

Chapter 237 - Reunion

Rays of dawn bounced off the vaulted ceiling. Kai grasped at the fleeting serenity. He had paid extra coin for a single cabin after the last *accident*. The rocking of the waves had delivered him four wonderful hours of restful sleep. He had only woken once when Hobbes had slid under the covers of his cot.

You lovable pest.

His fingers scrubbed the snoozing furball curled against his leg. The evil mastermind leaned into his hand with a soft purr, licking his thigh. Impressions of warmth and safety slipped through their bond.

Mhmm... you look so innocent you could trick a truth teller, right before you rob her blind.

Kai contentedly rubbed the silky fur, knowing it wouldn't last. The *Ylena* creaked under him with a few jolts and settled into a gentle lull. The bustling voices of sailors and dock workers drifted in from outside.

They had reached Sylspring.

He pulled the sheets over his head, wishing to delay the inevitable. His family was out there, within walking distance. Nerves and excitement rippled through him with equal intensity. Perhaps he could check on them from afar and delay the reunion till he felt ready.

It was so strange. There was no need to check the wards of his shelter for intruding beasts, he didn't have a list of deadly tasks to accomplish, and he could get as much food he would ever need by tinkling a little silver. Nothing would stop him from lazing around or going anywhere. Overwhelming freedom and limitless possibilities.

Hobbes yawned, exposing his little pearly fangs. He arched his back and paws with a satisfied meow. Violet eyes contemplated him silently as the king took in his domain.

"Morning to you too."

"Mew," Hobbes jumped off the cot and disappeared in a silver flash before touching the floorboards.

He's so much nicer when he's asleep.

With a deep groan, Kai sat upright, almost hitting his head on the ceiling. Procrastination never made anything easier. He raked a hand through his hair and donned his new clothes. If he got to hug his family and little brother, he didn't care if they cursed him after.

In the cramped corridor outside his door, Flynn was chatting with another passenger, a foreigner judging by his pitch-black hair. His friend's eyes darted to him. Excusing himself

from the conversation, he discreetly checked on the state of the cabin before grinning. “Got your beauty sleep?”

“Yeah,” Kai pressed his mouth in a grim but determined line. “I’m ready to go.”

“C’mon, stop worrying. Your family will be overjoyed to see you. *Then*, they might want to chain you in the basement for the next three decades. But hey, I promise to visit at least once a year.”

“Your generosity knows no bounds.”

“I try my best.” Flynn gave him a friendly slap on the back. “Do you want me to go first and warn them?”

Kai grabbed his bags to head outside, taking the time to think. “I— Would that help?”

“Probably not. I’ve already told them you were too stubborn to die, especially to an orange drake. So I’d need to share the details to make them believe me.”

“Wait... I was killed by a drake? Who said that?” He had taken for granted that Seryne would cover up his escape, but they couldn’t even bother to make up a believable story.

“That’s the official version the Republic stands by.” He nodded, amused. “No one believed it, *naturally*.”

“Does my family think I’m alive...?” A string of hope wove into his tone. If they suspected he wasn’t dead, it would make the reunion a lot less awkward.

“They know there was something shady going on with the circumstances surrounding your disappearance, but...” Flynn’s hesitation closed the picture.

“They think the Republic is just hiding their responsibility for my death,” Kai concluded for him.

“Probably. I can’t say for sure... After your funeral, I didn’t want to bring up the subject.”

“My funeral?” Kai blurted out, stumbling on the uneven steps to the deck. Three sailors eyed him weirdly but backed away when he stared straight back. “I had a *funeral*?” He struggled to moderate his tone.

“Oh, yeah.” Flynn’s chuckle carried a somber note. “I wish you could have seen it. You got a casket and everything. The Republic even provided an urn of ashes to bury. Hopefully, they weren’t human, that would be morbid...”

I— How—

Kai didn't know how to feel anymore. The bustle of Sylspring washed over him, making him lose sight of his worries. He should have expected the town to change after visiting Highharbor, but the sheer extent of the transformation baffled him.

Long piers branched out from the paved port into the Shallow Sea, a fleet of boats ferried visitors from larger vessels. The *Ylena* moored amidst a forest of masts. While the sun hadn't fully escaped the horizon, sailors and merchants already scurried around like busy ants.

Kai couldn't recognize even one of the pastel blue, yellow and pink establishments that crowded the shore. Everything was alien and new.

"I can show you around if you want. Half the pubs on the main roads are overpriced traps to rip off wealthy tourists, though they also get the best bards and don't water down their ale. On the inside, it's more of a mixed bag..." Flynn pointed out the places he had been to in an endless deluge till they stepped on solid ground. "What?"

"Nothing." Kai smiled, he appreciated the distraction. "Do you visit here often?"

"A few times a year. It's not hard to learn these things when you talk to people, especially if they've already had a few drinks. You should try it out sometime."

"Why? I already have you to do it for me."

Flynn grabbed his own shirt in dramatic shock. "Is that why you're being nice all of a sudden? You're using me!"

"You found out my evil scheme," Kai nodded with a straight face. "Now, are you going to lead the way or not? I don't have all day."

"Fine, but I want the right to snuggle Hobbes in exchange."

"Be my guest. You can scratch his back all day long if you manage to convince him."

"Deal." Flynn shook his hand and leaned closer to whisper. "Are you sure he'll be fine in such a busy town? Won't he get lost?"

Spirits, do I need to remind him again that the cat's an awakened animal, an entire grade higher than him?

"Don't worry, Hobbes can always tell my general direction. He'll nose around, maybe haunt some poor guy, and come back when he's hungry."

"If you say so." Flynn threw a mourning glance at the ship, unaware the sly feline was observing them from a roof on shore. "Do you want to go directly there or wander around for a bit?"

"Now's fine." Kai marched down the streets, unwilling to let his determination falter.

“Wait, they moved houses last year.”

“Oh...” Another piece of his past that was gone.

“Sorry, it slipped my mind.” Flynn scratched his head. “They wanted a quieter place for Kien, and that building had too many memories.”

How much did I miss...

The roads grew less crowded the further they were from the port. Flynn attempted to play the tour guide, though Kai couldn't hear a word he said. There were a few flashes of familiarity when they crossed into posh town and the merchant district. The strict confines of Sylspring had blurred together with different areas of enhanced mana density.

After two years in the Sanctuary, Yanlun felt like a desert to him. No matter how deeply he breathed, the air was never quite *filling*. He couldn't fault the mainlanders for comparing the archipelago to mana-starved rocks, but if he had to choose between safety and a dense ambience, he would pick the first every time.

There is still plenty of time before Zervathi causes chaos.

A new residential district had sprouted up on the southern side of town. Fenced little villas and houses of brick and plaster. The closer they got, the faster his heart raced. Kai dried his sweaty palms on his pants. He had been less nervous sneaking into the ice dragon's den.

After all I put them through, this is nothing.

“We're here.” A ring of pale green houses with maroon shingles huddled around the inner courtyard hidden behind an iron gate. Flynn waved to a shriveled old woman on a rocking chair, her snow-white braid coiled in her lap. “Hey, Nemaela, you look even more beautiful today. I like what you've done with your hair.”

The grandma grumbled something incomprehensible, though she must have recognized the voice because the enchanted gate clicked open. She watched them enter with one muddy eye. “And you're still a sweet talker. Make sure your friend doesn't make trouble. People here like the quiet.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Kai was too anxious to care about the comment. The air choked in his throat, it was like his insides were being squeezed and then pulled apart. He could hardly put one foot in front of the other.

The mana density doubled across the gate. A willow overlooked the small garden in the central courtyard. Though it couldn't compare to the upper city in Higharbor, they were definitely doing well.

“You came!” A toddler with aquamarine eyes squealed, running towards them, hands stained with mud. He stumbled over a patch of grass but regained his balance without losing the smile.

Is he...?

Kai stood still like a nail in the ground. The boy couldn't reach his knee and was already at the peak of Red, the elixir must have worked perfectly. There couldn't be any doubt.

Kien jumped straight into Flynn's arms. “Mom said you arrive tomorrow.”

“I managed to free up sooner and wanted to see you. You've gotten so fast, and big. A few more years and I'll have to look up at you.” He spun the giggling toddler in the air before setting him down. “Are you being a good boy? And not making your mom worry?”

“I'm always good.” Kien took a few dazed steps and grabbed his finger. “Come. You must see what I made!”

“I will.” Flynn easily thwarted the attempts at being dragged off with a fond smile. “There is someone I'd like you to meet first.”

The wide eyes quickly fixed on the only stranger with a pout.

Kai studied him back. What do you say to a precocious little brother when you see him for the first time? He wore his brightest smile and crouched on the grass to offer a handshake. “It's nice to finally meet you.”

Dammit. I should have relearned Improvisation.

His little brother scrunched his nose at the offer and hid behind Flynn's leg. “Mom said I shouldn't talk to odd strangers.”

“I'm not a—”

“Kien! I told you to play where I can see you.” A woman strode out of a door with a wooden spoon in hand and flour over her nose. Her pace slowed to a crawl when she saw them. “Flynn. We weren't expecting you—”

She froze in her tracks, staring at them and blinking repeatedly.

Kai found his mouth suddenly dry. It was like hardly a day had passed. Alana had her hair a little shorter and a thin wrinkle on the corner of her eyes—that perhaps he was only now noticing thanks to his higher Perception.

“Mom.” He managed to force out a monosyllabic sentence.

Great job brain. You continue to prove a disappointment.

His brother shifted his gaze between them, guilt turned to puzzlement. “She’s *my* mom.” Flynn pulled him aside, whispering an explanation Kai couldn’t make out. The courtyard was spelled into silence.

Alana trudged forward, her figure grew blurry as tears swelled in his eyes. Kai didn’t realize when he moved to meet her. Suddenly they stood in front of each other.

“Kai? Ar—are you really here?” She slowly reached to caress his face but stopped short, as if afraid she’d dispel the illusion if she acted hastily.

“I’m here. I’m sorry that I took so long to come home.” He couldn’t tell who had initiated the hug, only that their arms were wrapped around each other, and his gaze reached over her hair. He just had the presence of mind to prevent himself from crushing her.

“All that matters is that you’re here now.” Disbelief still tinged her voice. She made no effort to hold back from squeezing him; her Strength surpassed the peak of Orange with her profession. “Bless the spirits, I knew they’d bring you back to me.”

His ribs cracked under her grip, but he didn’t pull back or complain. If given a choice, he’d prolong the moment for hours without a second thought. No more words were needed, just silent sobs and smiles.

“Are you my brother?” Kien squeaked.

He reluctantly broke the hug to address the toddler staring up at him with a defiant expression. “Yes, I’m your big brother.”

“Then why did you make Mom cry?”

“I— I made some mistakes, but I’ll try to do better now.”

“I’m okay, Kiki.” Alana dried her eyes on a sleeve and bent to kiss him on the forehead. “You see, these are happy tears. You don’t need to worry about me.”

Kien watched them, still unconvinced. “My brother went to a place he can’t leave. How can he be here? Where was he?” He spoke with the blind confidence only a two-year-old could manage.

“It’s... complicated, Kiki.”

“I’ll explain it to you.” Flynn offered to take his hand. “Why don’t you show me what you made? I heard you are quite the artist. I came here just to see.”

Kien chewed his thumb, but ultimately couldn't resist the tempting offer. "Come, Finn. I show you."

Alana mouthed him a silent thank you before she grabbed Kai's arm in a steel grip. "Merciful Yatei, when did you grow so tall? Have you not been eating enough? You look so thin and tired." She poked his ribs with a disapproving shake. "Come. We were just finishing breakfast, I can cook you something up. Moui will be overjoyed to see you."

"Yes, Mom." Kai staggered to follow her furious pace into a luminous house smelling of sausages and coral flowers. He recognized some of the old furniture and the portraits of him and his sisters.

A man in a loose green shirt and a morning stubble sat at the kitchen table with a mug. "Honey, did Kiki play in the mud again?" Moui squinted and scanned him from head to toe. The handle of the mug cracked, spilling tea over the paved floor. "You are alive. I knew the story that girl told us was bollocks, but you actually came back."

"Hi, Uncle," Kai said, still too overwhelmed to formulate a better response.

"I must tell everybody you're back." Alana vanished into the house, humming to herself.

The hunter pulled him into another tight hug, proving he was still bigger and more muscular than him. "I knew you were hard to kill, but I didn't dare hope. Did the Republic keep you prisoner? Are you safe now?"

"I should be. They think I'm dead," Kai reassured him. "No one should come looking for me."

"How?"

"It's a long story."

Hmm, isn't that the understatement of the century?

Alana's return saved him from having to delve into the topic. "Take a seat. Ele will be here soon." She pushed him into a chair and lit the stove.

"Did Kea move out already?" Kai frowned, though it wasn't completely unexpected. She always had a fiercely independent streak.

"It's complicated, Kea didn't take it well when you disappeared, and Ele is married now."

"*Married?*" His voice rose an octave. It was his fault, his sister was only twenty. He should have been here to advise her not to settle for some guy.

Kai had still not gotten over the shock when Ele burst through the door. She heaved for air, her braids hanging wildly around her head.

“Mom! I came here as soon as I could when I saw the message. What’s the emergency?” Her gaze swept through the room, looking for the crisis, then snapped back on him. A hand rose to cover her mouth while her eyes sparkled with tears. “Flynn was right.”