

Chapter 234 - Just Kidding

That went better than expected.

A rhythmic tapping sounded from the kitchen. Kai sat on the couch, trying to ignore the gaze fixed on him. "I'm not going to disappear if you blink."

"Sorry, I had a weird day..." Flynn turned to his minced onion. "It's still strange seeing you here, in my house."

"All good. I can't fault you after vanishing into the Hidden Sanctuary for two years." He had been such a fool to think surviving in an unknown realm would be just another challenge. Zervathi had pressured him into an impossible decision, but it was his arrogance that made him readily accept.

Kai had yet to decide whether he regretted the decision. He wasn't blind to the upsides, though he would not return even for all the gold in the Republic.

His mind had already connected to the sword in his spatial closet when he caught himself. Caressing a blade for reassurance wouldn't scream mentally stable.

I'm safe here.

No beast would attack him in the living room. For the first time in two years, Hallowed Intuition was eerily silent. Even in case of attack, the clutter of enchantments around the house would give him ample time to respond. Kai realized the chopping had stopped and Flynn was gawking at him again.

What did I do now? Why do people keep staring?

"You mean you were trapped in a lesser dimension?"

"Oh, that. Yes." Kai let his arm hang over the back of the couch. "Though it's better if you don't go around telling people. The Republic was very touchy about the subject when I left. Also, I think you're burning something." He pointed to the smoke rising from the pan.

Flynn snapped back to turn off the stove, muttering something under his breath. "A pocket dimension... I thought of it, but it seemed too far-fetched to be true. Is that why they've been crowding around the Vastaire ruins? You now need special permission to visit any of the sites."

"Probably. That's where the passages between the realms were built, though Zervathi isn't going to let anyone through until he recovers his power."

"Zervathi?"

“The mighty god of the Hidden Sanctuary and annoying stuff.” Kai rolled his eyes with a dramatic voice. “A buzzing fairy who uses the fact he can’t lie to trick you into terrible deals.”

“You’re not joking?” Flynn completely gave up on the stove to stare at him.

“Why would I? He’s nothing special really, not for at least another couple centuries. He lost most of his power during his *torturous* imprisonment. He can never shut up about it.”

Flynn warily looked around him as if he expected to be smited. “I don’t think you should speak like that about a god. What if he hears you?”

“Hmm... why don’t we ask him? He’s listening right now. Say hi to the old snooper.” Kai waved a hand through his air. Instead of chuckling, Flynn went two shades paler, leaning against the kitchen counter for balance. “Hey, I was just kidding. I can tell when he’s looking since he blessed me.”

“Kai. Why don’t you go take a shower while I try to salvage our dinner? We can talk after we eat.” He pointed to a corridor with a strained smile. “It’s the first door on the right. You can use the clean towels on the shelf.”

“Okay.”

Hmm... I thought my joke was funny. Do I need to work on my humor too?

Apparently, talking to himself, beasts and minor divinities wasn’t enough to stave off the rust. The people on the streets had been plain rude, but he couldn’t tell what he had done wrong with Flynn.

Were social interactions always so hard? I should have kept Improvisation. Kai sighed.

He had been forced to abandon the skill for Space Magic during his first month. By the time he advanced to Yellow, there had been too many alluring options to pick a skill that wouldn’t help him survive or escape.

I just need a little training. Thankfully, I didn’t meet my family first. What am I even going to tell them?

Despite the thousands of reunions he had played out in his head, the thought of facing his mother and sisters filled him with fright. He’d much rather face a chasm crawler in close combat than meet his mom’s gaze.

Perhaps I should ask Flynn... He’s always been good at dealing with people.

No point in worrying now. Getting lost in his head had almost gotten him killed before he learned to focus on the present. The bathroom was small and clean. Glossy white tiles painted in blue geometric patterns, a fluffy carpet with a dancing crab, and most important of all, a *shower* installed over the tub.

“Spirits be blessed.” Kai drew a curtain over the small window and shed the cheap clothes bought in Eastwin.

The runework was simple and solid, with an actual heating enchantment in place. He couldn't remember the last time he showered. Water Magic was functional to keep him clean, but it wasn't relaxing.

Kai left his sea serpent sword leaning against the tub and abandoned himself to the flowing warm water. He scrubbed his body with a piece of scented soap, closing the plug to lie down. Makeshift basins and improvised fire runes couldn't replace the real thing. And not fearing an ambush in the back of his mind helped too.

It'll be fine.

He wished he was still small enough to let the warm water submerge him, but had to settle for his head while his legs dangled over the edge.

Most of the teens I saw weren't taller than me. It's him who's grown abnormally tall...

A double knock woke him from his trance. “Are you okay in there? Did you find everything you need?”

“I'm good!” Kai stood upright, splashing water all around. He hurried to close the faucet, the water had already built up to the edge of the tub.

“You aren't flooding my bathroom, right...?”

“No!” He opened the plug with his toe, directing all the water with a flick of his wrist. “Your crabby carpet is perfectly dry.”

“It was a gift.” Flynn sounded slightly defensive.

“They have good taste.” It was definitely a statement.

“Thanks... Dinner's almost ready.”

“I'll be out in a minute.” Every drop of water flowed off him into the tub as Kai stepped onto the dancing crab. No point wasting a towel.

Smelling his clothes, he cast a sphere of soapy water and threw them in. His high Perception made scents difficult to ignore, especially on himself. It wasn't the same as a proper wash, but he had only worn them for a couple of days.

He scrubbed a hand through his messy hair and looked into the mirror. His reflection peered back with the sharp clarity a bowl of water couldn't match.

Tanned skin and locks bleached by the strange sunstar of the Hidden Sanctuary. A diet of mostly beast meat had turned him into a slightly buff teenager. He truly didn't understand

why people kept staring. Sure, he had a few pale scars, but most were hidden underneath his shirt.

His pale facial hair remained in that awkward limbo between childhood and adulthood. On a whim, he decided to shave it off with a blade of water. He had worried it would become too much of a bother to take care when he was trapped.

Water is definitely the most versatile element.

Most natives in the archipelago didn't grow a full beard. He didn't remember his dad doing so either, though that might have been a choice. Minor details like that kept slipping his memories.

Kai retrieved his clothes. He was about to walk out when he noticed a casket concealed beneath the bathroom tiles. The runes easily unraveled under his gaze. He had almost missed it amidst the random assortment of enchantments.

That's quite a bit of gold. He must be doing well for himself.

Kai strolled into the living room. The table had already been set with two plates of roasted vegetables and fish in a purple sauce. Flynn was twirling a knife between his fingers and staring at the kitchen cupboard with a deep frown.

"Welcome back to civilization." He turned to give him a once-over. "I had less stored than I remembered. It's not my finest creation, but it should be edible."

"It looks great." After being forced to eat raw meat and gnarly tubers, anything cooked was a win in his book. The zesty sauce made him moan in appreciation. "You've gotten better."

"It's one of my skillless talents." Flynn gave him a long look before glancing behind him. "Wait to try something actually decent..."

Did I say something weird?

Kai savored every bite.

"How did your table manners improve after being stranded in the wild?" His friend chuckled. "Your mom will be happy after she finishes strangling you."

That's... something.

Kai dabbed his face with a napkin and took a sip of water. "It amused me to act snobbish while I ate burnt drake thighs in a cave." One of the many small habits he did to keep his sanity.

Flynn burst into a quick laugh before he awkwardly covered his mouth. "Oh, you're not joking. How was this Hidden Sanctuary exactly? The name is nice."

Pretty and twice as deadly.

“Mhmm... It’s kind of like a huge island, maybe three times the size of Yanlun or so.” He waved his fork to paint the picture. “There are a few smaller isles, but you want to stay away from the deeper waters. Most areas have mana dense enough to breed yellow beasts at maturity, though you can also find sparser pockets.”

“That sounds... like a death trap.”

“Yeah, Zervathi certainly hoped so at one point. That stingy bug.” Kai chuckled. “The first weeks were pretty rough, though it wasn’t *that* bad afterward. Hallowed Intuition warned me about the routes to take and places to avoid, the rest simply was a matter of running fast enough to not get eaten.”

One problem had been the giant spider guarding the resources he needed to escape. From the gaping look Flynn gave him, he decided to keep that story for another time.

“What about you? You must have stashed at least a dozen golds in your bathroom.” Kai tried to redirect the conversation towards a safe topic.

Flynn’s smile strained while he kept looking behind him. “You looked through my things?”

“No, of course not. I just counted through the cloaking wards. Like briefly glancing as I was passing.”

It’s not the same thing, right?

“Those are the best wards I have. They’re worth half the contents of that safe.”

“They *are*?” He had spent a significant chunk of the past two years decoding arcane enhancements from millennia ago. His mind already cracked runes before his brain caught up. “I almost *did* miss them. They might have worked better if they were arranged properly, the person who installed— Did you do it yourself...?”

Why am I so bad at this?

“Who else would you trust to secure your house?”

“Well... it’s not terrible for an amateur.”

“You don’t need to lie to me.” Flynn grimaced. “You’re already being too nice, it’s weirding me out.”

“I was always nice.” Kai stabbed a carrot with his fork. He might have just been a tad more mindful since it was their first meeting in years.

His friend gave him a disbelieving stare. “You were... *understanding* if I pointed something out, usually kind where it mattered. But you were as nice as a cat thrown into the sea on most days.”

Ouch! I remember no such thing.

“Not to say I *actually* mind it.” Flynn hurried to add. “It’s good you’ve grown more than just in height.”

“You’re still taller...” Kai pointed out, still a bit sour.

“Measuring yourself against perfection will lead to disappointment.” Flynn flashed his old smug grin and winked. “You’re the second-best thing. One day you might even reach some of my greatness. Let’s say about a third, half if you follow my teachings.”

Kai rolled his eyes with an unwilling smile, glad his friend hadn’t lost his foolishness. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

While washing the dishes, they idly chatted about the changes in High Harbor. His family and Lou were fine as well. Flynn kept glancing over his shoulder, perhaps a new mannerism he picked up.

Sitting on the couch, the conversation fell back to the Sanctuary. Kai had prepared a speech to explain how he ended up trapped there and why it had taken two years to come back. What he hadn’t predicted was the flood of questions that quickly hijacked his preparations.

“The Guide assured me that Zervathi couldn’t lie. I was a bit naive, I know, but I couldn’t let a horde of yellow beasts swarm into the archipelago when I got there.” At least on that, he had confirmed the danger had been real. “Any other questions?”

“Quite a few, but you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t mind. Ask me anything.”

“You’ve spent years alone in what doesn’t sound like a very nice place.” Flynn gave him a worried look, ready to pull him into another hug. “You’re allowed to not be okay.”

“But I’m fine.” Kai beamed. “I’ve survived. And I told you it wasn’t all that bad.”

Flynn opened then closed his mouth, swallowing whatever disagreement he had. “I do have another question.” His eyes wandered behind him again. “It’s not exactly related, and it might seem a little odd...”

“The only sapient being I’ve chatted with for the last two years was a narcissistic divinity with a god complex. I know how it sounds, but I bet the Seven Moons combined can’t match his self-obsessed rants. Point is, you could grow a second head and it would be less strange than the things I had to endure.”

His friend bobbed his head, hugging a pillow. "Have you seen a cat?"

"A cat?"

"Yes, a feline with silver fur and violet eyes. They could also be teal or green. I don't know, it changes every time I look. It has been haunting me all night and stealing my food. One moment it's there and the next time I blink, it's gone again."

So that's where you were. That pest's always causing mischief.

"Right there!" Flynn stood up. His finger pointed behind him with wide eyes. "I'm not crazy."

Kai turned to see Hobbes sprawled on a carpet, head between his paws to groom his furry butt. He raised his royal eyes on them, one yellow and the other blue, too intelligent for a common animal. Deeming them unworthy, he returned to his business with unhurried practice.

"Tell me you're also seeing it." Flynn pleaded, grabbing his arm.

"I— You mean the carpet, right?" Kai cocked his head. "I guess the pattern could resemble a cat."

It'd be a crime to waste such a perfect opportunity. And he did say I was being too nice...

"There is a live, breathing cat there." His friends sounded a little frantic, rousing a sliver of guilt and pity. The devious beast had once also made him believe he was imagining things.

"You must be seeing it too." The second Flynn turned to glance at him, Hobbes blinked away in a silver flash. "No, no. I saw it! It was right there. I've also touched it. I'm not imagining things, it's real."

Damn cat, you made me wait three months to touch your fur. How's that fair?

"It's okay." Kai patted his shoulder with a straight face and helped him sit down. "I've heard that severe stress can cause hallucinations. Have you been sleeping enough? Consumed any unknown substances?"

Flynn shook his head. "I— I don't think I did—"

A silver cat blinked in Kai's lap, lazily stretching his limbs. "Meow."

He must be in a merciful mood, or got bored.

"There! Again, how can you not see it?"

"Oh, you meant Hobbes," Kai widened his eyes in dramatic realization and scratched the diabolical furball behind his ears.