

Chapter 371 - Lucenti Kit

Kai stared at his friends' complicit grins. A squeaky chirp cut the lingering haze of Elijah's departure. His eyes itched from rubbing; not nearly enough to mistake the bundled blanket in Flynn's arms.

A pink, blind noodle of a body with little nubs for paws and a stubby tail wriggled among the folds. The kit squeaked its displeasure at the sudden draft. It glowed no brighter than a firefly in Raelion's dense essence. Even so small, the presence of a natural-born beast was unmistakable.

"Isn't it adorable?" Rain had somehow moved beside him, shaking a teal paper bag filled with purplish leaf-looking bits. "Petal chips?"

"...thanks." Kai picked one and chewed, unable to say how it tasted, only the sticky sugar on his fingers. Inwardly, he groaned.

I just left them unsupervised for half a day.

The opinionated noodle gave a reedy peep as Flynn set the wool bundle on the kitchen table with anxious care. Rewrapping the blanket, he petted the whisper-fine peach fuzz. The kit nosed at his hand with clumsy insistence, mouth open in search. "Uhm... I think it might be hungry again."

Rain dashed back, switching the teal bag for a small glass dropper and a flask of warmed milk. Mana swirled inside the glass. "Here."

"Did you check the temperature?"

"I stored it right after heating it earlier."

Flynn tested a drop on his wrist and nodded. "Here you go, lil bud."

The kit fit inside his palm. Its pea head looked comically large on the tiny body. Soft a mip-mip quietened the squeaks as it gurgled with earnest effort, drop by drop. Its tail gave a wobbly twitch with each swallow.

"Sorry, we didn't mean to hijack your birthday. Happy fifteen!" Flynn offered him an apologetic smile, still focused on not spilling a drop. "We have to feed it every three hours for the next couple of weeks. It should get easier after. And I've also prepared a present for you!"

"It's my fault, actually." Rain looked away from the feeding noodle and dipped his head. "I wanted to keep it a surprise. It was too late to delay once I found out it fell on your name day."

Kai scrubbed a hand over his face. "That's fine. You don't need to apologize. I wasn't expecting a party or gifts." He couldn't say he didn't enjoy them, but, to his own mild surprise, he genuinely didn't care. When he'd rolled out of bed this morning, he'd thought it an ordinary day; anything beyond a casual *happy birthday* already counted as a bonus.

Was I the only one who forgot the date?

Regardless, a larger issue occupied his mind—a tiny, gurgling, yipping issue. The kit looked much like many baby mammals: sealed eyes and hairless except for the patchy fuzz, still more ugly than cute.

Even if mana does weird stuff with physiology, it can't be more than a couple weeks old. Where did they find it?

Kai considered himself decently learned in zoology, though his knowledge skewed toward tracking and hunting adult beasts rather than identifying newborns. Kits weren't usually found lying around—much less awakened ones. From the tip of its poking fangs as it fed, it must be a small carnivore species, with a long body in proportion to its stubby legs.

Please, don't tell me...

A glance at his beaming friends provided the answer. His mouth opened and closed, words and clues falling into place.

Why am I even surprised? Of course, Rain picked the cute, fuzzy animal...

Stifling the urge to smack his own face, Kai sighed. *Surely*, he would have anticipated this if Elijah hadn't broken into his life. And now, the butler had left for Spirits knew how long...

Time for damage control. What do they even plan to do with it?

Kai sank into a chair. "You chose the Lucenti Kit from the Trials' reward?"

Rain snapped his head up, a little abashed. "Hmm, yeah... I didn't need any of the other rewards. And it looked so tiny. I couldn't just leave it there alone."

Naturally...

"Have you thought about what you'll do with it *after*?" He tightened his tone to avoid sounding patronizing. If the academy placed the kit in the top five prizes, it couldn't be an ordinary species. "It's a beast reared for taming or bonding. It may look helpless now, but it'll grow. You can't keep it around without a dedicated skill. Unless you plan to bond with it?"

"I did consider it." Rain drummed his fingers, somehow looking even more guilty. "Even if I were free to take a familiar, I couldn't choose a landbound beast. So I gave it to Flynn."

You... what?

His gaze whipped to his suspiciously quiet friend.

The kit had gotten its belly full and curled up in Flynn's palm with a soft peep, leaving him no excuse for distraction. "Uhm, well... I also only found out today."

And you couldn't tell him it was a bad idea?

One breath. Two breaths. Kai bit his cheek. Despite looking like a rushed decision, was it really his place to criticize them?

And it might not be necessarily bad if this is what he wants. They must have talked through it. No way Rain just picked it because it looked cute?

Kai axed that line of thought; no point in mulling on past events, anyway. Better if he focused on the future. "Uhm, so... what kind of beast is it?" He scratched his forehead with a thumb. "A lucenti kit should be like a weasel or ferret?"

"Closer to a stoat," Flynn said, leaping at the chance to switch topics. "At least, that's the unawakened breed it resembles most. Its eyes should open in the next two weeks. The academy said they'll provide all food and essentials for this academic year. You should see the grounds and facilities they have available for tame beasts. Most students' companions stay there. Some are truly enormous." He tucked in the snoring noodle. "This little guy should become quite smart and mischievous, but it shouldn't grow too large."

"It'll also change its coat each winter. Isn't that incredible?" Rain placed a shell with a sound ward over the kit, voice high in excitement. "I knew land dwellers were diverse, but I didn't realize there were so many curious species. I'll show you. We stopped to borrow the recommended texts."

A stack of books thudded onto the table: general guides on beast rearing, breeding, handling and bonding, topped by a weathered encyclopedia on awakened mustelids.

"The academy refused to tell me how they got the kit. They couldn't even remember when the last one passed through Raelion, so there was no manual specific for them." Flipping pages, his scowl eased as he found an illustration. Time had yellowed the paper and muted the colors, but not the details: a pure-white stoat peeked from the fresh snow. It had tiny rosy paws, a button nose and a gold-tipped tail curled behind it. "This is their ermine coat in winter. We'll have to wait a year to see it. I wonder how it feels to touch..."

Kai nodded along, his attention drawn to the written text.

Lucenti Mustela Erminea, also known as Lucenti Stoats or Ermine, were officially recorded in the Index Bestiaries in the summer of 3792 AL, after the expansion eastward across the Goglin Woodland led by Consul Iudicious Almeria against the belligerent orcish hordes...

Kai skimmed over the paragraphs of historical references and patriotic drivel. The author looked more fond of reconstructing past accounts than the living beasts.

...stealthy ambush hunters, a notoriously challenging prey to all but the most skilled Green trackers. Adults mature at the peak of Yellow, though specimens have been recorded to cross the threshold...

...Lucenti Ermines were believed extinct in the Merian territories after their pelts became highly prized among the Great Houses as symbols of Moonblessed purity during the Immaculate Century.

...In the spring of 4776 AL, nearly four centuries after the last recorded sighting, a surviving population was discovered within the inland Mirror Moor. The hedge researchers noted the innate predispositions and abilities of this population appeared strengthened, though these findings have not been substantiated by scholars of high blood. Thus, theories of long-term adaptation and unconfirmed mutations remain uncertain.

...main traits include exceptional Perception and stealth magic, an innate Light affinity and territorial nature, known to hold grudges against specific sapients who wronged them for decades—

The page flipped before he could finish reading.

Just as I was getting to the good part...

Kai swallowed his protests. From the authors' tone, the old tome might not even be that reliable. His friends' race to share every useful and random fact about the kit's *bright* future distracted him. Luckily, only half of Rain's reasons involved how soft and adorable the stoat would eventually look. Flynn seemed more overwhelmed, though still excited.

For once, it's actually not my problem to figure out. Oh... Hey there, bud.

"Mrow." Hobbes blinked on the table, silver coat fluffed up, tail swishing the air. His violet eyes traveled between the bundled blanket and his chief dispenser of treats.

Got off your nap to say hi? Not like we took a pivotal specialization less than an hour ago.

Kai ran his fingers down his familiar's back, a knot of thrumming emotions and sensations. The milestone had changed something, though he couldn't quite define it. Subtle yet deep. Almost their bond had gained a new taste.

Wait, is he jealous?

"Are you hungry, bud?" Flynn brought Hobbes onto his lap as the cat stalked across the table. "I bought this for you." He held out a stick of salted salmon. "What do you say? Is it to your liking?"

Hobbes turned away with a sniff, never interrupting his dirty look at the intruding kit. His principled fasting lasted a full five seconds before his nose twitched. With a lick at his paw, he devoured the offering and it in three begrudging nibbles. Then, he ate a second one for good measure.

“Meow.”

Flynn scratched his neck, inviting a reluctant purr. “I’ll make sure to buy more. This little guy here is our new addition. I still haven’t picked a name. Maybe you could help. Got any ideas?”

His whiskers whipped away from the kit with a disinterested growl, and he twisted to guide the scratches in the right spot.

“Who else could watch over and teach your little brother half as well?” Flynn produced another fish stick. “You’re the only one I can count on for this.”

“Meow...” Well, Hobbes couldn’t deny that. None of the humans could be relied upon. He’d always been too magnanimous for his own good.

He does have a—

A sharp pain snapped him back. Kai recoiled from the flood of sensations brushing his mind like a rubber band whipped taut. Hissing, he glanced at the angry red spot on his forearm.

Did Rain just pinch me?

His roommate innocently hummed. “You looked lost, craning your neck like Hobbes.”

“I what...? Hmm... thanks.” Kai rubbed his arm, unsure what exactly had happened. He watched Flynn coax Hobbes from a grumpy cat into a responsible older brother, keeping his mind carefully separated from the bond.

I’ll have to test this.

“Thank you, bud.” Flynn smiled as the furrball fell to the flattery and snacks. “I don’t know how I’d do without you.”

Who’s playing who anymore? They have each other wrapped around their little finger and paw. Wait... am I third-wheeling?

“Meow.” Hobbes settled on the table, curiously peeking at the snoring kit. Idle glimpses of the noddle bolting at his command trickled through his thoughts.

Spirits save us. What have you done?

“We should probably go meet Valela.” Flynn stood up, stretching his back. “She’ll begin wondering if Mat got kidnapped again if we take longer.”

Ah. Ah. Don’t you start... no, wait! How do you even know? Do you actually understand Hobbes?

Glaring at his chuckles, Kai grabbed his coat from the rack. Another matter to investigate for later. "I'm ready to go."

"I need to change first. Back in a minute." Rain rushed to his room, scarf winding in his trail.

Doesn't he keep clothes in his bracelet? Or does his wardrobe no longer fit inside? Hmm... I'm almost scared to see his room.

Flynn set the bundled kit in an empty bowl, ripping a page from a journal to scribble a note for Rob or Alden. "Do you mind if I leave the kit here for a couple hours? It'll probably sleep better. I'll come back to feed it if we run long."

"Sure... If you are certain."

"I am, Hobbes says he got it." Flynn petted the vain fluffball. "The little guy couldn't be in better paws."

That's what worries me.

Kai threw a rueful glance at Hobbes, but didn't delve into the bond. The kit could likely survive a couple days alone. Despite the names, natural-born beasts weren't like mana-less species or even awakened animals.

What an odd day...

"Mat." Flynn balanced on his feet. "Again, I'm sorry for taking over your birthday. I had this whole day planned, then, well... stuff happened, and I couldn't delay the kit."

"That's fine. I honestly don't need anything."

"Yes, you told me so." He squinted down at him. "You had forgotten about the date, hadn't you?"

Kai snorted and turned toward the door, refusing to dignify the jab with an answer. "Don't be ridiculous. I learned Mnemonic Mastery. I just didn't consider it important."

"Right... so I imagine you don't want your present?"

"Now, how did you jump to that? I'm not so rude as to refuse a gift when you've already prepared it." Kai scanned Flynn's pockets for clues. "Where did you put it?"

"I'll give it to you later. Valela helped with most of it, so it's from the both of us. Originally, she wanted to buy you a wand. I hope you don't mind that I convinced her that was a terrible idea."

"A wand?" His eyebrows shot up. He had indeed planned to get one before Elijah handed him a magic sword. They placed notoriously among the expensive enchanted tools. A crazy

gift idea. He'd still have had to have bought a better one himself, and if Valela matched his price range... Spirits, better not to even imagine it. "I'm actually relieved you stopped her."

"Any day, man." Flynn grinned. "But if she wants to splurge a bit on *my* next birthday, don't feel obliged to repay the favor. Unlike you, I'm dirt poor. Uhm, do you know how high the bounty on your identity has reached? It hit three figures. The fancy bloods are nuts."

More great news.

"I'd rather live as if they don't exist."

"Wise choice. Why should we consider them? But speaking of terrifyingly crazy people, does your master want..."

Kai gave a curt shake. "Elijah has left."

"Oh... sorry? Why— I mean, when did he leave?"

"Just before you arrived. He delayed for my birthday."

"Oh... that was nice of him. Are you alright?"

"It's my birthday and I'm getting a present." Kai shrugged with a smile. "I'm great."

"Mat, you know..."

"Jokes aside, I'm really okay. It was way better than last time. I'll meet him again."

"I'm happy for you then. Don't hate me, but I hope he doesn't reappear *too* soon. I never thought I'd become paranoid checking my own shadow." His shoulder clenched with a shiver. "All these years, I thought I was exaggerating when I teased you about your *mysterious master*. But I completely undershot it."

"I'm ready, guys!" Rain came bounding back, wrapped in a green squirrel scarf and matched floppy hat. In his arms, he held a second red-and-white checkered scarf, a sunny yellow sweater and an orange pompom hat. "Sorry, I took a bit to decide."

Kai looked him over. "Are you going to wear all those?"

"Of course not. These ones are for you."

"Why would I wear—"

"Did you forget you're still a wanted student? We can't let you get jumped by those leeches. Any risk is too high." Rain held up the outfit with a far too pleased, pointy smile.

"I think you'll look great," Flynn added with a chuckle. "No one will suspect you of being the infamous first rank. C'mon, you don't want to keep Valela waiting, do you?"

Kai edged a step back toward the door. "What if I ruin them again like last time?"

"No big deal. I bought these for you." Rain practically glowed. "I've always wanted to have friends I could offer birthday gifts to. I'll give you the others later."

Others? How many did you buy?

Kai briefly considered making a break for it, but the meddling rank-hunters still blockaded the dorm atrium. With a heavy exhale, he snatched the clothes from Rain's hands.

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"Please don't ask." Kai stiffly lowered himself onto the cushion of the carved chair. They'd reserved a private booth on the third floor of the Wing Aurea—a room and table with silver cutlery large enough to host three times their number.

Valela discreetly leaned to the side to look him over. Her lips quivered with a suppressed smile. "Happy fifteenth. You look very... bright."

"Doesn't he? Positively sunny," Flynn agreed, clapping his shoulder and doing a poor job of hiding his guffaws. Beside him, Rain rested an elbow on the table. His hand covered his smile in a flimsy pretense of innocence.

Kai tore off the scarf and pompom hat with a glare before turning back to Valela. His nose caught a wisp of lavender mingled with the clean scent of sea air. "Thank you." He ran a hand, trying to tame his spiky hair. "I'd say you look good too. But you always do."

"I..." Valela smoothed the cuff of her blue sleeve, flushing. "Thank—"

"Ugh!" Flynn suddenly hacked like he was choking and reached for the crystal water pitcher. "Sorry. Swallowed wrong. Don't mind me. I'm good."

Rain lowered his face into *both* palms to cover his expression.

"You're too nice," Valela mumbled. She twirled a loose auburn lock before hastily reaching for the paper menu. "Please, order anything you want. If Lys asks you, we spent the whole day at the library. The meal is on me. I had more planned for your birthday, but students are still looking for you. So..."

When did she start planning if she had to redraw them?

"This is already plenty enough." Kai stopped her rambling with a smile. The only three people who knew his real identity and his full of professionally cooked food? What else could he ask for his birthday?

Amidst food and lively chatter, time slipped by, plates emptied, and warmth settled into the booth. Eventually, it was time to unwrap his last present.

"Are you sure we shouldn't wait for Flynn to return?" Valela asked. "He handled most of it."

"You know, he said the same thing about you. Either way, he won't mind," Kai said. After an hour of subtle teasing, Flynn and Rain had 'gone to the bathroom' and vanished, leaving them alone. "So what is it?"

"It's really nothing much." Valela reached into her spatial purse and set two metal cubes on the table, interlocking lines and arrays layered over every face.

Huh? Where have I seen these before?

"Are those...?" Kai picked one up to study the runes. His thumb pressed a raised square. With a click, crisp voices filled the booth.

"—sure this is working? I can't see any lights..."

"Honey, I think it's recording," Mouli's low rumble interrupted.

"Hey, Kai. It's Mom. You probably recognize my voice." She giggled. "How are you doing, sweetheart? We have received your letters. I hope you've not been skipping any meals—"

"Mom, he's not a child anymore."

"Happy birthday, big brother!"

"Kien, sweetie. I told you to wait, so we could say together—"

Alana's and Ele's voices intertwined with Kien's high-pitched protests.

Kai tapped the cube to stop the playback. His throat tightened. After months without hearing their voices, he found himself strangely emotional. "Thank you. It's a very thoughtful gift," he managed, taking a sip of water. His gaze fell to the second cube. "And that one?"

"That message is from Kea."

"Kea? How did you convince her to record one?" Kai cleared his throat. "I'm lucky if I get her to write more than six lines in her letters."

"That one was really all Flynn," Valela laughed. "I just helped get it delivered in time. Maybe I should go find those two. I don't want to intrude—"

“You can stay.” Kai lifted a hand to stop her. “We can listen to them together. If you don’t mind, I mean.”

Valela settled back in her chair. “I think I’d like that.”