

## Chapter 115 - Clarity

The whole family sat for dinner. With a sour look, Kea focused on her plate and ignored everybody else. The only thing Kai could see were his mother's glances from across the table. From her smiles and upbeat tone, she knew something was up.

Ele and Moui's casual conversation gave the dinner a thin coating of normalcy. Using Acting, Kai maintained the pretense. The food lost any taste, but he slowly chewed each bite as an excuse not to talk.

His heartbeat punched in his chest. Time passed at a snail's pace and yet too fast. Kea disappeared again as soon as her plate was empty. Kai followed her example, retreating into his room.

With his alchemy equipment and piles of books lying around, there was barely any space to move. His feet still found a way to pace back and forth on the hardwood floor.

In the kitchen beneath him, Ele had finished cleaning the dishes. The glowing forms of Moui and Alana had started talking. Kai turned off the skill, reading their mana flow to guess their thoughts would drive him crazy.

Telling when someone felt a strong emotion was easy, but guessing what that meant was more of an art form. He missed the context of their conversation and body language. Kai knew himself enough that his mind would jump straight to the worst conclusion.

Several outcomes played in his head. Kai rehearsed the speech that would hopefully stop his mum from freaking out. All possible preparations had been taken care of.

*Should I try to make an offering?*

Kahali and Yatei already seemed satisfied with him, so he never felt the need. He mostly considered it superstition. What would the spirits do with a loaf of bread or a crown of seashells?

He only participated in the communal rituals for the first harvest and the moons alignment, like the Festival of the Tides.

*Just in case. It can't hurt to try, can it?*

Praying for the first time when he needed something wasn't the most devout behavior, but Kai would give anything for a distraction.

There were other precepts to respect depending on the spirit he chose to plead. Some ancestors and major entities had preferred sacrifices, and a specific way they had to be delivered. In the sea for Kahali, in the jungle or underground for Yatei; shrines were also a valid choice.

*Anything I can do from my room? Think, brain!*

Kai remembered burning was acceptable for a general plea.

*To any spirit willing to listen it is! Yeah, I'm a terrible believer.*

Kai rummaged through his room in search of inspiration, he needed the right item.

*If I remember correctly the offering should be something precious or meaningful.*

The most precious items he possessed were the gifts he received from his family and teachers, but it didn't feel right to use them. And he wasn't willing anyway.

*Maybe money? It would really hammer down the contractual nature of the relationship.*

Unable to think of anything better, Kai burned some mana herbs inside his cauldron.

*Please, help this poor pious kid survive the night.*

As the smoke drifted toward his window, it was quite a sad sight. Hopefully, some benevolent spirit would take pity on him.

A knock from the door made him jolt. His guts wrenched and he had to force his legs to move forward.

His mother was standing by the door. Her face was a stony mask. "Son, we need to talk," her nose scrunched. "Did you burn something?"

"Ehm... no?"

"Let's take a walk then." Alana didn't inquire any further, marching downstairs.

Outside, the last rays of twilight painted the horizon orange and red, creating long shadows on the streets. Their residential neighborhood was quiet. The houses were lit from the inside, with hardly anyone on the streets. Voices came from poshtown where the nightlife was in full swing.

With skills to enhance hearing, privacy was a hard commodity in town. Alana faltered on the streets before making a choice.

Kai followed her, gaze straight ahead, stewing in his own personal hell.

Out of the northern gate, they reached the beach. Stalls and vendors sold refreshments and played music, while flocks of tourists and a few locals crowded around large fires talking and laughing.

Keeping to the edge of the crowd, they moved further still. Finally, people and lights grew sparse. Here, the crashing of waves overcame the murmurs of people, the moons were the only source of light.

Alana sat on a log by the shore. "Sylspring is a nice town, but sometimes it feels suffocating." Her casual tone made Kai's heart skip a beat.

Steeling his will, he met his mom's gaze. Her impassive expression weighed down on him. He opened his mouth to say something, but the speech he prepared came up blank.

"Moui told me about your plans," Alana said. "I guess it's my fault in the end. I was the one to insist we find a teacher. I should have known you'd learn combat magic."

"Are you not angry?"

"Would that help change your mind? Would you stay if I asked you? Would you?"

"I don't think anything could." Kai was taken aback by her plea. He wished he could give her what she wanted, but his decision was final.

This was something he wanted, *needed* to do no matter the cost.

"I've lived longer than any teenager, but I still feel like a child. I've never traveled, lived by myself, or done adult things. Even *before*, it was just as bad, I was always stuck in one place. I know it sounds stupid, but I want to go out there to find out who I am."

He needed to experience life outside a bubble and challenge himself to see who really was. What did he want? Did he truly crave adventure, or would he turn back at the first setback? Would he like to travel or did value his safety and comfort more?

On Earth, he once read that life was like an unending search for answers, and he still felt stuck at the starting line.

The confusion evaporated as the pieces suddenly fell into place. He had never had such clarity. That was the motivation that pushed him forward in its purest form.

*Spirits, it sounds so cheesy, but it's true.*

"I don't think anything you could have done would have changed this." It had been inevitable.

"I see," Alana pulled him into a tight hug. "I still remember when you learned how to read. How your eyes lit up when your dad told you stories about ancient cities and faraway kingdoms. You always said you'd really visit those places one day. I'm sorry, Kai."

This was not how he imagined this going.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Mom."

"But I— I do... you've told me you were different, *special*. You've told me how *in your past* you were unable to live like other people."

Alana never brought that up. It had been years since they talked about it.

“I hoped if I ignored it and treated you like every other kid, you’d become one.” Her voice broke, and she took several seconds to regain control. “But you’ve been a kid for too long. It’s natural you want change and to leave home. I’m really sorry.”

They hugged under the moonlight.

“You know you’re the best mum I could ever hope for, right?”

“I was selfish.”

“Are you going to tell me I’m always perfect?”

“Not always, but more often than not...”

Kai gave her a disbelieving look. Maybe Ele was onto something, their mother saw him through rose-colored glasses.

“But don’t think I’m not mad at you for choosing combat magic,” she scolded him, drying her eyes on a handkerchief. “Just because you want to go to the mainland, it doesn’t mean you need to put yourself in danger. You could have chosen any other specialization.”

*Yeah, it would have been too good to be true.*

“I’ve also learned many other schools of magic. You know I can brew potions and enchant items.”

Alana looked skeptical. “Moui made it seem like you put a lot of focus on fighting. You didn’t specifically ask Lady Virya to teach you combat magic?”

"I— I mean—" Elijah had been overeager to teach him how to survive. Though it wasn't exactly one-sided.

"So?" His mum pressed, starting to look suspicious.

"I just like to be prepared. The better I get at offensive magic the safer I am." Kai grinned innocently. His mother couldn't object to that.

"So, you can swear to me that you'll never look for trouble or intentionally put yourself in danger."

"Well..." Kai started sweating. "That's a pretty vague promise."

"Seems perfectly clear to me. Kai, you wouldn't lie to your mother, right?"

"Have I told you how I got a Yellow skill?"

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"We can start with running if you prefer," Kai told his sister. It was time to enact the second phase of his plan.

Last night's conversation hung in the back of his mind. His mother had been more supportive than he could hope for. As for the discussion on the dangers he would undertake, that was trickier.

The reveal of Hallowed Intuition granted him some respite. What could she say to a skill that used Favor to keep him safe? That completely threw her off her game and bought him time. Sooner or later, she would realize there were limits to every skill, and ask more questions.

*How do other people deal with this?*

“Want to race around the town?” Kea pulled him back to the present. Nothing like physical exercise to clear his head.

Outside the town’s southern gate, the area was deserted. Kai wanted to keep the training simple. There needed to be no doubts or ways of cheating. Any islander knew Swimming, but since Kea was a hunter, Running was the favorable option.

“How many laps?” Kai kept his tone even. He took less enjoyment than he imagined from shattering her worldview. At this point, it was too late to turn back.

“Three.”

“Why not five?”

Kea gritted her teeth. “Five it is. But then don’t complain if you can’t keep up.”

“Fine by me.”

As Kea ran, Kai was right behind her. His stats should be higher though not by a mile. He had one more enhancement, while she was one year and a half older.

That was without considering training and skills. Her speed was faster than an ordinary adult, but far from beating him after Elijah’s training.

The wooden wall of the town stood on their right. Kea increased the pace, quickly reaching a sprint. Kai remained stuck beside her with a quiet grin. It wasn’t hard to discern her thoughts.



Yes, he had killed a beast she had no hope of defeating, but that was thanks to magic. It wasn't like the skills she trained till exhaustion. Spells were a cheat.

That was his best guess. There weren't too many ways to logic your way around the truth. Maybe she had started to realize he didn't just play around and chop vegetables at the estate. Magic wasn't the only field he had her beat.

Contrary to his expectations, Kea decided to slow down to a somewhat reasonable pace. Kai followed suit, ignoring her glares. A sprint or a marathon, it made little difference.

Just a pinch of Empower would make the competition meaningless, no matter how good her Running was.

*Let's keep things interesting.*

Without skills, Kai took the run a bit more seriously and abandoned distracting thoughts. They passed the line of people exiting the western gate, continuing towards the shore at the northern end. Without a second of break, they turned back.

Kea showed the first signs of fatigue but didn't slow her speed. Though he could feel her relief as they spotted the southern shore and completed the first lap.

*Four more to go.*

Amidst labored breaths, the sun rose higher, and they began to sweat buckets. Kea also decreased her pace slightly.

On the second lap, Kai began to feel fatigued, reminiscing fondly of his time with Elijah.

*If you can still walk once you're done, you haven't trained hard enough.*

During the third lap, Kea slowed significantly. Her complete focus was on the road ahead. Step by step they made it back.

As they were turning for the fifth lap, she stumbled and collapsed. Her face hit the ground before he could reach her with a burst of Empower.

*Fuck! Did I push it too far?*

“Are you okay?”

Kai turned her body, panicked, she seemed fine. Luckily, she fell on a soft patch of grass. Her chest heaved up and down. She looked confused, then tears began to draw trails down her dirty cheeks.

*Oh, damn.*

Putting a hand in his pocket, Kai retrieved a potion from his spatial closet. “Here, drink this.” He raised her head to help her swallow.

“How. Did. You. Do. It?”

Kai was unsure of what to say. He wanted to tell her a lie to make her feel better, but that was exactly what led them here.

“I've been training like this every day for the last five years. My teachers were very demanding.”

He didn't know whether to be happy or sad as the full measure of his statement began to sink in. He could read the realization of her delusion in her cloudy eyes. It wasn't a nice sight.

"Let's go home."

Kea didn't protest as he helped her up. Slowly, they made their way toward their house. Their haggard appearance raised more than a few eyebrows, so they avoided poshtown.

When he was about to turn the key to his door, his sister finally spoke up.

"Do you think we could train together again sometime?"

"Mhmm... Sure, I usually train in the morning. But it's probably better if we wait a couple days."

"Okay," with a nod, she disappeared inside.

*That went as well as I could hope. If she doesn't burn down the house tonight, I say we're golden.*

"Everything okay?" Ele poked her head out the doorway, scanning him from head to toe. "Did you two go roll over in the grass?"

His clothes were covered in dirt and green streaks. "Something like that."

"Mom won't be happy, grass is hard to wash away." Ele stood in the hallway leaning on a wall.

“Something is different about you.”

“Really?” his sister smiled mysteriously.

Kai took longer than he wished to admit to link the dots. “You enhanced your race!”