

Chapter 108 - Unexplored Caves

Kai swam past Mr. Clam through the crevasse. A cold current caressed his fingers against the stillness of the pond. Squeezing between the rocks, the path shrank and descended into darkness.

Mana Sense told him it grew wider further up, but the choke was too narrow for him without the risk of getting stuck.

It had already been more than ten minutes since he resurfaced; wrestling with Mr. Clam also took some effort. Kai pushed on the seafloor with his feet and began his ascent, stopping midway to get Ele's attention.

"Ele, I found an underwater cave!" Kai exclaimed as soon as they breached the surface.

His sister didn't show the excitement he expected. "Are you sure it's not a dead end? I've searched this pool a few times before and I've never found anything."

"Come, I'll show you."

Diving back down, Kai swam straight for the crevasse, gesticulating to explain his findings to her. Ele still looked skeptical.

His crystal light couldn't illuminate past the first bend. The water contained slightly more essence than the rocks, outlining the shape of a larger cave. Without Mana Sense, it would be impossible to determine if the tunnel led anywhere. Her skill wasn't high enough to recognize the subtle difference.

After a fruitless waving of hands, they took another detour to the surface. Ele listened to his explanation in silence.

“I’m sure there’s a cave below.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you,” his sister said—Kai could feel the *but* coming from miles away.

“But can you know the dead end is not just a little further up? I’ve seen plenty of tunnels. Most of them lead nowhere. The fact a place is hidden or hard to reach doesn’t mean it contains anything valuable, or that is worth the risk.”

“What about the current, you felt it too, right?”

“I wouldn’t call that a *current*, the waters are always in flux. There could be many reasons for that.” Her calm and conciliatory tone crushed his dreams with boring logic that irked him to no end.

She’s treating me like a kid who claims he found a treasure in his backyard.

Kai swallowed a snappy response. It wasn’t the time to act like a brat.

From her point of view, what are the odds of someone finding a secret treasure on their first outing? But just because it’s rare, it doesn’t mean it never happens. Having 24 Favor must be worth something.

Whether it was Blessed Swimmer or his luck, Kai felt it in his bones - that cave was worth exploring.

“What’s the harm in trying?”

“Apart from getting stuck several meters underwater and drowning, you mean?” Ele sighed and softened her tone. “I speak from experience. I know you want to find a great treasure. But that passage is too small even for you. Trying to enlarge it would only risk it collapsing on us.”

Jackpot!

Kai hid a smile. The moment she moved the topic from a straight *no* to an *insurmountable* problem, he had won.

“What if I can widen the entrance at no risk?”

When the gears started turning in her head, it was already too late. “How would you do that?”

“With magic,” Kai conjured a fish made of water. Her eyes widened as it swam around her, before jumping into the pond. His sister stared at him with mute wonder.

“I didn’t apprentice all these years for nothing,” Kai said proudly.

“Are you sure you can enlarge that tunnel safely?”

“Completely.”

Ele put on a token resistance before admitting defeat. “I guess there’s no harm in trying, but don’t be disappointed if you don’t find anything. That’s how it goes most of the time.”

The feeling in his gut only grew as they swam closer. Even if he was tempted to blast a hole through the stone, with Ele watching, he tried to use more *finesse*.

The rock formation looked porous but solid. His reserves mostly contained Water mana, with just a smattering of Earth. It would take half an hour to gather the necessary essence to shape the stone. With his high-level Water Magic and the advantage of the environment, it didn't seem worth the hassle.

He gestured to Ele to move back and relocated Mr. Clam out of the way.

Be safe, little buddy.

Using what little Earth mana he had, Kai studied the stone and widened some cracks. With everything ready, he touched the rough rock and let the mana flow through his hand. Water moved forward at his command, flowing through the tiny fissures in the stone.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, then a low rumble resounded through the pond as large chunks of rock separated from the rest in a burst of chips. Quickly casting another spell, Kai pushed them away to ensure the fallout didn't seal the tunnel.

They only weighed a fraction underwater, he'd have no way of moving such large boulders. Their large mass caused sand and waves to sweep through the pool.

When everything settled, Kai observed his work satisfied. The cut wasn't as precise as he hoped, but it worked as envisioned. Floating a few more chunks of rock out of the way, the tunnel lay open before him.

His enthusiasm quickly faded when faced with his sister's angry expression, gesticulating wildly at him.

She did say something about not disturbing the ecosystem...

Rubble and debris lay strewn all around, his landscaping skills could use some work. He might have also crushed a few patches of coral and kelp here and there.

Kai gave her his best apologetic look. The schools of fish moved nervously around, but they hadn't started a murderous rampage.

All well what ends well, right? Apart from the poor sods that got smashed. As the talking lion said: it's all part of the great circle of life. The fishes had enough time to get out of the way, and let's be honest, anemones barely count as animals.

Kai took his sister's scolding, glad they were underwater. Bubbles came out of her mouth. He couldn't hear a thing, though her glares made the message crystal clear.

Wearing an appropriately castigated expression, Kai floated toward the dark opening below, and Ele begrudgingly followed behind.

I'm going to feel really bad if this leads nowhere.

Anticipation gripped him as darkness was pierced by his enchanted light. The tunnel was still narrow. Only years of experience exploring the depth around the estate stopped him from panicking as the walls tightened around him, constricting his movements. If he met a dead end, he'd have no space to turn around.

Despite the confidence in his abilities, Kai let out a few bubbles of relief when the passage opened up in a cavern. The mana density had increased yet again. Tiny black fishes shied away from the light. His attention was captured by the dozens of Mr. Clam's siblings that lay at the bottom of the cave.

The family of mollusks hadn't inherited Mr. Clam's deep stinginess, their shells lay wide open on the sand. The glint of several golden pearls reflected in the light.

Being the first to step foot in this secret cavern was indescribable. He would explore a place no other person had ever visited before.

His sister cautiously made her way out of the tunnel beside him. As Kai gave her a smug smile, she was too taken by the sight to notice. Her mana pulsing with strong emotion at the sight.

I knew this was worth it.

Curiosity beckoned him forward, the cave was only a few meters high but continued with no end in sight. The further he swam the larger Mr. Clam's cousins became. From dinner-size plates to 'I could probably fit in there if I curl up'.

Kai kept to the upper side of the cavern. The only other animals present were the tiny black fishes and pale scuttling crabs. The current that led him here grew stronger. The darkness ahead begged to be explored.

Ele grabbed his leg right as he was about to turn another bend, shaking her head and pointing to the exit. Groaning in frustration, Kai followed her.

"I told you it would be worth it," he said with the first breath of oxygen he took.

"Yeah, you were right," Ele admitted, her exasperation overshadowed by her bubbling excitement. "We should take the chance to gather the pearls we can."

"But the cave continues."

"You don't know what you're gonna find. It could be dangerous. If something happens, you'll be so far away from the surface."

“I can keep my breath for a looong time,” Kai argued. “And I have Danger Sense to warn me.”

“Skills aren’t infallible. Just because they warn you of danger, it doesn’t mean you can always avoid it.”

“I’ve got Mana Sense too. I’ll see anything from a mile away.”

“Still, I don’t thin—”

“You’ve seen what I can do with my magic.”

“Yeah, that was truly... *something*,” Ele admitted, a complicated look on her face.

Seeing his sister falter, Kai struck the final blow. “I’ll turn away and run at the first sign of danger. With Blessed Swimmer and my magic, I can get ridiculously fast.”

“You’re not going to change your mind, are you?” Ele said.

Kai wanted to say he’d listen to her, but the truth was that at most he’d come back another time, alone.

Plunging into the depths, his sister stayed by the cave entrance, using an underwater torch she fetched from the boat. With one reassuring look at her, Kai headed toward the unknown with his crystal in hand.

Mana Sense scouted ahead for any threat. With the essence levels rising, so did the chances of meeting an awakened beast. He had only fought an aquatic creature once when a large barracuda entered the bay near the estate.

Kai was as good as humans got in the sea, but he still felt outmatched against a marine being. Only Water Magic helped close the gap.

Following the currents, the darkness of the cavern was suddenly split by a mesmerizing light, far outshining his crystal. Something buzzed in the back of his mind, but what did it matter compared to such beauty? He swatted the noise away, floating closer, to bask in the light.

Everything else fell away. He felt content. It was the most fascinating sight he had ever seen, containing all the colors of the rainbow and more. The buzzing grew stronger now accompanied by hurried whispers. Entranced by all the shades of red, green and yellow, Kai ignored it.

Closer. The light was almost within grasp. Just a little more and everything would be okay.

The rumble in his head thumped like a gong. His whole body and mind screamed that something was deeply wrong.

Like the shattering of glass, the mesmerizing light faded away to reveal a golden pearl shimmering with iridescent light. It sat a palm from his outstretched hand, sitting on the fleshy mouth of the biggest damned clam he had ever seen. Large enough to swallow him standing up.

Fear blasted through the desire to grasp the treasure. Mana flooded his skills before he could form any coherent thought. Blessed Swimmer, Empower and Water Magic. They all worked together for a single desire - getting away from Mama Clam before he became her snack.

Mana Sense warned him the mollusk had noticed something was wrong, probably reacting to his sudden burst of mana. As his skills took effect, Kai pushed against the water like never before in his life, while the walls of flesh began to snap close.

No, you don't!

More Water Mana surged to slow the closing shell, just enough for his body to dart out faster than his sprint speed. Kai crashed on the opposite wall of the cavern.

Blessed Spirits, this hurts.

The impact punched the air out of his lungs. With his desperate flight, he had lost most of his oxygen.

Thank fucking Yatei I've got the ring. I could kiss Elijah's grumpy face right now.

Activating his emergency plan, he released the bubble of air from his spatial closet and used Water mana to keep it around his head. He took a deep breath, followed by a long string of curses worthy of a seasoned sailor.

"Fucking mollusk!"

His Mana Sense had never left the awakened beast—though it felt weird to call a shelled invertebrate a beast. He had no idea how the skill missed that. Mama Clam remained at the other end of the cavern, not showing an ounce of shame for her actions.

To add insult to injury, the cheeky clam opened her shell once more, enticing him to give in another shot. The light of the golden pearl filled the cavern, though its allure was only a fraction of what he felt before.

Impudent mollusk!

Kai let go of the air bubble, the oxygen level too low to be worth keeping. The prudent course of action would be to leave.

But he still had a considerable chunk of Water mana, and his hurt pride didn't allow him to leave like that. Especially with a mana treasure in front of him with such beautiful light...

Nope, snap out of it, you moron!

Mana sense confirmed Mama Clam was at the early stages of orange grade.

Not sure if I should be happy or not. I'd have buried myself in a hole if I had gotten charmed by a red-tier mollusk.

Despite her unthreatening appearance, the *beast* was bound to have far higher attributes than him. That multicolored illusion could only be an instinctive form of magic, it could also be the reason why Mana Sense didn't notice from a distance.

I need a plan.

The matriarch's cavern had the highest density of mana and housed no other clams or tiny fishes. Exploring the cavern, Kai noticed the shell sat right at the mouth of a tunnel which seemed to be the origin of the current.

He preferred to avoid a direct confrontation, even if he could injure it, the mollusk could simply close its shell and wait him out. That was the whole reason they had a shell.

A clam is still a clam, awakening can only improve her wits so much.

Taking a stone from the seafloor, Kai threw it at the pearl with the help of some magic. As expected, the mouth shut instantly.

A few seconds later, the shell opened again, and the rock was thrown out.

No take backsies. It's rude to refuse a gift.

Kai threw it back in, eliciting the same reaction. An annoyed pulse of mana resounded through the mollusk. Getting an idea, he swam closer, within spell range.

The snap was extremely quick, and he wasn't confident in outspeeding her. Instead of waiting for her to get ready into position, he struck right as Mama Clam was about to spit out the rock, her shell halfway open.

Pumping the spell with all the mana he could spare, a tentacle of mana sneaked inside her gaping maw, grabbing the pearl with lightning-quick speed. He could feel the clam trying to close again. Caught mid-action, her reaction was too slow and stuttered.

Thanks, Mama Clam. A fair trade for almost eating me.

It was the biggest pearl he had ever seen, larger than his fist and rich with mana. As he was admiring his loot, Danger Sense warned him again.

The matriarch propelled toward him using her two halves to push against the water.

Without thinking twice, Kai put the treasure inside his ring and ran, chased by a furious Mama Clam.

Damn greedy mollusks. I should have known Mr. Clam took after you.