

## Chapter 105 - The Weight of Choice

“A very long time,” Kai evaded his mother's question with a grin. “Can we talk about it downstairs?” They were standing in the middle of the hallway.

“Oh, silly me. Let's go have breakfast, you must be hungry after the journey.”

Kai let his mother drag him downstairs. Kea and Moui were already in the kitchen, while Ele had gone out early to take advantage of the low tide.

“Don't wait for me,” Kai said, seeing they weren't eating.

His sister didn't need to be told twice, she bit on a slice of hard bread covered with mango jam. Her eyes watched him with a hint of curiosity, but not enough to delay her breakfast.

Kai could see the same questions written on Alana's face. She knew something was up.

“Do you want me anything else? I didn't expect you to come back so soon, or I'd have bought more.”

“This is more than fine, mom.”

His mother seemed too accommodating. When he showed up without notice, Alana never failed to make him reprimand him. Now it reminded him of when she broke the news of her and Moui.

*Spirits, I thought we were over this.*

Breakfast proceeded smoothly if a bit awkward. Alana fussed over him to ensure everything was perfect, while Moui observed silently from the sidelines.

“Why did you come back so soon?” Kea asked when her plate was empty.

“Kea,” Alana said with an admonishing look.

“It’s fine.” His sister’s bluntness spared him the effort of breaking the conversation. “The reason I came back early is because Lady Virya has left.”

The room turned silent, even Kea’s jaw hung open.

“What do you mean, she left?” Alana asked.

Kai did his best to appear calm and collected. “They’ve left the archipelago.”

“So they dumped you,” Kea said, looking ready to burst into laughter.

“They didn’t *dump me*,” Kai crossed his arms. “Their stay in the archipelago was only temporary, I knew they would go back to the mainland.”

“And they left you he—” Kea got silenced by their mother’s glare. “I’ll go prepare the hunting gear.” She left, but not before sharing one last amused look.

The truth in his sister’s words burned him more than expected. He understood why they had to leave and didn’t hold it against them. According to Dora’s letter, Elijah even delayed the departure for him. Still, they had left him alone, and that wasn’t a great feeling.

With both Moui and Alana watching him from across the table, the atmosphere turned heavy. They looked too serious. Kai thought his mother would be happier with the news.

“I know you can’t contain the joy of having me home permanently, but no need to smile so much.” The joke did little to relieve the mood.

Alana reached with her hand to comfort him. “Oh, sweetie. I’m extremely happy you’re home. I’m just sorry it happened this way. Are you okay?”

*Damn, you really want to make me cry.*

“Yes, mom. I’m fine. I knew they were going to leave eventually.”

*Just not when.*

“Do you want us to look for a new teacher?” Moui asked, already in problem-solving mode.

“No.” Kai didn’t have to think long. “Not in the short term at least.” He added, afraid his answer sounded too curt.

*I got unbelievably lucky the first time. But even with my Favor, I can’t find someone half as good if there aren’t any in the archipelago.*

He had just taken his first steps on the path of magic. Eventually, he would have to look for another apprenticeship or to enroll in an academy. But he wasn’t ready to call someone else master anytime soon.

“What do you want to do?” Moui continued, trying to find a solution.

*Isn't that the million-dollar question?*

"I don't know," Kai answered honestly. "I guess I'll take a few weeks to think about it..."

"Of course, take all the time you need, sweetie."

"If there's anything we can help you with, we're here for you," The hunter added.

*Spirits' mercy, if they start finishing each other's sentences, I'll move out.*

"I know, I'll go clean up now." Kai opted for a strategic retreat. Last night he flopped down as soon as he got home.

There was only one bathroom in the house. It was a definite downgrade from his private one at the estate, but infinitely better than in Greenside, where they had to go outside their house in a common toilet to pee. Kai didn't think he'd survive going back to that.

The Republic even installed running water—at least in this neighborhood. It was a sad little trickle, which was still a hundred times better than having to use a bucket.

As he washed himself, Kai took a look at the piping. There wasn't any rune in sight, it worked on mechanical principles. Mana Sense wasn't ideal for examining essence-poor material, so he couldn't be sure exactly how.

Pumping up more water wouldn't be hard. Would the Republic care if one house increased the stream a little?

*Maybe it's better if I check the local laws, even though they probably wouldn't notice. Adding some heating runes should also be doable.*

The problem was mana supply. The poor density of the archipelago struggled to even maintain the most basic runes unless he used a gathering array. The alternative was to create a mana reservoir to be refilled manually, which would be bothersome.

*Moui has Mana Manipulation too...*

Kai walked back to his room, undecided. Noticing his backpack by the bed, he started unpacking. The room wasn't small, but not particularly big either. He was used to having a lot of space, at the estate he had several rooms just for him.

He brought Dora's rations into the kitchen, catching his mother before she left to go grocery shopping.

"What's all this?"

"I told you there was no danger I'd starve myself," Kai said, taking out more and more rations from the backpack. Alana stared at the growing pile with wonder, questioning him about the food she didn't recognize.

"That's an apple, they grow them on the mainland. Not sure now what this cheese is called. Yeah, that's sugar." Kai hadn't realized a good half of the food he ate at the estate couldn't be found in the local market.

Alana was having fun sorting through the pile of strange and *exotic* food, so Kai left her to it.

Back in his room, he had to be selective with what else he took out. Most of the shelves were already filled with his dad's volumes. And the desk they bought for him was hardly able to contain all his alchemic tools.

If he pushed his bed in a corner, he could fit a bigger table. And the walls were free to house more shelves with a bit of smart positioning.

*Or I could just buy a workshop. I wouldn't really feel comfortable leaving my equipment in another building, but I could carry the most expensive tools and materials in my ring. Not the most practical solution...*

Until now Kai never particularly cared about his space at home. He would always run back to the estate anyway. The idea he would live permanently with his family was starting to sink in. He would need some adjusting.

All the changes were starting to feel overwhelming. In the blink of an eye, his life had turned upside down. Kai decided to go out to get some air. Walking usually helped him clear his head.

Kai lost himself in the clattering of the crowd all the same. He preferred the calm churning of the waves, but he had to make do with what was available.

*What am I doing?*

There were so many things he had to figure out. Settling down in his house was just the beginning. He would need to tell Reishi and Flynn he was moving permanently here. No doubt the merfolk would jump on the chance to monopolize more of his time.

*Then* he would need to find new ways to keep growing his skills. He promised Elijah to not slack off, and he meant it. Training with all the distractions of a town and his family around was going to be a challenge in and of itself. But it was fundamental to establish a good routine to not get sidetracked.

*Then* there were his long-term plans. What did he want to do and where did he want to go?

His heart beat faster and breathing felt hard. Kai ran out of the town, trying to not think of unlikely worst-case scenarios. Out of the southern gate, the suffocating feeling started to abate.

*Come on get a grip of yourself.*

It had been many years since he was this close to having a panic attack. He thought he was over them, clearly, he had been wrong. Reaching the southern beach, he put his clothes in his ring and jumped into the sea.

*They fucking left me!*

Diving underwater, he screamed all his frustrations, which helped a surprising amount. His teachers' departure bothered him more than he initially thought.

He pushed his body to swim faster amidst the waves, till that was the only thought in his mind. Exhausting his body was cathartic.

Elijah and Dora had done their best. His mind accepted what happened, but his emotions did not.

*Certainly, it wouldn't have hurt if they warned me ahead of time instead of dropping the news out of the blue. Even hundred-year-old mages have things to learn, or it was another of their dumb tests.*

Floating in the sea, Kai regained his cool.

*I'm going to be fine.*

The thought stopped feeling like a lie. After living at the estate, where every decision was made for him, all these changes had threatened to drown him. But they could also be exciting.

He wasn't a powerless kid at the mercy of his circumstances. He had decent strength and was loaded with money. What else did he need to navigate the world?

One at a time, he would figure out all the challenges that stood before him. He didn't have to solve everything right this instant.

Moving back toward shore, he was about to use Water Magic to dry himself, when he noticed he wasn't alone. Two kids about his age stood not far from him. They didn't wear the blue uniform, but Kai only needed one glance at their haughty expression to guess their identity.

*Scholarship kids. Can't the Republic even keep them busy?*

Kai was hoping to sneak past them, but they were already coming toward him.

"Who are you? What are you doing on *our* beach?" The taller one stepped into his personal space. His demanding tone tempted Kai to slap him.

Even among the kids who were accepted into the Republic's program, few were this obnoxious. Just because they reached Orange a bit before their peers, they thought they were hot shit.

Avoiding a pointless argument about the ownership of the beach, Kai opted for a different strategy with Acting.

"I'm Kai, nice to meet you." He offered to shake their hands with a radiant smile. "You wanna be my friends?"

"N—What—" His unexpected reaction made tall boy's brain short-circuit.

Unfortunately, sneer boy at his side stepped forward to take his place. "I'm—Kai made an effort to not remember his name—this beach is our place to train. We can't just let anybody come in here."



Despite still being at the top of Red, sneer boy looked even more arrogant than his companion.

“Really? I didn’t know. I’m so sorry.” Acting made his words sound almost convincing. “I don’t want to cause more trouble in your busy schedule.”

Tall boy looked satisfied by his reaction, while sneer boy appeared to get a hint that *maybe* Kai wasn’t being entirely sincere.

“Well, I better go then.” Kai moved past them. “Maybe next time we can play fetch.”

*Losers.*

Faint yells resounded behind him when he was already inside the tree line. He had never seen that duo around here before. If the spirits were merciful, he wouldn’t again. Or maybe not, it wouldn’t be too bad messing with them once in a while.

Heading home, he finished unpacking. Three piles of books rose in a corner waiting for their shelf. With a tidy room, the mess in his mind didn’t feel as daunting. Kai wrote a list of all the things he had to do. The more he thought, the more ideas came to mind.

Dora’s garden had provided many of the herbs he used for Alchemy and, without the enhanced mana density of the estate, his magic practice would take a hit. He had never realized how dependent on them he had become.

For every problem, there was a solution. Reishi could provide the necessary ingredients and he could build a small-scale gathering array himself.

Looking over the list, there was only one thing that filled him with urgency: Virya’s cube. The timer hung over his head like a sword of Damocles. One year wasn’t a short period, but neither was it long.

Which put reaching Orange ★★★ on the top of his list. Elijah made it clear he'd have no hope of solving the puzzle box without those stats, and knowing Virya, that would be far from enough.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human ★★** – 153,845 > 157,713 / 175,000 XP
- Profession: **None**

#### **Body stats**

- Strength: **15**
- Dexterity: **18**
- Constitution: **20**
- Mind: **22**
- Spirit: **25**
- Perception: **17**
- Favor: **24**

#### **Skills:**

- **Acting (lv98>99)**
- **Mana Sense (lv73)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv58)**
- **Empower (lv55>57)**
- **Inspect (lv48>49)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv41>42)**
- **Water Magic (lv40)**
- **Alchemy (lv40>41)**
- **Runes (lv37)**
- **Nature Magic (lv36>37)**
- **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv20>21)**
- **Herbology – Advanced (lv28>29)**
- **Danger Sense (lv14)**
- **Attuned Meditation (lv10>11)**

*Getting close. Running through the jungle for two days certainly helped. Almost a 1000 XP by themselves.*

If everything went well, he might reach it in two to three months.

*I'll take a week to settle down and plan, then it's grinding time till the peak of Orange.*

With a path before him, his heart felt lighter.

Kai was drawing what kind of furniture he should buy when there was a knock on the door.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there this morning. I just heard the news," Ele walked inside, taking a seat on his bed. "I thought I'd have to dry your tears, but you seem to be doing fine."

"It's alright, mom always worries too much."

"Are you truly fine?" Ele squinted, examining him from up close.

Kai rolled his eyes, "I've everything handled."

"You know you can always talk to me if you need something."

"Yes, I know. Now stop acting like mom, I'm not going to break if you stop staring at me for a second."

Ele laughed. "You never know. But if you don't need your big sister anymore, I'll leave you alone."

"Actually, there is something you could help me with," Kai stopped her. "Remember when you told me we would go pearling together one day? Does this week work for you?"