

Chapter 95 - The Perfect Son

The unfamiliar wooden ceiling stared back at him.

Yep, that really happened.

Slipping out of his blankets, an anonymous and empty room welcomed him. The place of a stranger.

At least the bed is comfortable. Moui sure didn't skimp with his money.

Sitting upright on the soft mattress, the world faded away as glowing multicolored particles began to swirl around him. His left hand darted out, almost making him fall off. His thoughts and will crashed down on a single mote.

Phew. Got it in the nick of time.

In his palm rested an iridescent particle, Space mana. Kai added it to the collection, a couple hundred motes phased in and out of reality inside his body. Almost enough to cast one of Dora's cantrips.

Even with all the levels in Mana Sense and Attuned Meditation, he couldn't reliably gather Space mana in a reasonable timespan. It was up to chance and quick reflexes.

It was incredibly tricky to visualize the mind-bending spells possible with spatial magic. And only gathering enough mana to cast once a month wasn't ideal for improving. It was more of a hobby than anything, a fun game and an act of defiance to all those who told him he couldn't practice Space Magic.

Maybe I'm truly going through a rebellious phase. Dammit!

Being stuck in a child's body had frustrated him to no end, but now that he had reached puberty, he wished childhood could have lasted longer. In three more years, he would unlock the Second Seal. An adult in his culture.

I never reached adulthood in my first life, even if I was older...

Before he could get swept up in his fears for the future, Kai turned to something more reliable: his routine. His daily meditation always helped make him feel centered. Today he would need it more than ever.

About an hour later, Kai felt ready to face the inevitable. He paused in front of his door to gather his courage and headed downstairs.

"Had a nice rest, sweetie?" Alana greeted him, looking over her shoulder.

She *and* Moui were cooking breakfast over the stove, closely working around each other. A sleepy Kea rested her head on the table, but immediately perked up when she saw him coming.

This. Is. Fine.

"Heard the journey to the estate was long, *kid*," Moui said. The word assumed a whole new meaning under the new circumstances.

I'm not your kid!

“I’m used to it.” Kai sat on a chair, examining the wooden pattern of the table like it hid the secrets of the universe. A plate of food was placed in front of him just as he was about to understand the meaning of life.

“Thanks, mom.”

You’ll have to get used to it one way or another.

Wearing a smile with the help of Acting, he started eating. It was admittedly good. An abundant mix of sweet biscuits and salty tarts. An obvious attempt to bribe him. From how Kea stopped staring at him like a hawk to scarf down the meal, it wasn’t an everyday occurrence.

Alana discreetly elbowed Moui. “How is your training going?”

“Fine.”

Kai continued to give curt answers as Moui and Alana vainly tried to start a conversation. The hunter had never been one for small talk, and he preferred him that way.

They both looked so desperate to please him. Kai wished he could give them what they wanted. It was just so damn weird. With his plate empty, he was trying to come up with an excuse to get out, when his savior walked downstairs.

“I’ll be going to buy groceries,” Ele said.

“Can I come with you? There were a few things I was looking to buy.”

“Okay. But I want to avoid the rush, so—“

Kai didn't wait for her to finish. He dashed into his room, got on some proper clothes and jumped down the stairs, all in record time.

"I'm ready. We can go. I'll see you later. Mom. Moui." He waved and fumbled with the lock of their door.

"Here," Ele showed him how it was done. And they were out on the streets.

"I think you can let go of my hand now, we're far enough," Ele said, pointing out he was still dragging her around.

"Oh, sorry."

"What are you looking to buy without any money?" She squared him up and down.

Kai checked his pockets. They were all empty. In his hurry, he had forgotten his satchel. "I prefer to go for an investigative round before shopping."

"Ehm... Do you think I offended them?" he added, staring at his feet.

"They'll be fine. They knew it wouldn't be easy."

"It's just that they are so..." he looked for a word that wouldn't make him sound like a jerk.

"Suffocating?"

"Yes! They are trying too hard. And it only makes things weirder."

“Would it have been better if they behaved like nothing happened?”

“Yes— I mean, I don’t know. Maybe? You’re too good at this. It’s not fair.”

Ele giggled. There was no way this wouldn’t feel awkward. He needed time to wrap his head around the fact his mother and Moui were a thing...

Urgh... stupid brain! Don't you dare think of that!

They silently agreed to drop the argument, losing themselves in the bustling market. They weren’t the only ones who hoped to avoid the rush hour. Packs of people already crowded the stalls, and it was going to get worse till midday.

While poshtown was where silver flowed like water, the market was the beating heart of Sylspring. There was a kind of charm to the experience. All the smells, the sights, the talking. After a long period of isolation at the estate, being surrounded by other human beings, all with their own stories, helped him feel connected to the world.

Kai let his sister lead the way. He might have known the town for longer, but he never truly lived here, let alone go buy groceries. Ele greeted each merchant with familiarity as if she had grown up here. Never losing her smile even while haggling prices down.

“Do I have something on my face?” Ele asked. A polite way to point out he had been staring.

“No, nothing. You’re just really good at this. Do you have a skill?”

“For what?” Ele watched him, confused.

“Dealing with people and making friends.”

His sister’s chuckle was enough of an answer. Kai wanted to dig a hole to bury himself.

Of course, she doesn’t.

“It’s just a habit. Try going out more and you’ll be able to do it too.”

Somehow Kai highly doubted that. “How can you remember the names of everyone you meet without a skill?”

Ele shrugged, “I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe I’m the real genius in our family.”

Kai slumped down. “Maybe you are.”

“How far are you from the next enhancement?” His sister changed the topic for his sake.

“Still a small chunk away. I now understand how people get stuck at Orange. It’s such a slog.” With so many ears around, they kept things vague. After they had shared their whole status years ago, they continued to keep each other up to par with their progress.

“What about you?” Kai asked, doing the math in his head. “Your *goal* must be close.”

“A couple weeks to a month, I think. Depends on how many low tides we get.”

“That’s great!” Kai congratulated her. After reaching the Second Seal and losing the bonus of Life Experience, the norm was to use general skill to improve your race. His sister had also been siphoning off part of her profession XP toward Orange ★★.

In the short term, there would be fewer benefits. Professions gave a far higher and faster return on investment, which was why most people rushed through the levels to upgrade them. Ele was playing the long game. With a higher race and more experience with pearling, she hoped to obtain a better evolution for her profession.

“The other treasure hunters won’t know what befell them.” He joked.

They shared a smile. With a few more stops they were ready to head back, carrying two bags each. Kai realized the obvious.

“Please, tell me we haven’t bought all this for me.”

“Not *just* for you, we’re going to eat too. Mom insisted.”

“Does she plan to invite the whole neighborhood?” There was enough food to send a dozen people into a coma.

“It’s her way to show that she cares. We went through something similar a year ago. It was worse, actually, Moui was in on it too. Kea got a new bow and I had to talk him down from buying me a little boat.”

“Where are my expensive gifts then?” Kai asked, pouting. He didn’t want anything, but that sounded way more fun than this.

“I think they learned to be more subtle. So you get food.”

Life is so unfair.

They stopped before their house, his sister turned to him. "It won't be that bad. I'll convince mom to tone this down. If you want them to stop, try not to look like the spirits claimed your soul when you see Moui."

"Fine. I'll try."

They hardly had time to open the door when Alana and Moui were upon them. The bags disappeared from their hands.

Ele is right. If I want them to stop this charade, I need to give them what they want.

It wasn't hard to act as if everything was normal with the help of his skill. Just a happy family lunch. Continuing to stomp his feet was only going to prolong his suffering. After his mom stopped observing his every move, he would have all the time in the world to come to terms with the situation. He should have done this from the very beginning, but it was hard not to be a brat sometimes.

Entrusting his body to Acting, Kai prepared his mind for a rough few hours. Their house became a bustle of activity as they all got to cook an ungodly amount of meat and vegetables.

Even with Ele convincing Alana to forgo a few dishes, the result was monstrous. Smiling and chewing, he let his mother engage him in casual conversations with Moui occasionally adding his take from the sidelines.

The only saving grace was admiring Kea's frustration and disappointment as he behaved like the ideal understanding son.

Dragging his bloated body up the stairs, Kai couldn't believe he had survived the ordeal. It had been rough, but at least his mother looked happier by the end.

Not a minute had passed when a knock came from his door.

“Can I come in?” The deep voice was unmistakable.

Spirits, give me a break. Being the genius son is much easier than being the affable one.

“Sure, *uncle*.”

Moui’s lumbering figure peeked through the door. It was nice to see someone else being awkward for a change.

There wasn’t even a chair in his room. Kai sat straight up with some effort to make space for him. “You can sit on my bed.”

“I appreciate what you did. Your mother really cares about having your blessing.” The hunter scratched his head.

“Was it that obvious?”

Moui chuckled, “This morning looked about to stab me in the eye with a fork and now you laughed at my jokes. You are never that nice even on your good days.”

Ouch! You could have lied to me too.

“It’s not my fault your jokes are terrible.”

“Alana thinks I’m *very* funny,” Moui defended himself, crossing his arms.

“Yeah, that’s because she likes you.” Kai couldn’t believe what he just said. It was the food’s fault, his brain wasn’t functioning properly. From how the hunter’s face beamed, he hadn’t missed his admission.

“Now leave me alone, you lumbering giant. I promise not to scheme your breakup as long as you make her happy.”

Moui gave him a curt nod, ignoring his threat. An irritating smile was still present on his face.

“And I would never stab you in the eye, uncle. Low chances of success. Poisoning you in your sleep, on the other hand, that’s more feasible.” Kai waved him off. “Remember to close the door on your way out.”

Blessedly alone, Kai fell into a food induced slumber. Opening his eyes hours later, the world had stopped falling apart at the seams. If his mother had to be with someone else, it might as well be Uncle Moui.

I shouldn't have introduced them all those years ago. Damn me.

What was done was done. It was well into the afternoon. He was still too stuffed to consider going for a run. While he had been granted a few ‘free’ days with his family, Elijah wasn’t one to waste any opportunity. Since he was there, he might as well run some errands.

I should also see if Flynn is in town. So much to do.

Kai began unpacking his fresh clothes and a batch of potions for Reishi. On the bottom of his bag lay a blue sphere with swirling water. A network of delicate lines was carved on its surface. He would probably never stop gawking at Virya’s craftsmanship. The few mana appliances he had built with runes couldn’t begin to compare.

The Water sphere immediately reacted to his touch. Instead of speeding up the process with his attuned mana, Kai admired the flowing storm brewing inside. A series of blue marks began lighting up in a circular pattern around the orb, inching closer to the center.

His Water affinity had always been one of his highest. It started at 54 when Virya first performed the ritual. The number of lights continued to rise past its previous limit, slowing down when it got past 60, but still climbing higher.

64, 65, 66...

With a last flicker, the 68th mark began glowing. Kahali had been very generous with its blessing. A 14-point increase had been enough to make even Elijah curse his luck.

It was possible for affinities to grow on their own as he got older, but that only happened with the minor ones, usually below 10 points. Increasing his Water affinity naturally was as likely as gaining another blessing. Still, a one-in-a-million chance was better than zero. And with 24 Favor you never knew.

I'm not sure if I should wish to reach 69, but 70 would be great. A nice round number. Can you hear me, Kahali? Can't you spare a couple more points for your faithful servant?

There was no response. At least it proved the spirits didn't mind blasphemy, or he would have been smited long ago. Kai cut off his mana from the orb to make it stop growling.

With his crystal ball in hand, he walked downstairs. His family was the reason he brought it in the first place.

"What's that?" Kea looked curiously up from her chair.