

Chapter 122 - Annoying Meddlers

“They *left*?” Kai didn’t have to fake his confusion with the captain showing up out of the blue.

Zerith's measuring gaze never wavered from him. “You didn’t know?”

“They told me they were going to leave, but I— Are you sure they’ve left? Maybe it’s just a misunderstanding.”

This conversation was inevitable. Kai had thought long and hard about how to approach it. Even with Improvisation, directly lying to the captain’s face carried heavy risks.

“I’m certain, a boat passing by saw the place was definitely abandoned. Other sailors have been able to confirm it. What did your master tell you?”

“He p—planned to leave, but I d—didn’t think it would be so soon.” Kai stared emptily ahead. Summoning his fears and doubts, he was the lost little kid again. “He sent me to Sylspring to spend more time with my family. No one told me anything— I thought I had more time...”

Kai offered some convenient facts and let Zerith draw the conclusions by himself.

The most convincing lies were always mixed with the truth. Who would believe he knew nothing at all? But an unimportant disciple they couldn’t bother to warn. Now, that was something they would believe. The Republic never had much consideration for the natives, this would be right up their alley.

~Was this why they left without a word? To give him plausible deniability?

“Did they tell you when they would be back?” The captain's demeanor softened.

Kai shook his head. "They didn't..."

"Sorry, kid. They truly left. Perhaps something unexpected came up and they had to leave in a hurry."

Traces of sympathy and pity, exactly what he hoped.

"Yeah..." Kai kept his head down. "I—I better go. Some people are waiting for me."

Zerith's gaze followed him as he hurried toward his lab. With each step, he expected to be stopped. The captain did not.

~That went better than I imagined.

He had dodged the bullet, for now. Though it might be optimistic to think this would be the last of it.

~I got a level in Improvisation even if I didn't let it take over. Hmm... maybe mixing my decisions and identity with the skill prompts is the way to go. Virya always said that skills are tools.

Jiro was waiting for him in front of the unassuming building. The guard opened the door for him and followed inside. Kai scribbled a quick note on a spare piece of paper and gave it to a confused Jiro.

"Tell Reishi I'll be back in two, three days tops. Something I need to handle came up. I'll take an extra shift to make it up to him."

Without waiting for a response, he was off toward his house. Kai made sure to look appropriately somber and panicked in case someone was watching.

Alana was still in their living room, immersed in moon charts to calculate the next tide. The thud of his steps woke her from her musings.

“I didn’t see you. Why are you back already? Did you forget to take something?”

“My teachers have left, I need to visit the estate to check what’s going on.” He had already warned his family about his intentions.

“Oh, that’s *absolutely terrible*. Are you sure they left?” His mother winked at him. Kai wanted to facepalm, as subtle as a cawing seagull.

~Maybe we should have tried some rehearsing.

“I’m sure it’s a mistake. They wouldn’t leave me without a goodbye...”

Alana helped him prepare some quick rations for his journey. His spatial bag was soon filled with six sandwiches, a large piece of cheese, four loaves of hard bread, a jar of mango jam and an undefined number of papayas, coconuts and other tropical fruits.

“Mom, I think this is enough.”

“Do you really have to go?” Her worry sounded more sincere this time.

“I need to know for sure. I’ll be back as soon as possible, I promise.”

After a quick hug, he ran toward the western gate. Kai wasn't looking forward to the trek back and forth, but he didn't have much choice. That was the only possible reaction after receiving such shocking and unforeseen news.

It would also keep him away from prying eyes. He doubted the Republic had enough personnel to tail him through the jungle. He'd prefer to avoid having to perform another dramatic breakdown for being abandoned if possible.

~It'll be good training if nothing else.

Beyond the fields, the sea of green greeted him. The smell of lush vegetation, flowers and life, the wind swishing among the leaves.

With an almost empty backpack and a couple extra levels in his skills, the run proved surprisingly easy. Empower surged through his body as glided through the path.

Kai listened for any sign from Hallowed Intuition. He needed to get better at interpreting its warnings, but he was fairly sure no one was following him. Or at least they had no nefarious intentions.

As the excitement of the subterfuge drained from him, the hours crawled forward. The run demanded just enough attention that he couldn't properly focus on anything, but not enough to keep his brain busy. In simpler terms: it was boring.

~Should I increase the pace to make it more challenging?

Any faster, he'd have to pay the consequences on the way back. The marks on the trees indicating the distance helped him cope with monotony. Before the sun disappeared behind the jungle, Kai spotted the last mark with the smiley face he engraved into the bark.

Emerging from the tree line there was no paved path to follow. A single lonely building kept watch on the crystal sea. The bay was exactly as he remembered, beautiful and eerily empty.

~I didn't think I'd be back so soon.

His house was exactly as he left it, bare walls and bookshelves, the shower enchantments still in need of a new source. He had already taken everything that could be carried. There was nothing left for him here.

The melancholy flowed to the surface as the moons took center stage. He wandered aimlessly along the shore, reminiscing about the past. Dora's hearty laughs, Elijah ordering him to run, swim and dodge his sneaky pebbles. All that once was had ended forever.

Since he got here, he might as well commit for the benefit of any potential observers. Probably he was just being paranoid, but he'd rather go the extra mile to avoid even more headaches down the line.

There was only one potential flaw to his plan: the deed to the bay. It showed how his master cared at least a little. It would be hard to claim to have been completely unaware if he had possession of that document.

Keeping that hidden for the next few years was a priority. In case someone found out, this journey also offered an excuse. If his teacher was truly that powerful and mysterious, he could make sure only Kai would find the papers.

Maybe this supposed master felt guilty for leaving him and didn't care about the land. The story wove itself together. Not his most foolproof plan, but he hadn't been working with much.

The more time passed, the more believable it would sound. He was just a stray kid taken in by a powerful master on a whim and later abandoned.

Kai was sure the governor had more pressing issues. Like tracking down the rebels gone into hiding, plotting evil plans, or actually *governing*. Managing the archipelago should be more than a full-time job.

~If my Favor is worth anything, it will take care of the rest.

After a day of running, the mattress was like a cloud.

The following day, he took another mournful parade through the bay and got ready to depart. He was about to march out of his house with his backpack when an unintelligible whisper sent shivers down his back. Kai retreated into the living room.

~What the actual fuck!

Noticing Hallowed Intuition had reached level 2 didn't improve his mood. He carefully approached the door again. The grim foreboding came back, though slightly weaker. Like a dark cloud hovering just out of sight.

~Shit! Can't I get clear instructions?

On a hunch, Kai put down his backpack and tried walking out again. Nothing. He cautiously stepped outside. It made no change.

~Well, that's good enough for me.

Maybe someone was actually watching him, or maybe they were waiting in Sylspring and his intention to leave triggered the skill. Whatever the case, going back now would be a bad idea. Shaken by the warning, he didn't want to take any chances.

~Another pity party ready to go!

Summoning his most dramatic side, Kai went wild on his interpretation of a brooding teenager. He muttered his grievances out loud, threw rocks into the sea, punched the sand and screamed at the skies.

~Spirits, I don't know if I should hope someone is watching or not.

Perhaps he was going *a little* overboard when he wrote a giant 'fuck you' in the sand and lit a pyre with a chair he never liked. Hallowed Intuition stayed silent, so he went ahead.

It was a good sign, but also frustrating. What he wouldn't give for a list of clear instructions.

After an exhausting day of moping and sulking, Improvisation had leveled again. Even if this was an unnecessary charade fueled by his paranoia, it hadn't been a complete waste of time.

Showing his intention to leave the next morning, Kai received no foreboding from Hallowed Intuition. He waited an extra day just to make sure, though he spent it in Meditation. Even a morose teenager would feel drained after throwing such a tantrum.

His family would already be worried. To not even think about Reishi. Who knew what the merman would do if he delayed his return another day? Better not to risk it.

~This time he'll really chain me to my lab.

Kai made it back in record time, pushing his body more than was reasonable. He had exactly half his mana left by the time he reached Sylspring.

"You alright, lad?" Old Ven's scowling mug welcomed him back. "I didn't expect to see 'ou back after—"

“The Republic informed me my teacher left *without* telling me.” Kai managed to spew amidst his desperate need for air.

After a moment of confusion, the wrinkles on Old Ven’s forehead distended in realization. “Told ‘ou to never trust a foreigner. They don’t respect the will of the ancestors.”

Kai nodded, catching his breath. The last flaw in his plan was solved. The old geezer would take any secret to his grave rather than let anything slip to a republic official.

“You’re right, Ven. I should have listened to you.”

“Of course, ‘ou should!” The farmer waved his rake emphatically. “Go tell that to my grandkids too.”

“Any time, now I gotta go. My mom must be waiting for me. I’ll make sure to share a bit of luck with your cabbages next time.”

“Aye, lad. Remember to listen to your elders!”

“Yes, sir.”

His heartbeat increased as he closed in at the gate. Only the lack of reaction from Hallowed Intuition pushed him forward.

~Not like I have another choice.

To his great relief, the bored enforcer on guard ignored him, but Sylspring’s number one meddler couldn’t help himself. The man waited two steps from his door.

"I'd really like to get home, it's been a long journey. What more do you need?" Kai didn't hold back his annoyance given the circumstances.

Captain Zerith glanced at him with a tired expression. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way, kid. I'll try to make this brief. I only need to get the letter you received from the governor."

"Oh, *that*,"

"I know, it's... distasteful to ask it back, and *now* might not be the best time," Zerith sounded apologetic.

Kai struggled not to smile. Now that was some good news. He was just another mildly talented kid without support, of course they wanted it back.

"I'll get it. Wait here," Kai said curtly.

He hadn't taken two steps inside when his mother crushed him in a hug.

"You're finally back. Are you alright? You should have packed more food if you planned to stay four days." Alana checked him from head to toe, frowning at his disheveled state.

"I'm sorry I took so long, I needed time to think. Just give me a minute to deal with an annoying bug." Kai slipped away, dashing up the stairs.

Reaching his room, he took out the curved letter from his ring. The paper looked crisp and white as the day he received it. Instead of walking downstairs, he crumbled the document and threw it out the window at the captain waiting below. "There you go."

Without waiting for a response, he closed the latch again. That was the exact kind of petty action to expect from a spited kid. Though he couldn't deny the satisfaction.

~Maybe I am a little angry kid.

Even with hindsight, he couldn't have handled the situation much better, aside from having Elijah and the others help him. He could only lay low and hope for the best.

Right now, he had to deal with the consequences of disappearing for four days. Kai longed for a hot shower, but his mother had other plans. Alana demanded he eat a full meal before letting him go clean up.

He considered going to talk to Reishi, though it might not be the wisest idea.

~Hi, I'm back. Sorry for disappearing just as we started our business. I swear not to do that again, probably. Please don't chain me to my desk.

He shook his head. The merfolk wouldn't be satisfied with a quick hello. Better to leave that for tomorrow.

~As if my life needed more complications. All this trouble just because the Republic can't mind their own damned business. And right as I was about to get my life in Sylspring sorted.

The only good news was that the stress and unexpected complications helped him gain quite a few levels.

~There was Improvisation twice, Empower, Hallowed Intuition, and Alchemy the other day.

Kai did the math counting on his fingers before realizing an easier method.

Ding

Skill Experience: 1900 XP

~I should be pretty close...

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human ★★** – 165,613 > 174,942 / 175,000 XP
- Profession: **None**

Body stats

- Strength: **15**
- Dexterity: **18**
- Constitution: **20**
- Mind: **22**
- Spirit: **25**
- Perception: **17**
- Favor: **24>26**

Skills:

- **Mana Sense (lv73>74)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv58>60)**
- **Empower (lv57>59)**
- **Inspect (lv49>51)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv42>43)**
- **Water Magic (lv40>41)**
- **Alchemy (lv41>42)**
- **Runes (lv37>38)**
- **Nature Magic (lv37)**
- **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv21)**
- **Herbology – Advanced (lv29>30)**
- **Attuned Meditation (lv11>12)**
- **Improvisation (lv1>4)**

- **Hallowed Intuition (lv1>2)**

The flash of panic for almost reaching the threshold was quickly drowned by the rising excitement.

“Mom, I think that shower is going to take a while.”