

Chapter 109 - Escape

The tunnel flew past him. Kai fed his remaining mana to Blessed Swimmer and Empower. Mama Clam's essence pulsed furiously as she gave chase and propelled herself in short bursts of surprising speed.

So much fuss for a single pearl! What's the big deal, you can just make another.

Frantically trying to get away, Kai couldn't afford the waste of a poorly constructed spell with his dwindling resources. All his focus went to navigating the cave system.

While Mama Clam's sudden accelerations threatened to catch up with him, the agility of a mollusk her size wasn't exceptional. She crashed against the walls at each bend of the tunnel. The cave shook as dust and sediments fell from the ceiling.

Kai abandoned any idea of a fight. Within the tight confines of the cavern, any mistake would turn him into mashed potatoes. Poisons wouldn't be of help underwater.

Guided by Blessed Swimmer, Kai used each twist in the path to push against the rock and increase his speed. Although the walls appeared stable, the impacts didn't stun or make her desist in the slightest. The greedy clam only increased the frequency of her bursts.

The hope his sister went outside to take a breath was dashed by the flickering green light at the end of the tunnel. A wave of panic swelled through him for the first time.

Kai tried to scream a warning. Ele was too busy relieving a clam of its pearl to notice. Sacrificing a few specks of Water mana, he slapped her head up. She darted back, warily watching her surroundings. Kai waved to run as he barreled toward her.

The cavern rumbled as Mama Clam slammed on the wall. Ele froze. Without time for pleasantries, Kai angled his path and grabbed her outstretched arm.

His sister began madly swimming at his side. Mana revolved around her figure. Dragging Ele with him, Kai still lost some speed, and the last bend was fast approaching.

Proving her expertise, Ele applied his same strategy to gain momentum by pushing on the rocky wall. The exit was within sight. Scraping his mana veins raw, Kai used his last shreds of Water mana to push his sister forward.

For a moment he feared she would turn back as she realized his actions. The cave trembled, Mama Clam had turned the last bend. He felt cold sweat even though they were underwater.

You can be mad at me later.

With one reproachful look, Ele darted through the narrow exit. An immediate wave of relief was torn by the urgency to get to safety. Kai pushed more unattuned mana into his skills. The blinding shape of an orange-grade beast sprinted toward him.

Too late, mollusk.

With an exhilarated smile, Kai jumped into the hole. He almost broke his neck maneuvering through the cramped space at such speed. He scraped a long gash on his thigh against a jutting rock, barely feeling the pain.

A quake caused rubble and pebbles to rain down on him. Mama Clam clearly was a sore loser. The fear of being buried alive increased his urgency to get out.

Ignoring scratches and grazes, Kai flung himself toward the bright exit and dashed into the peaceful pond beyond. The rays of the sun spilling from above were the most beautiful sight he could imagine.

There was no time to contemplate his own existence as Ele dragged him toward the light.

They breached the surface. His sister hardly caught a breath before she besieged him with worried comments.

“Are you okay? Spirits, you’re bleeding,” her hands checked his cuts as she kept swimming to the edge of the pond. “Don’t worry, I got you. It’s all going to be fine. You’re going to be fine.”

Kai felt none of her alarm, quietly letting her take the lead. A cursory glance confirmed his scrapes were all superficial wounds, hardly worth mentioning. He had suffered worse injuries countless times, be it hunting in the Veeryd jungle, or just training.

Even with his adrenaline receding, the slight burning against the salty water was easy to ignore. “I’m fine, sis.”

His words were somewhat disproven when he almost fell to the ground, trying to take a step. Ele was upon him before he could blink.

“It’s just mana exhaustion. I’ll be fine in a moment.” His mana veins sat at a measly 45% capacity. Close to the lowest he ever got. As long as he rested for the next few days, he would be fine.

Kai considered using the emergency mana potion in his ring. He had only three of them, and without Dora’s garden, it would be extremely expensive to brew more—taking for granted that he found all the ingredients.

He opted for the traditional way since he wasn’t in immediate danger. His skills and will were already fast at working to convert the mana in his proximity.

His reassurances did little to placate Ele’s alarm. Kai wanted to point out there was nothing to worry about, but seeing her panicked state, that would probably not go over well.

"I've got a balm to stop the bleeding," Kai took out a little jar. He didn't get to open it before Ele snatched it from his hands.

"What was that *thing*?"

He was surprised the question took this long to come. "A very angry clam."

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Me neither. It was an orange-grade beast."

Ele paled, "Why was it chasing you? I told you to turn back at the first sign of danger. What would I have told Mom if something happened to you?"

Her voice broke, and guilt slammed into his consciousness like an enraged clam.

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect that to happen, it lured me in with some kind of charming magic."

He winced as Ele's fingers pushed the wound on his thigh. "I told you even with a sensing skill, sometimes it is too late to run when you perceive the danger."

Touché.

"I didn't think the first beast I'd meet would be an orange tier..." Ele raised an eyebrow at him. "But I should have been more careful and listened to you."

His sister gave a curt nod. "It doesn't matter. I'm just glad you're okay. Thank the spirits you managed to escape."

I did train my skills for years exactly for this, but I'm sure the spirits also played some part. Probably.

“So, that clam chased after you because you escaped its spell?”

“Well...” Kai vainly took time to think of a solution. There was none—except lying.

Oh, boy, here we go.

“After the clam lured me in, I *might* have snatched her pearl as payback. But I didn't know it would or *could* chase after me.”

Silence descended upon them. The only sound was the light scuttling of a crab a few meters from them. If he didn't know his sister better, Kai would think Danger Sense was warning him.

“You. Did. What...?”

Emergency procedure, activate!

Out of options, Kai took the golden pearl out of his ring and shoved it at his sister. “Here, look.”

“I don't c—” her eyes were transfixed by the iridescent shimmer on its smooth surface. Its allure was far weaker than in Mama Clam's shell. Still, it was the biggest pearl he had ever seen, and a mana treasure at that.

A good ten seconds later, Ele broke her stare, still grasping the pearl tightly on her chest. "This doesn't change anything." Despite her words, her tone had lost its furious edge.

"I know, I didn't think a clam could be that fast."

"That's why you don't go snooping around in dark caves without preparation. Do you realize how close we were to not make it?"

We had at least a good two seconds to spare, it wasn't that close. Though I guess Elijah's standards don't exactly follow common sense...

Kai sincerely apologized. Ele told him it was fine, and yet, he didn't feel like it was.

He was long used to taking risks, knowing Elijah was always there if something went wrong. Except now he was alone, there was no safety blanket. He had been warned this day would come, but it wasn't easy to switch his mindset after years of habit.

I've long accepted I was going to take some risks. Minimizing them was a great part of why I trained at the estate.

In the future, he needed to be more cautious to not involve anyone else in his perilous choices. That had been an unforgivable mistake.

They rested by the pool to let him recover enough mana and for his wounds to stop bleeding.

"Let's wrap up, we can wait for the tide in the boat," Ele said, refusing to let him walk alone all the way back.

It was mid-afternoon, a few more hours till the waters came back. Kai didn't think it was wise to ask if he could go check if Mama Clam had gone back to her cave.

"How many pearls did you manage to find before I interrupted you?" Kai broke the silence.

Her lips quivered upwards ever so slightly, but she steeled her expression. "A few."

"And how much do you think they are worth?"

The look Ele gave him made clear she knew exactly what he was trying to do. But it didn't matter since it would work anyway.

"I've never sold pearls of this variety."

"What's your guess? More or less than the others we found?"

"More."

"Really..."

His sister rolled her eyes. "Yeah, a lot more."

"What about the mana pearl?"

"Probably a few times more than everything else combined."

This time it was his turn to stare in shock.

“And do you plan to give it back?” Kai inquired with a chuckle.

Her eyes fell on the golden sphere in her hands. “Oh, right. Take it.”

“I was joking, you can keep it if you want,” Kai refused. “You can consider it payment for putting up with me.”

“Don’t be silly. You found it and seized it. By the law of the sea, it’s yours.”

“You did give me the first mana pearl I found,” Kai argued back, juggling his bracelet in front of her nose. “Wouldn’t it only be fair to give you mine?”

“That isn’t the same thing,” Ele vainly offered him the shimmering pearl again. “You can’t compare that tiny bead to this.”

“I didn’t know gifts were measured by value. And I don’t need the money.”

“Kai. I’ve already got more than my fair share in that cave. I don’t want it.” Ele thrust the golden pearl in his stomach.

“Aye, my Captain.”

I can always buy her something with the money.

“If you ever need something, *anything*, don’t hesitate to tell me.”

The quippy response he expected didn't come. Her hands fiddled with her satchel while her gaze moved to the empty sea.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"You're a terrible liar."

"Just a stupid thought."

"I would feel much better if I could do something for you," Kai knew Ele couldn't resist that.

"It's just— I was wondering what it would take to learn magic."

"Oh..."

"See, I told you it was stupid."

Kai vehemently shook his head. "It's not. I'm the stupid one for not proposing it sooner. I thought you'd not be interested."

Ele gave him an incredulous look. "Not interested in shaping water and splitting rocks with the flick of a finger."

Magic is indeed awesome.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“I didn’t want to put you on the spot. It’s probably too late for me to start learning anyway.”

“Nonsense, you’re plenty young and plenty talented,” Kai waved her worries away before assuming a solemn tone. “I have only *one* question for you.”

Ele gulped, “What?”

“Are you ready to embark on the arcane path of spellcraft?”

“Yes...?”

“Great, we can begin!”

“You mean right now?”

Kai gestures to the empty expanse around them. “Unless you have something better to do?”

The next hours flew by as he gave her an impromptu lesson. They were working with a decent foundation since Ele already had both Mana Sense and Manipulation. He ended up talking about his experiences at the estate, showing her some beginner exercises.

“I see why there aren’t many mages around,” Ele groaned as her mana construct crumbled again. “You need a level 50 Orange skill just to start.”

“Only for elemental magic. Though unattuned disciplines require more study,” he admitted. “Contrary to what Kea thinks, I’ve not been twiddling my thumbs all these years.”

“You are always quite vague with the details.”

Kai frowned his brows. “I’m an open book. I didn’t want to give her more reasons to be envious.”

Ele gave him a long stare.

“What?”

“Have you thought that it could be useful if you told her how hard you’ve worked?”

He shrugged. “Shouldn’t she already know? How’d I have reached Orange at seven otherwise?”

“One thing is knowing, another is *seeing* it with your own two eyes. I knew you could cast spells, but it was an entirely different thing to see you blast an entrance through the stone.”

I was more delicate than that.

“I mean—” Kai tried to come up with an argument. For once, his mind was awfully empty. “Maybe you’re right...”

Spirits, tell me I’m not that much of a moron.

On the horizon, the sea shimmered in the waning light as it flooded to recoup the lost ground. In minutes their boat was rocked by the surging waves. Ele decided to wait a while longer to not get swept by the rising tide.

“Time to go back, Your Majesty,” Ele prepared her oars. “Or should I call you teacher now?”

“Spirits no.” Kai paused, thoughtful. “Do you think I should also ask Kea if she wants to learn magic?”

“You know her, she doesn’t have the patience. From what you told me, magic is a lot of sitting around playing with colorful motes,” Ele laughed at his indignation. “You could try asking. Maybe if you showed her something impressive, she might reconsider.”

Honestly, he hoped Kea wouldn’t be interested, teaching her would be a nightmare. He was going to ask nonetheless.

Spirits help me if she says yes.

Relaxing on the rocking boat, Kai finally paid attention to the blinking notifications. He had gained a slew of levels in Danger Sense, and a couple in Water Magic and Blessed Swimmer. Then something unexpected popped up.

Ding

New skill available in the Archive! [Hallowed Intuition \(lv1\)](#) – Favored by the realm, grasp the whispers of the ineffable to warn you of a possible future. Increased effectiveness when your well-being is threatened.

Ding

[Hallowed Intuition \(lv1\)](#) is creating a resonance with [Danger Sense Eye \(lv18\)](#)...

Ding

Compatibility meets the minimum threshold. Do you wish to substitute **Danger Sense with **Hallowed Intuition**?**

Warning: some or all levels of your skill may be lost in the process, the choice is irreversible. Do you wish to proceed?

His eyes looked blankly at the colored words. That wasn't orange.