

## Chapter 94 - Three Years

Peering out of the jungle's reach, Kai smiled jovially at the town in the distance. The smell of freshly dug earth greeted him on the cultivated land that stretched before him. With winter over, a swarm of men and women reversed onto the fields like busy ants.

"How're you doing, Old Ven? Any news?"

"I ain't dead yet! Been two years since that charlatan said I'd be joining the ancestors. And I'm still waiting," he scowled at him resting his hands on his hoe. "What's got 'ou in such a chipper mood?"

That was Old Ven's version of a heartfelt welcome. It wasn't a case he worked so far out close to the jungle edge. The path from the estate ended in his field, numerous visits had led them to become acquainted with each other.

"Anything new in *Sylspring*?"

"Same ol'. Streets are fillin' with loitering fools, crooks and loafers."

*Tourists, merchants and everyone else save Old Ven's fourth and seventh nieces.* Kai translated in his head.

"Out here's the only place I can get some peace. They shun an honest day of work like the plague."

"Nothing new from the Republic?"

“Nah. The only time they show their faces is to collect taxes. They never forget those.” He spit on the ground.

Old Ven might not be the most charming geezer, but he was an honest man. And it was the best way to get a heads-up on anything new in town.

“Thanks. Do you need any more potions for your health?”

“Just make sure to walk on my turnips over there.” He pointed to a patch of ground. “These mainland’s crops are all weird. They could use some of your luck.”

There were two reasons why Old Ven tolerated him: the briefness of his visits and his *luck*. Kai infused some of his Nature mana in the turnips as he passed by. He still wasn’t sure if the geezer knew what he was doing. Old Ven never asked anything. The only thing that mattered to him was having a more bountiful harvest than the other farmers.

Kai waved at the few farmers he was familiar with and made his way to the gate. The enforcer on duty did a second take but didn’t stop him. After the selection, he kept a low profile, never using the governor’s recommendation or showing off his skills. Even if some people made that particularly hard.

“How's going, kid?”

Kai endured in silence as Captain Zerith ruffled his hair.

*How can he always know when I arrive!*

Kai had hoped, with all the young talents flocking from the surrounding towns, the man would lose interest. No such luck thus far.

“You grew a couple of fingers since the last time I saw you.” He squared him out. “I guess you're nearing that age...”

*No, not him too.*

He already had one embarrassing conversation with Dora. Then Virya gave him a book on the human body, and Elijah offered to answer questions *on his own volition*.

As usual, reality rudely refused his wishes. “You’re growing up. If you notice some changes in your body, know that’s perfectly normal.”

“I’m doing fine. Thank you.”

“Of course, you are,” Zerith patted him on the back. “Going through a rebellious phase is perfectly normal.”

Kai clenched his fists. Worse yet, they were right. The signs were *all* there, he was going through puberty, for a second time.

“If you have any questions, you can come ask me.”

*I’d rather drown.*

“I will,” Kai said, hoping to get rid of him.

“How’s your training proceeding? You must be pretty close to the second stage of Orange. I won’t ask how close, but let’s say... less than ten thousand XP?”

His fingers unconsciously moved to the metal pendant that masked his grade. Virya told him the amulet wasn't infallible, so he better avoid people with powerful scanning skills. He was working on that part.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human ★★** – 153,845/175,000 XP
- Profession: **None**

#### **Body stats**

- Strength: **12>15**
- Dexterity: **15>18**
- Constitution: **18>20**
- Mind: **19>22**
- Spirit: **21>25**
- Perception: **16>17**
- Favor: **22>24**

“Something like that.” The amulet should give him a sign if Zerith tried to use a skill on him. He was safe for now, but antagonizing the captain of the local garrison would be a terrible idea.

*Spirits grant me patience.*

“You're approaching the next enhancement with a good pace.”

“When did *you* reach it?” Kai asked. Since the man was determined to chatter on, he might as well satisfy his curiosity.

“I was about your age, but I was born at the peak of Red.” The captain eyed the bag on his back. “Is another batch of potions in there? Heard you're making good money. Here to sell some more?”

"I'm visiting family." Kai considered lying, but Zerith would know before the hour was over.

"Oh, they came to Sylspring? Why didn't you tell me? I could have given them a tour. Trust me, I know all the best places in town."

"I must have forgotten."

"Well, no problem. You can introduce me now. I can help you with the address. It seems we've been walking in circles."

*What a strange coincidence...*

Kai knew Zerith wasn't so dense to miss the obvious hints. The captain knew exactly what was going on and enjoyed messing with him.

"Your family must be the couple with two daughters who bought a house a few months ago. They live near the market in one of the nicer areas." Zerith scratched his beard, "I think your older sister works as a fisher and the young one hunts in the jungle, right?"

Kai stopped in his tracks. The description and place left little doubts, but...

"My mother is single."

"Really? I thought I saw her with a man. Almost as high as me, well built, a stern look..."

Kai let out a sigh of relief, "That's just Uncle Moui. My younger sister has an apprenticeship under him. He's just a friend."

“Oh, right. I must have been mistaken. Anyway, catch you around.” Captain Zerith left, just like that.

*That's weird.*

That man had always been an odd one. Kai had no time to worry about that now. He hadn't been able to help his family move since Elijah had refused to give him time off for the last few months. Worse yet, Alana staunchly refused to accept more than five silvers for the house, insisting it wasn't necessary. He needed to make sure they didn't end up buying some dinghy place out of misplaced pride.

Moving to Sylspring had been his idea after all. Better climate, higher wages, nicer people, and the mail didn't take months to arrive. The idea seemed worth throwing out there and his mother had been surprisingly easy to convince. Kea also jumped on the proposal when she heard she could still access the Veeryd jungle from Sylspring.

I probably wasn't the only one who disliked Greenside.

Organizing the move took the most times. They sold what they couldn't bring in Greenside and scouted the neighborhoods here. Moui joined in at some point. It made things easier since Kea wouldn't have to look for a new teacher or delay the move.

The only thing Moui cared about was hunting. It hadn't been *that* surprising he joined in. Sylspring offered new stretches of jungle to explore and maybe he had gotten tired of Greenside. Yes, that was probably it.

*This should be the place.*

A two-story wooden house rose in front of him. Pale blue walls with a white pearl door, and windows with glass panes. It looked pristine, charming and damn expensive. Not the most lavish building around, but still way beyond what any family from Greenside could afford. He

had considered buying a house himself, and property didn't come cheap in Sylspring, especially in the nicer areas.

Kai checked the address again. There were no mistakes.

*How can they afford this? Mom said Ele was doing fine, but if she refused my money, she wouldn't have taken hers. And this place requires you to do more than fine.*

Before his mind could start weaving together ridiculous stories, Kai knocked on the door. There had to be a logical explanation. Maybe they sent him the wrong address.

Steps echoed from inside, the door opened and Alana threw her arms around him, crushing him in a hug.

"I missed you so much, sweetie."

Kai returned the hug and let himself be dragged inside.

"How was the journey? Everything okay at the estate? Look at you, you're growing so fast."

After answering a myriad of questions and reassuring her he had eaten enough, Kai snooped around the house. It was even nicer inside, with dark wood furniture and colorful ornaments. Kai could recognize some of them from their place in Greenside, but few were truly familiar.

The shimmering green shell Ele found, Kea's first bow, and the painting of Whiteshore he gifted them two years prior.

"Mom, how can we afford all of this?"

“We got a bargain,” Alana waved him off. “Come, I’ll show you your room. I will put all your things there. Why don’t you change and come tell me of your progress? Everyone should be back soon.”

Swept in her excitement and joy, Kai pushed his doubts down.

*Maybe they truly got lucky.*

The rooms were on the second floor. His was bare except for Rellan’s books which had been neatly placed on a bookshelf. Kai hardly had time to settle in when Alana called him. More voices filled the house.

Downstairs, Alana sat at the kitchen table with Kea and Moui.

“How have you been, Kai?” The hunter stood up. His sister gave him a nod and a strange grin.

“Good. How was *your* move, Uncle?”

A weird tension swept the room. Moui sat back down beside his mother.

“Kai,” Alana began. From her first word, the truth hit him in the gut. The world faded in the background. His mom continued talking, and the hunter joined in.

At some point, he must have sat down, gazing emptily. Kea was smiling brightly at his face.

The rational part of him kept insisting it was fine. His mother was still young, and Moui was a nice guy. They seemed happy together. He should be glad for them.



And yet, he couldn't. He felt betrayed, blindsided. The undeniable sign had moved on from his dad.

"I need a moment." Kai walked out of the house, hunching his shoulders.

*I'm such an idiot.*

Even if he spent very little time at home in the last few years, the signs had all been there. The smiles, the shared glances. Each time he came back, Moui was at their house. He justified that with his role as Kea's teacher, only now he realized how ridiculous that sounded.

Kai wandered aimlessly through the crowded streets, trying to make sense of his thoughts and emotions. Eventually, he found his way to the sea, away from the cramped docks. Sparse people around.

"How are you doing, Kai? Still hanging on?"

Eleni sat down on the sand beside him. Long hair tied in a braid and two pearls earrings. At seventeen, six years older than him, she was a grown woman by the archipelago standards.

"How did you find me?"

His sister laughed, "You're more predictable than you think. It wasn't all that hard."

Kai turned back to the waves gently crashing on shore. "There's going to be low tide."

“Yep. I was about to go scour the seas when I heard you had arrived and run away from home. Mom and Moui are quite worried.”

“I needed some time to think.” Kai rested his head on his knees. “How long?”

“How long... have they been together?”

“Yes.”

“Mhmm... Mom told us about a year ago, but I suspected it for some time.”

*That's...*

“Why did nobody tell me when I last visited?” Betrayal burned in his thoughts.

“Mom didn't want to distract you from your training.”

Kai gave her a long look. “I could have handled it.”

“Well, look where we are,” Ele replied with a similar glance, pointing out the obvious. “I think she was afraid of how you'd react.”

“Still, she told you and Kea.”

“It's not the same thing. She couldn't have kept the ruse up for much longer with us living together.”

*And I was not...*

Kai finally found what was bothering him so much. It wasn't their relationship, and it wasn't that sense of betrayal. Change was never easy, but he could deal with it. It was guilt. His mother and Moui had been together for long enough to move and buy a house together. Alana wasn't someone with last-moment whims. They must have planned and discussed it for months, all the while they hadn't told him.

He hadn't been there.

Sure, he visited once in a while and sent letters, but he couldn't lie. He had put his training and his goals before anything. Was it a surprise they didn't treat him the same, when he spent hardly a month with them in the last three years? His family was getting distant and the fault was his.

"Let's go home before mom gets worried." Ele offered him a hand.

"Do I have to? Tell them I went to live with the fishes."

"Come on, little brother. Waiting it's not going to make it any easier."

Kai reluctantly stood up. How was he going to show his face after he ran off like that?

"How did you and Kea react when she told you?"

Ele gave him a knowing smile, "Kea ran off into the jungle for two days. Mom was about to ask the *enforcers* for help."

*Yep, it's already better.*

“And that’s not all,” Ele whispered. “The month after that, Kea tried to *accidentally* shoot him with an arrow three times.”

“Really?”

Ele nodded. “He easily dodged them, and Kea probably knew. But yes, she really did.”

*I can feel the shame flowing away.*

With a lighter heart, they headed home. “What about you, old sis?”

“What about me?”

“Were you not upset even for a moment when mom told you?”

“No, someone like Mom couldn’t stay alone forever and Moui makes her happy.” Then she hurried to add. “But I saw the signs early. So maybe that’s because I had more time to prepare.”

*Spirits, she’s a saint.*

“How are you able to do that? To be so good with everybody.”

“I’m not perfect. I just got an easy win with you and Kea,” she laughed. “But if you really want to know, it starts with listening and watching what other people do. Then you add a lot of effort and patience.”

*Is this how Kea feels with me? I'll never be the best son. It's not even a contest.*

They were two blocks away when Moui found them first. Ele gave him an encouraging glance. And then one to Moui.

“Kai, I just want you to know that—” The hunter started what looked like a rehearsed speech.

“It's fine, *Uncle*. I get it. Just don't expect me to call you dad.” Kai said, walking past him.