every thought. In any other circumstances, he would have realized sooner.

~But I didn’t, and now I’m making up excuses. She had told me she was close.

“We should go buy something fancy to eat, what would you like?”

~Let's buy her love with money. Just great. What type of cake does she prefer? Damn, I'm the worst brother!

“We've already bought everything for lunch and dinner.” Ele plucked a blade of grass from his hair. “Just go get cleaned up before Mom sees you, you're covered in mud.”

“You only reach Orange ★★ once.”

“Yeah, and you did too. There's no need for a special celebration.”

“That's different, I was away at the time, you couldn't have known.” Kai crossed his arms. “Tell me you wouldn't have done anything if I was home?”

Ele diverted her eyes. “Finding that cave was already a huge help. I don't need anything else.”

~I also put you in danger of a giant greedy clam.

“Okay,” Kai temporarily backed down. There was no way he'd change her mind like this.

~I'll ask Mom what she likes, Ele can't complain after I've al—

“And don't buy me anything. I already feel bad keeping all the money from those pearls.”

His sister could be quite pigheaded sometimes. The mana pearl was worth more than all those put together. He was the one who should have felt bad for keeping it.

~She can't complain if it's something I craft myself, right? She must not be far from upgrading her profession too.

Kai took off his shoes to avoid making a mud trail and headed for the bathroom. When he turned the knob, the door didn't budge.

"Pass later." Kea's voice called from inside together with the sound of running water.

"Try to hurry up. I need to clean up." He sat on the floor to wait.

Any pity Kai felt for breaking Kea's worldview was quickly swept away as minutes ticked by. Even Meditation could only do so much when she took over the bathroom for over half an hour.

With a metallic clack, the door unlocked, and Kea came with dry and combed hair. "Oh, you're still here."

~Were the last three knocks not clear?

Kai stood up, fuming. His lips pressed into a thin line; several irritated remarks flew through his mind. It had been a complicated day. While she was *technically* older, Kai had always considered it his duty to look after her.

~This is the last freebie you get.

Kai slipped past her and closed the door behind him.

He was the guy who swooped down in her life and complicated things. Having a younger sibling who beat you at everything would annoy everybody, but he had to draw a line somewhere.

His patience was running thin. It wasn't just about the stupid bathroom, though that really irked him. Kai had been trying to help her for years, but she needed to put in some effort too.

Getting out of his dirty clothes, Kai froze at the sight before him. Half the floor was covered in water, a towel was thrown in a corner and the sink was filled with long hazel hair.

Kai gritted his teeth. A lifetime in here and she left with this mess. The memory of the spotless, spacious rooms at the estate flashed in his mind. He should have appreciated them more.

Living with his family was nice, but going from several private rooms to sharing his spaces with four people was a challenge. He had to make do when he was a child. Now there were other options.

~I need to buy a place for my workshop, might as well add a bathroom and room.

With a flick of his wrist, Kai commanded all the water into the toilet. Fixing the creases on the rug and organizing the bars of soap by color, he erased the most obvious signs of Kea's rampage.

The neater atmosphere was calming. It would have made more sense to tidy up after he was finished, but a clean place helped give his mind a semblance of order—especially when he was upset.

~Okay. I might be a bit of a neat freak, but there are worse flaws.

Kai jumped into the shower. The cold trickle was as sad as he remembered. He would fix it in due time. The enchanting schematics only needed the last touches. The only missing piece was making the right type of ink, and he could proceed.

The sense of clean skin did miracles for his mood. By the time he was done, the bathroom was spotless.

A mouth-watering smell hit him immediately. Lunch was almost ready, and clearly, Alana had been paying attention to Ele's enhancement. Two lobsters marinated in a sweet and sour sauce of wild berries awaited him in the kitchen.

"And you complained about me taking too long," Kea gave him a sidelong glance.

A vein pulsed on his forehead, but he forced himself to stay calm.

~This is Ele's celebration, don't ruin it with pointless bickering.

Moui set the table while Alana carefully watched the stove with Ele by her side. Kai took his seat, putting on a quiet smile. He didn't have to act for long.

The lobsters' tender meat melted on his tongue. And the side dish of vegetables had been grilled to perfection. Closing it all was a fluffy two-layer lemon cake. It was like eating clouds. No doubt it had been cooked by a professional baker in poshtown.

"Congratulations honey, we're so proud of you."

"Mom, I told you, it wasn't necessary," Ele gave her a scolding smile.

“Of course it is, sweetie. This is an important occasion for you. My little girl is becoming a woman,” Alana dried a tear at the corner of her eye. “Only the spirits know how many more opportunities to pamper you I’ve got before you’ll leave to make your own family.”

His fork paused midway to his mouth. His gaze dashed back and forth between them.

~What’s this about?

“Mom, I’ve told you. I’ve no intention of getting married anytime soon.” Ele had an exasperated look.

~Thank Yatei.

“I said the same thing before meeting your father, and I wasn’t much older.” Alana served her another slice of lemon cake. “You never know when you’ll meet a nice young man who’ll sweep you off your feet.”

“You are more than enough for me,” Ele embraced him, while Kea evaded her hug. “And I’m too busy with pearling anyway.”

~Exactly, you have no need for a useless dude. We’re fine as is.

“Of course, sweetie, no need to hurry. You still have plenty of time.”

The conversation turned back to more casual topics as they made short work of the cake. But the looming threat didn’t leave Kai’s mind. How had he not thought of that? He needed to keep his eyes wide open.

People reached adulthood at fourteen. Usually, they were too busy with their new profession to consider marriage, but there was no express law to forbid it. Except for your neighbors’

opinion, which worked just as well. No one wanted to become the target of the gossip machine.

Sixteen was the earliest age considered proper. With most waiting until their early twenties. It would raise no eyebrow if his sister chose to marry.

If not now, one day Ele would marry. That was how life worked in the archipelago. Not much else to do than make a family.

~She's a teenager, no need to hurry that date. Thankfully she shares the same opinion.

After they cleaned up the kitchen, Kai offered his sister to continue their magic lesson.

"I'm still working on the exercises you showed me last time."

"Great, you can show me what you're struggling with. You'll improve faster if we work together." No gift was more precious than your own time, right? She would not be able to refuse his help. A small start to make up for the years spent apart.

"Are you sure? I don't mind taking a while longer."

"You don't want to spend time with me, sis?"

Even though she knew exactly what he was doing, Ele couldn't help herself. "Of course not."

"Then we can start immediately. We can use your room, mine's too cluttered."

It was the perfect solution. She was interested in learning magic, and it would keep her busy in a productive way. Certainly, she would tell him if she were to date someone.

They spent the entire afternoon weaving mana constructs together. He used treads and pulses to challenge her perception and control. Kai hadn't lied, it was much easier to train your skills with someone else guiding the way.

Not the most efficient training for him, but Dora did always say teaching helped hone your skills. A way to strengthen your foundations and see how other people approached the same problems you went through.

With a bit of convincing, they agreed to train together twice a week if the tides permitted. Her Mana Sense was eight levels from the first milestone. A considerable hurdle, but not insurmountable.

He had also floated the idea of going back to the underwater cave. There were mollusks to harvest, and the cavern continued past Mama Clam. If he had time to plan, Kai was confident he could deal with her. Preparation was everything for an alchemist.

"I think I need a bit of pause from adventure."

"What if someone else finds the cave?"

"The pond is in the middle of my area this season, no one will come anywhere close."

To avoid quarrels the pearl hunters divided the sea closer to shore amongst themselves. More general areas than hard lines, but Ele said conflicts were rare. Kai wasn't as confident in other people's integrity.

"Won't people be curious about where we found that mana pearl?"

“The only two people who know are Sabe and the chief supervisor,” Ele waved him off.
“Sabe isn’t the type to spread rumors and the supervisor doesn’t care enough to.”

“What if someone else overheard?”

“It’s easy to spot people on the sea if they follow me to my area. People don’t break the rules when they know they’re going to be discovered.”

“What if they go out with a fair tide?”

“In *that* case, it would be a nightmare to find the right pond among hundreds. And the entrance isn’t immediately visible even if you were to choose the right one. Anything else?”
Ele patiently smiled.

“Nope, we can wait a little. Let’s say two or three weeks?”

“Let’s say after I evolve my profession,” Ele closed the conversation.

It wasn’t a precise time frame, but she couldn’t rush such an important decision.

~I can always go alone...

The next day, Kai went out to scout for potential locations for his laboratory.

There were two possible paths. Either going to poshtown, the best-guarded area by far, where he would only have to worry about the Republic. Or go in the opposite direction and

pick a place in the outskirts. The enforcers rarely patrolled there, so he'd have to worry about everyone *but* the government. A choice between the lesser of two evils.

Finding a middle ground wasn't that easy. The separation between neighborhoods was stark. Either you had the enforcers patrolling regularly or you never saw a dark uniform until something big happened.

~Maybe I'm too paranoid.

Ignoring the safety concerns, poshtown was more appealing and *expensive*. The whole town was built around it. All the best shops, merchants and taverns readily available within just a short walk.

The tourists were annoying but easy to ignore. The streets were always clean, the buildings better constructed, and the mana density slightly higher. That would come in handy. It burned to admit it was a pleasant area.

Cost was the true hurdle for most people. It would take most of his silver, but it was within his budget—especially if he sold the pearl.

Still, he hesitated. It would be like giving in to the Republic, becoming part of their big circus. Not that choosing to set up shop in a worse neighborhood would change anything, except for him being in a worse place.

Undecided, Kai headed back home. He had so many things to deal with, the sooner he settled down the better.

~Should I just go with it?

“Hello, sir. Are you the esteemed alchemist Kai Tylenn?”

Kai turned to see a kid even younger than him. He was trying hard to maintain a professional air, with a ridiculously straight posture and stiff movements.

~What do they teach children these days?

“Who’s asking?”

~Don’t look at me like that. You started this nonsense.

The boy stared at his feet with a pitiful expression.

“Yes, that’s me. Just call me Kai, please. Why were you looking for me?”

“Oh, I was told to inform you that Master Reishi has returned from his journey.” The kid said with a rehearsed tone, standing there.

~Does he expect to get paid or something?

Kai found a handful of chips in his pockets. “Here, for you. Tell Reishi I’ll stop by him in two—no three hours. Can you do that, right?” That should give him enough time to cook lunch.

“Yes, sir. It will be done.” The kid did a half bow and hurried away.

~Time to sell my precious.