

Chapter 120 - New Heights

“Congratulations,” Kai shoved the word out of his throat. Now that he knew where to look, the signs were obvious.

The tiny creases around Moui’s eyes were gone, and his skin was practically glowing. That wasn’t the effect of a night of good sleep or a new skincare routine. Advancing your grade didn’t technically make you younger, but Moui sure didn’t look like a man in his forties.

“Thank you, kid. I know you’ll get there too, one day.”

Kai couldn’t tell if it was a heartfelt wish or a tease, probably both.

“Then you can take Mana Sense and see the enchantment for yourself, right?” He waved to the array in the shower.

“Well, I—” Moui’s eyes vainly darted around the bathroom before coming back on him.

“Yes?” Kai took a step forward.

You don’t have any more excuses.

“I guess you’re right. I’ll take it and see how it goes.”

What’s with the gloomy look? No need to thank me for convincing your thick skull to take one of the most useful skills.

Kai forced himself to stay calm, “I’ve been showing Ele a few exercises to practice her mana skills. You can join us for the next session.”

“Huh, I—”

“I’d be curious to see how advancing your race affects your mana. We’ll practice tomorrow afternoon if that works for you.”

“I don’t want to bother you two.”

“No problem. The more the merrier. You’re part of the family now.” Kai squeezed through the door past him before the hunter could change his mind.

The ancestors grant me patience. Making people act in their best interest is exhausting.

With a knock, he entered Ele’s room. His sister sat on a desk stringing a necklace of clear water pearls. A clatter of threads, pearls and tools lay around her broke the perfect order of her bed sheets and folded clothes.

“Do you know that Moui—” Kai didn’t need to finish the sentence. “Yes, of course you do.”

He stood awkwardly on his feet. The covers of her bed were so perfectly pulled it felt like a crime to sit down.

“It took you only a few hours to notice this time,” Ele put down the necklace to look at him. “Sorry, I didn’t want to tease you.”

“No, it’s fine. When did *you* realize?”

“I’m not sure, about a week ago?”

Kai frowned his brows. “Moui said he only advanced this morning.”

“Yes, he did. But I knew something was up. I asked him what was going on and he told me.”

“Oh...” Kai plopped down on the bed and Ele came to sit beside him.

“Are you okay, little brother?”

“Do I not pay enough attention?”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s pretty hard to tell what Moui’s thinking, and you’ve been living with us only for a short while.”

It has certainly been a pretty hectic week organizing the new place. There is always an excuse, isn’t it?

“How’re you doing, sis?”

“Good, why?”

Spirits, she finds it weird I asked. When was the last time I did?

“Just wondering. If you ever need something, I’m here.” In their talks, she never brought up the problems she struggled with.

“Same for you. Remember I’m the big sister.”

Certainly, the most mature.

After chatting about random stuff with Ele, Kai went down to help his mother in the kitchen. Despite Moui’s protests, the house buzzed into a frenzy of activity to celebrate his feat.

“I’m proud of you, honey,” Alana said. They shared a quick kiss, the seventh little peck of today—Kai had been counting. They both looked happy and unbearably lovey-dovey with each other.

Thankfully I finished soundproofing the walls. I’ll remain blissfully ignorant.

Kea rolled her eyes. “Can we eat now? I’m hungry.”

“Sure, sweetie,” Alana disentangled her arms from Moui to begin the feast. The hunter was about to stand when she stopped him. “Just sit, this is your day.”

Even though Moui wasn’t used to being the center of attention, Kai had never seen him smile so much.

Waking up with a blissful silence, Kai was the first one downstairs. The stove was cold, and there was no trace of their mother.

“Good morning,” Ele greeted with a yawn. “Do you need a hand with those eggs?”

Without waiting for an answer, she took the pan and skillfully shaped an omelet. Kea arrived half an hour later, combing her messy hair with her hand.

“I’m going out, tell Mom I won’t be back for lunch.”

He still needed to find two bookshelves for his new lab. As Reishi promised, the place was going to be ready in no time. Polished white tiles were already being installed in his bathroom.

They were only waiting for him to choose the last pieces of furniture, so the merman could bring the alchemy equipment. Busy days were ahead, and Kai was eager to start.

When Reishi said two days, he meant two twelve-hour shifts. Business was business and he was impatient to recoup the investment to start earning. Child labor laws weren’t a thing. If Alchemy didn’t have mana constraints, Reishi would have probably asked for more.

With how he had trained at the estate, the work didn’t scare him. Though he was used to doing many different activities during the day. Brewing from dawn till dusk would be a different experience, and probably less interesting.

Guess that’s why they call it work. I could probably divide the hours into three days. As long as I reach my twenty-four-hour quota, Reishi will likely agree.

Two beefy workers that appeared to be twins waited for him at the lab. They’d been hired to arrange the furniture. Like most of the people Reishi employed, they weren’t from around here.

“You’re from the Shattered Isles, right?” Kai said, noticing their green hair. “How is it there?”

“Not very peaceful,” one grunted, he had a golden stud on his left ear.

His brother had a thin scar running down his chin, he just nodded in silence. Kai noticed they were both Orange ★★★. A bit of an overkill to move furniture.

Reishi likes to be extravagant.

Kai tried to prod them to say more. It wasn't happening. They stared at him in silence, waiting for instruction.

Not very chatty, are you?

Even though he was a kid, the two grown men followed his commands without a problem. They didn't complain when Kai made them move wardrobes and tables from one corner of the house to another, searching for the perfect spot.

"We were told to help you buy anything else you need," the guy with an earring said after Kai was finally satisfied with the placement.

Not like saying no was an option. The previous times, the articles he bought were brought in later. Reishi was eager to finish.

"Okay, let's go."

Walking around Sylspring with two muscled dudes at his side was an *interesting* experience. People threw curious glances his way when they thought he wasn't looking.

Kai couldn't blame them. He felt like a mob boss flanked by his henchmen. His short stature only made the scene more ridiculous. Asking the twins to walk on the same side didn't help much.

Bodyguards weren't a unique sight in poshtown, though rare. Safety was one of the main selling points of the archipelago. The private guards who followed behind richly dressed people tried to blend in.

Fine, I might as well enjoy it.

Out of other options, Kai decided to inhabit the part with Improvisation, assuming a confident swagger. If Reishi thought he could make him hurry this way, he was dead wrong.

They visited the woodworkers around town to order custom pieces and browse their stock, only stopping for lunch. Kai magnanimously offered to pay for them too, hoping to garner new information. The twins shared a few tidbits of knowledge, nothing useful.

With only a few mesars left of the furnishing budget, Kai asked for some modifications to a bookcase he liked. He had to use some coppers of his own to buy a painting of the Vastaire ruins on the other side of Yanlun. Green vines spiraled around their ivory tower, with a backdrop of a crystal sea.

Kai left his henchmen to wait for the woodworker to finish. They didn't mind after confirming that was the last article he needed.

He hurried home for the mana lesson he promised. They chose to sit around the kitchen table since they were three today.

"You've taken the skill, right?"

"Yes, I did," Moui answered with a sigh.

Such a thankless job.

Without dallying, Kai began dishing out instructions. After confirming Ele's progress and giving her a few tips, he focused on Moui. The problem kid that needed special attention.

The hunter squinted as he demonstrated a mana construct.

"You know you're not truly using your eyes with Mana Sense."

"It's just confusing to see all around me."

"You'll get used to it."

The hunter had improved considerably since Kai taught him how to control his own mana presence years ago. He was afraid to ask which level the skill had reached. With both his profession and race at Yellow, his attributes must dwarf his own by a mile.

However, his Mana Manipulation had grown in weird ways without its counterpart. He could control his whole essence pool with ease, while he struggled to mold a thread thinner than a rope.

Kai couldn't deny a small smidge of satisfaction. Only Yatei knew what he could have achieved if he wasn't so bull-headed.

He'll catch up. I won't allow such shoddy manipulation.

Kai demonstrated some basic exercises, and Moui easily followed his instructions.

"How's advancing to Yellow?" he asked, failing to suppress his curiosity. Moui's mana network shone like the sun, compared to him his veins had the pale glow of the moons.

“About the same as Orange. Though I think having a profession of the same tier must have helped, I wouldn’t know how it was without.” Moui let the mana monstrosity in his hands crumble. “Not pleasant, but completely worth it. I’ve never felt this good since I was in my twenties, probably better than even that.”

“Let’s get back to exercise, we have a lot of ground to cover. You have a lot of bad habits to forget.”

“It’s been working well for me.”

Kai shook his head. “You’re using a sword as a walking stick. Sure, it can do the job, but it wastes the potential of Mana Manipulation. Try to *actually* use Mana Sense to see what you are doing.”

There was something that hadn’t changed from the first time he had taught him: how stubborn he was. For each exercise, he came up with three objections. It was like rowing against the currents.

After two hours, Ele left them alone. A glance was enough to tell Moui that they weren’t done yet. The light had waned by the time Kai allowed him to go.

“I gained a level,” the hunter exclaimed with his gaze lost reading his Guide. “Two actually, and one in Mana Manipulation.”

“What?”

“My Mana Sense is level 3.” Moui had the courage to beam proudly. “I must be a genius too.”

How is this fair?

Kai gnashed his teeth. It was maddening.

Maybe I'm too good of a teacher. Yeah, that must be it.

"I should start charging you by the hour."

"How much do you want?" Moui readily agreed.

Kai considered it for a moment when he got a better idea. "Just admit I was right."

The confident facade of the hunter faltered, "It's soon to say for sure..."

"That or ten silvers."

Moui actually considered the choice, rummaging in his pockets. He took out a handful of coppers and one silver "Fine. You were *probably* right. I'm still not sure how helpful Mana Sense is, but at least the XP is nice."

Kai accepted that was the best he was going to get. "I'm going to get some air before dinner."

Is this the injustice Kea feels?

Seeing Moui print through the levels hit him more than his yellow advancement. The first levels were always the easiest, but Mana Sense was an orange skill.

Huh, I guess that's the point. He has reached Yellow in both grade and profession. Now he's punching down a tier.

Kai remembered the surge of levels when he advanced to Orange. And he didn't even have a profession. The realization left him more conflicted. No matter how hard he trained, a higher grade could close the gap with less effort.

I need to get there asap.

The next day his lab was ready. Kai cleared his room and moved most of his books to the new place. Reishi came escorted by the muscled twins who pulled out crate after crate from a spatial bag.

"Are you satisfied with the place?" the merman asked, overseeing the men unloading the cargo.

Kai was tempted to complain about the tiles wrong shade just to see how the merman would react.

"Yes, I just need to enchant the bathroom. *After* that, we can begin." He carefully avoided the pitfall. From how the merman's smile lost half its brightness, it wasn't just paranoia.

"I see... Well, do you want to check what I got for you?" He waved to the twins who had finished pulling out the boxes.

"I do, an alchemist *can't work* without the proper equipment."

"I'm sure what I found will be more than adequate."

Most of the crates contained mana herbs and were put in one of the back rooms that worked as temporary storage. But a dozen smaller boxes had been placed on the workbench.

With his usual flair, Reishi began unpacking. A sea of scalpels, sieves, burners and glassware of various forms and sizes took over every free surface in the room. Kai stoically observed everything, trying not to glance at the tools he had never seen before.

A good alchemist doesn't need all this fancy stuff.

"This is the cauldron to test new recipes," Reishi said unveiling a shiny metal object with delicate runes carved down its surface.

Kai took a closer peek, there were a dozen switches and levers. Was this still a cauldron? If it worked half as good as it looked, he couldn't wait to try it.

Dora was indeed a bit frugal with these things.

His trusty old cauldron did the job, but he wouldn't mind getting an upgrade.

"And this," Reishi caught his attention, struggling to open the last crate for its size. "Is the cauldron you'll use to scale production."

A black hunk of metal was revealed. A network of thousands of runes was interwoven around an unknown number of knobs and dials. Kai had to stand on the tip of his feet to look over the edge.

What's this monstrosity?

"What do you think?" Reishi clasped his hands at his sides with a proud grin.

“Mhmm...” Kai slowly inspected the *thing*. “I think I need a shorter desk. We’ll probably need to delay the start for another day or two to find a proper one.”

Improvisation is my new god-tier skill.