

Chapter 96 - What's your number?

Kea followed him, stealing glances at the box in his hands. The fight between curiosity and pride apparent on her face. "What's in there?"

"Nothing much. Just a rare object I got from the estate." Kai said nonchalantly, hiding his smile.

"What is it?"

Kai squeezed past her in the hallway, "I'll show you later."

Her lips pressed in a thin line, no doubt she could see he was baiting her. Not that it ever mattered. "It's glowing with mana."

"It is. Mana treasures tend to do that." Kai easily evaded her grabby hands. She was older and taller, but his skills and grade more than made up for it.

"Why can't you just tell me?" Kea stomped her feet. "You are unbearable!"

"Why can't you just wait five seconds?" Kai replied flatly. "I'll show you when we are all together."

Without even trying to, he could feel her mana pulsing angrily.

Looks like someone is skimping on their mana training.

After she reached Orange, he had convinced Kea to learn Mana Manipulation. With Moui's support, it had *only* taken a few months to convince her. His sister never had the patience to

train mana skills. However, they were so useful Kai was sure they were worth keeping for a hunter.

His mother had told him Kea had calmed down over the years. He couldn't really see it. She got riled up at the slightest provocation. Taking the bait even if she knew where it was going to lead.

Either mom lied, or I'm just that good at pushing her buttons.

His whole family and Moui were chatting downstairs. Their attention moved to him as he made his entrance. Briefly glancing at Kea behind him, Alana frowned at him.

It's not my fault Kea falls for it so easily. She makes it just too tempting.

With an innocent smile, Kai placed the box on the table and took a seat. Ele squinted at it, her eyes looking past the wooden cover. At least one of his sisters was practicing the mana exercises he provided.

Alana and Moui gave him a questioning look. "What's that? Did you bring it from the estate?"

All eyes were on him. With a mysterious smile, Kai let the tension build up. Kea vibrated with anticipation and annoyance. Finally, he opened the lid with a dramatic flair.

The room was filled with 'ohs'. The swirling Water sphere was a sight to behold, and Virya's enchantment only added to the mystique. A trace of childlike wonder flashed on the face of everyone present, Moui included, before he returned to his stoic self.

"What is it?" Kea asked awed, her irritation gone as fast as it came.

"It measures your elemental affinity with Water." Kai explained to them how it worked and what having an affinity meant.

At first, he hesitated whether to bring the orb, wanting to avoid their disappointment if they possessed no affinity for water. Kai was already used to underplaying his training to not make Kea feel inadequate. Only after pondering for a long while, did he realize he was being an idiot.

Even disregarding that he couldn't hide his achievements from them forever. It wasn't his place to decide what his family could and couldn't handle. They weren't children to be protected from the harsh realities of the world. Kea was just a year and a half from getting a profession and being considered an adult.

He didn't expect them to suddenly drop their careers and dedicate their life to magic, but testing them cost him nothing. It would be up to them to decide what to do with the results.

"There are many different affinities," Kai explained. "There are long and complicated ways to see which ones you have. This Water sphere is a shortcut, but it can only measure a single element. So, who wants to go first?"

He tried to present it like a fun novelty instead of a do or die test. If some showed a high affinity, they could have a laugh and consider the possibility. Otherwise, life would go on as if nothing happened.

"I wanna go first." Kea unsurprisingly exclaimed. She basically threw herself at the blue orb, her arms reaching over the table for the box while everyone watched on patiently.

"Sure, sweetie, go ahead." Alana moved the wooden chest closer to her, stroking her hair.

Kea grabbed the box with both hands, staring into the deep swirling waters inside the crystal orb. Her palm lingered a moment before meeting its surface. A blue glow began emanating as the marks along its surface lit up one by one.

Kai wasn't surprised. Water was one of the most common elements. Most people had at least a minor affinity for it. The factors that determined a person's affinities were a contentious topic, but there was a proven correlation with the environment you were born in.

With the high abundance of Water mana of the archipelago, he would have been more surprised if she showed no affinity.

The lights steadily increased upon the crystal surface. Far slower than his. The last mark flickered on and off for a few seconds before settling down on a pale light.

Kea glared at the orb, her hand clutching it tighter. Kai even noticed her mana trying to push into the sphere, not that it made any difference.

“That’s 23.” Kai counted.

“Sounds like a pretty high number,” Alana said.

Kea gave up on the sphere and turned to him. “Is it good?”

“Most people have it below ten,” Kai said with a certainty he didn’t have. It seemed realistic enough. No one ever did large-scale testing of these things, and if they did, he hadn’t been able to get his hands on them.

Close enough to the truth.

“How high is yours?” Kea asked.

“More than that. Water probably isn’t your element.” He smirked at her. Hiding a sugar-coated truth behind his tease.

With no one stepping forward, Alana took hold of the box, “Let’s see what I get.” Her tone was light and casual, treating the test like the game Kai envisioned.

The marks had barely dimmed when a new wave swept through them. His mother stared mystified at the sight before exclaiming, "Look how many little lights. I must be lucky. What do you say, Kai? Could I have become a mage too?"

"With 37 probably yes," Kai answered absentmindedly. That was really good. "Above 35 is considered a major affinity in the Republic."

I guess my talent for magic needs to come from somewhere. Dad also kept Mana Sense and Manipulation, even if he said he wasn't very good at them.

Kea looked sulky but didn't storm off. Maybe Alana was right that she had matured.

Ele still showed no interest, maintaining a polite smile. "My turn then," Moui said, taking the sphere.

Everyone looked with bated breath. Kai could hear some anticipation in his uncle's tone. Someone didn't become such a good hunter without a competitive spirit.

With a timid flickering, the first marks began to glow. One. Two. Three. Four. The lights stopped. The family continued to stare intently at the crystal. The marks remained unchanged.

A soft chuckle cut through the silence. Noticing everyone's attention was on her, Kea castigated her expression. "Looks like water isn't your element either." A hint of amusement obvious in her tone.

I spoke too soon. She still can't stand getting beaten at something.

Moui's large shoulders hung low. He looked downcast. Kai swallowed a taunting comment, taking pity on his beaten puppy look. Four was really low for such a common affinity.

Water must truly not be his element. It's impossible that someone who unlocked Mana Manipulation by accident doesn't have any good affinities.

Alana consoled Moui with a pat on the back. "Don't worry, I'll protect you with my magic." The hunter smiled and they shared an intense look Kai would have rather not seen.

Spirits' mercy. Get a room far away from this house.

"So, sister, there's only you remaining." Kea pressed her older sibling, eager to get another show.

"I'm fine," Ele pushed the box back. "I prefer to keep the mystery."

"That's not fair. We've all touched it. It's your turn."

"Kai hasn't." Ele threw him under the bus.

What do I have to do with this?

Kea didn't seem interested in him. Probably because she knew his result would be higher than hers.

"She's right, Kai," Moui piled on. "You brought this glass ball but haven't told us what you got."

Kai threw the hunter a dirty look.

Just because we had one conversation, don't think we are even. I can barely tolerate you staying in the house we bought with your money.

“Or we can just keep the mystery,” Ele proposed conciliatory. It was too late for that.

Alana pushed the box in front of him, “Why don’t you show us, sweetie? I’m curious too.”

Kai sighed and compiled. “If you insist.” The marks quickly lit up in their spiraling pattern around the sphere, slowly down and then stopping. All eyes focused on the glowing signs.

“My affinity is 50,” Kai announced. With his control of mana, it was easy to cut off the connection at the desired result. With his sisters’ low Mana Sense, they would never notice.

Hopefully, Kea won’t get a stroke of envy. Even if they inquired about affinities, 50 isn’t ridiculously high.

Kai didn’t miss the irony of tricking his family right after he decided to be more honest with them. Change was hard, and right now he didn’t feel like there was a point in telling them. He trusted them, but part of him felt hesitant to reveal his entire abilities.

Baby steps. I’ll get there.

“Stop gawking, you always knew I was a genius,” Kai said with modesty. “Now it’s your turn, sis.”

The ball was in Ele’s park. He didn’t know why she refused to touch it the first time. His older sister looked unwilling, but with everyone watching her, there was no escape.

Reluctantly placing her hand on the orb, Kai immediately knew something strange was up. Like a tidal wave sweeping through all the blocks, the marks flared to life. The room went silent. His heart skipped a beat.

58, that was the final number. Just 10 points lower than his affinity *after* he received the blessing.

Well, damn me!

Four moons hang overhead in the night sky, their reflection twinkling on the sea. The breeze among the trees and the distant chatter of the town were the only sounds present.

“You knew.” Kai stared at his sister. They were alone, out of the cramped house to get some air.

Ele didn’t deny it. “I had my suspicions, but I didn’t know how high exactly. I never expected you’d bring out a magic ball to measure elemental affinity.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Kai used Acting to hide his feelings and not make it sound accusing. His pride wasn’t so fragile to buckle so easily, not anymore. What hurt him was that she had kept it hidden from him, not even a passing mention. Speaking about their training and progress was their *thing*.

“I’m sorry. It was only a suspicion. My profession gave me some hints, but I didn’t know if I was just reading into things,” Ele fiddled with the fringes of her dress. “You know, I’m not like you and Kea. I didn’t reach Orange years before my peers. I’m not special.”

Kai was stunned, frozen on the spot. A thousand thoughts whirled in his head. He sieved through them, afraid to say the wrong thing.

“That’s not true,” Kai stepped closer. “You have always been special. Kea *and* I, we’re the problem children. W—we always make Mum worry and cause headaches. When mom has a problem, she doesn’t come to us for advice. She comes to you.”

He forced himself to take a pause to breathe. “We both know *you* are the one who kept our family together after Dad died. Finding a job when you weren’t even fourteen and making sure mum took care of herself. I— I w—wasn’t even there.”

His voice cracked and his eyes turned lucid. He had to stop again before his words turned incoherent. Silent tears flowed down Ele’s face. He could feel his cheek becoming wet too. He crushed her in a hug, hiding his face in her dress.

“D—don’t ever say you’re not special. You are the best of us and, clearly, you also have more talent.” Kai mumbled.

The response came equally jumbled, “I’m the older sister. It’s my duty to keep an eye on my two troublemakers.”

They sat on the sand, admiring the waves, calming down their racing hearts. They decided to head home before their mother sent Moui to look for them.

“So, how high is it really?” his sister suddenly asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Your affinity, how high is it? You had told me it was very high before, but never said how much. 50 seems like a conveniently round number. And you didn’t look very distraught when I got 58...”

Damn. I should have gone for 51.

“I’m not Kea, I don’t get all sour and sulky if someone beats me,” Kai crossed his arms, offended.

“Sure, little brother. As you say.”

“Fine,” Kai lowered his voice to a whisper. “68.”

“So, you are still the family’s genius.”

Kai let her ruffle his hair without glaring back.

“You should consider studying magic too. Your affinity would make many people green with envy.” His sister still didn’t get how incredible she was.

“I’ll think about it,” she said diplomatically. “I don’t know much, but I doubt having one affinity means I can be a mage. I’ve seen how you used your mana skills. I don’t even come close. I’ve met a few people with mana skills, and I was hardly better than them.”

Kai mulled silently. He didn’t want to pressure her into something she didn’t want. And what she said wasn’t technically wrong, but having a high affinity sure was promising.

“By any chance, were any of these people with mana skills apprenticing to become mages?”

His sister stumbled on his steps, “Ehm... I don’t know. I think they were just training their mana skills hoping to get an apprenticeship in Higharbor.”

Kai gave her a long look. “So, you are *only* slightly better than people who spend all their days training with mana. It seems clear you have absolutely no talent for magic and should give up already.”

Even in the low light, Kai could see his sister blushing.

“Just promise you’ll *seriously* think about it,” Kai said.

“I swear on the great Kahali.”

Just wait till I show you a couple tricks with elemental magic. After you see them, you'll never go back.