

Chapter 123 - Perfect Plans

Kai double-checked that the bathroom door was locked. He had to jump to pull the blue curtain with crashing waves over the small window. Not that it mattered since it faced the wooden planks of another building.

Admittedly, this wasn't how he imagined his triumphant enhancement to the peak of Orange: hidden in a tiny bathroom in the middle of Sylspring. The sea might not be practical, but it was more dignified.

~Not that it makes any difference. I'll lose my dignity soon enough writhing on the floor.

Usually, he did a long session of meditation to prepare himself. That wasn't feasible unless he chose to wait, block any Skill or Life Experience, to find a more appropriate time and place.

~Who am I kidding? My patience doesn't stretch that long.

Increasing his attributes was too tempting. On his second birthday during his first swimming lesson to the shores of the estate, each enhancement remained vivid in his mind.

The hint of apprehension was drowned in a downpour of excitement. Each upgrade was greater than the last, in pain *and* rewards.

Kai opened the water faucet of the shower and bit on a towel to silence any scream. He sat naked on the floor, only wearing his silver ring and the two pendants he never took off. One bearing the symbol of the spirits, a gift his mother gave him years ago, and Virya's amulet to hide his grade.

Ding

Life Experience: 302 XP

~Here we go.

He sat on the paved floor to wait for the inevitable.

Ding

Orange ★★: 175,000/175,000 XP

Conditions for race upgrade met...

Beginning enhancement from Human ★★ to Human ★★★...

The beginning was always the worst part. Waves of heat gathered near his heart in an incandescent mass of energy. The seconds stretched into infinity as Kai tightened his jaws.

Like the breaking of a dam, a jolt of burning pain opened the gates to a flood. Fire flowed through his veins, sweeping every inch of his body. His nails dug into his clenched fists, Kai bit harder on the towel letting out muffled grunts.

~FUCK! Why does it need to hurt so much!?

Time lost all meaning, he couldn't tell up from down. Even his ability to form conscious thoughts left him. There was only an inferno of flames threatening to devour him.

As it reached its apex, the tide inverted. The burning fire retreated with blissful speed. Reality reasserted itself over him. The smooth tile under his cheek, the icy water pouring

from above and the pleasure of being born anew. The memories of pain melted in the feeling of invincibility.

With a wave of mana Kai overrode the manual lever to switch on the heating enchantment. The water temperature increased till it scalded his skin due to his heightened Perception.

He fiddled with the inscription to adjust the heat. It would take a couple days to reset his keener senses. A smile split his face. His body was incredibly light as if he could escape gravity and fly if he simply jumped.

Kai was almost about to try when three loud bangs on the door made him jolt to attention.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Kea yelled. “You’ve been in there for a lifetime.”

~It has been four days and not even a hi.

“Thank you for the warm welcome. I still need a moment.”

It couldn’t have been more than five or ten minutes. Enhancements were quick and easy compared to advancing between grades. Though the bathroom probably had something to say about that statement.

The dirt from the long journey joined the pouring water to reach every open surface of the room—ceiling included. His keen eyes let him take in the full mess he made; he must have thrashed more than he thought.

Kea stomped her feet outside the door. “Hurry up!”

“I need five more minutes,” Kai yelled back.

The euphoria of his improved attributes would have to wait. Kai dismissed the blinking notification and got cleaned up. To his surprise, his mana reserves were full.

~Must be a side effect of the enhancement.

With a flex of his will, water and dirt streamed toward the drain of the shower. Even though he hadn't taken the time to carefully visualize the spell, the cast was incredibly efficient. Repeated usage helped hone his magic, and so did higher attributes apparently.

With his hair already dry, Kai covered himself in two towels and opened the latch. Kea waited with crossed arms and a glare. She darted inside and slammed the door shut after him.

"It's nice to see you too, sister."

No response came back. Kea was the only one who had not been informed of the reason for his sudden journey.

~What did they tell her?

With the bliss of the upgrade, nothing could impact his mood.

"You're back," Moui greeted him by the stairs, wearing his hunting clothes. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes," Kai grinned. "As well as I could hope for."

~I'll reach you in no time, Uncle.

He had barely stepped upstairs when the last member of the family came out of her room.

“You’re back, little brother,” Ele gave him a quick hug. “Glad everything worked out.”

“Yeah, me too.”

His sister frowned. “Wait, did you... Did you actually go away to train as we told Kea? Well, congratulations,” Ele patted him on the back.

~How? How is this possible?

“What gave me away?” Kai had hoped to keep it hidden for a few days to prove he wasn’t the only one who could miss those things.

“Some people call me the *all-knowing*. Everyone has their own abilities,” Ele smiled mysteriously, puffing her chest.

“Is it a skill?” Kai narrowed his eyes. “Tell me the truth, it must be a skill.”

“It’s called *Sister’s Intuition*,” Ele bopped him on the nose. “Honestly, it was pretty obvious. You’re radiant and have a... *something* in your movements. And you also told me you were getting close.”

Kai looked down at himself. He couldn’t really tell what she was talking about. “Moui didn’t suspect a thing.”

“Well, I told you that I’m exceptional.”

~Fine, you win this battle, but the war isn't over yet! Next time I'll be even more sneaky.

“Just make sure Mom doesn't make a fuss. We've had enough feasts and I'd like to keep this quiet. I don't need anything.”

“I'll try my best. No promises.”

Finally, alone in his room, Kai put on a loose shirt and trousers and sat on his bed. No more interruptions, it was time to see the fruits of his efforts.

Ding

New Feat: Perfectionist – Through great efforts and discipline, you reached the final stage of Orange before your fourteenth birthday.

You are awarded: +4 Favor!

One more point than last time. Without the boost of seven new skill slots, the climb had been much harder. Still, it was nothing to scoff at. To those who reached Orange ★★★ after they got their profession, the feat granted a single point.

~And now let's see what we're working with.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human ★★★** – 0 / 300,000 XP
- Profession: **None**

Body stats

- Strength: **15>19**

- Dexterity: **18>23**
- Constitution: **20>25**
- Mind: **22>28**
- Spirit: **25>31**
- Perception: **17>22**
- Favor: **26>30**

If he were a normal human, his face would start to hurt from the toothy grin that showed no sign of abating.

Strength was the lowest, a buffed kid was still a kid. He didn't worry, together with Dexterity, it would be the easiest attribute to increase as he grew up. And their value was still stupidly high.

If he had one peeve, it was that now Spirit was higher than Favor.

~I guess this is Elydes' version of a first-world problem. Mommy bought me a blue Ferrari instead of a red one. I'll need to get another feat.

For now, he basked in his own success. He couldn't wait to see how six extra points in Mind helped his Alchemy.

~Oh, wait.

Kai took out the cube from his spatial closet. His thoughts had never been this fast and clear. The convoluted maze of runes and sliding pieces unraveled itself in his head.

~I can't believe I took hours to do this.

A thread of mana easily linked the seven runes, solving the fourth layer of the puzzle. Once again, the pieces rearranged themselves with a series of quick clicks.

He breezed through the next two configurations in less than ten minutes. The underlying rules of the cube were so obvious he wanted to slap his past self.

The seventh puzzle stumped him momentarily, requiring slightly more to decode, but it also bowed to his awesome powers. With some satisfaction, he wove his mana through the correct combination of runes.

~Done!

This time the cube took longer to switch. For an instant, Kai hoped against all odds that he had solved. Naturally, Virya would never devise something so basic.

When the dark wooden surface stopped morphing, there was only one change: a new set of runes had been added to the formation.

~Should have known it was just an increase in difficulty.

The introduction of the new variables completely transformed the interactions between the pieces. Just as he started to speak a few words, Virya changed the alphabet. Kai could almost hear the witch cackling madly wherever she was.

~Come on, I can do this.

Using Inspect, the runes started to make more sense. Kai tested a few patterns, rearranging the sliding pieces. Something didn't add up. Right as he thought he had found a solution the cube rejected his answer.

~What did I do wrong? Wait... No, she didn't.

Virya absolutely did.

Weaving two threads at once confirmed it. The next stage of the puzzle required two codes. Even worse, he had to link the two sets of runes at the same time, otherwise the cube would reject his mana.

~She was definitely cackling when she built this.

His unblinking gaze zeroed in with absolute concentration. His mind dashed admits a thousand combinations.

~So. Close. Yes!

The mana threads snapped on the last two runes, and Kai let out the breath he'd been holding. A satisfying flutter of clicks moved through the cube. And... he was back at the starting point with a new configuration.

~Spirits only know how many layers she put in here.

Downstairs, Alana called everyone for dinner.

~I'll get my prize, all in due time.

Everything was going according to plan.

The cold light of a blue crystal lit his office. Zerith put down the pen and massaged his tired eyes.

Such a headache for a damned kid. Why was he doing this again? He couldn't save every brat who ran into trouble. Why was this his problem? He already sent half his salary to the orphanage in Kadria.

The chair in his office creaked as he stretched his legs. Outside his window, the judging eyes of the gods hung in the night sky.

Cold lifeless bodies lay butchered in the streets. Their image never faded. The memory was refreshed anew every night. It wasn't a debt that could be repaid, but he would try, nonetheless. He'd been trying for the last seventeen years.

Banishing the blood and death from his mind, Zerith focused on the paper in his hands.

A presumed fifth circle adept and two unconfirmed high-level threats had disappeared into thin air. Gone from the archipelago without the wards so much as showing a ripple.

Honestly, it had been stupid to dare think otherwise. If it was truly The Lady of Blood as he suspected. Cold sweat ran down his back at the implications. She was a myth from the old lands, akin to a natural catastrophe, not something they should be messing with.

The headquarters had not responded on the matter. Even if they could verify the suspicion, they probably wouldn't inform him. This was way above his pay grade, and the governor's too. But Cressida couldn't just let go as it was protocol. No, she needed to go poke her nose to see if she could grasp any advantage.

~Damned woman, she'll be the death of us all.

The disappearance was dated between one and two weeks ago. All that was left was an empty building and an eleven-year-old kid, who claimed he knew nothing. The damned fool thought himself so clever.

The lad might be scarily canny for a child, but he had no hope of outsmarting any half-decent detective. He was lucky they didn't send many of those to the archipelago.

Zerith skimmed through the sixteen pages of pointlessly verbose description of the events—he'd be surprised if anyone managed to go through that all.

He had taken the habit of writing each report in the most redundant and tedious way when he was in the military, and slowly perfected the art over the years. It was a point of pride to ensure whoever read them lost as much time as he wasted writing them.

Once, he only reserved it for the pointless tasks, but he began doing it for every report headed for Higharbor since he had been posted here.

The last statement was what truly mattered.

Final Verdict:

After repeated questioning and observations, the target has shown no knowledge or performed any action that contradicted the events as previously reported.

Advised course of action:

The target's chances of being made privy to any valuable information are negligible. He presents above-average talent for a native inhabitant of the archipelago, but he is not noteworthy in any other meaningful way. Confirmed grade as Orange ★, possibly on his way to Orange ★★. [For further details, refer to the analysis in section 6, paragraphs 4-12; and section 9, paragraphs 8-20.]

As previously reported in the pages detailing the events, the target has a trading partnership with Reishi Senyu of the merchant House Tajira. Given the nature of the amicable

relationship, consequences on possible future economic deals are to be taken into consideration. [For further details, refer to the breakdown in section 4, paragraphs 6-9.]

As such, there are no significant advantages in pursuing a closer contact with the target that would justify the potential expenses. I advise adding the target to the standard D-tier observation list, to be revised upon the unlocking of his Second Seal.

The secret was about balancing the right number of truths and lies, presenting them in the right order. Cressida would likely read the report personally. If he made it too bland or clear-cut, she would get suspicious. It needed to raise the right amount of interest that would make the kid unremarkable in his abnormality.

After a final reading and correction to ensure the writing was as long-winded and abstruse as it was going to get, Zerith personally passed the papers through the reading strip to be transmitted to Higharbor.

The statement written by the guard he sent after the kid would corroborate his story. He had taken particular care in choosing the most prejudiced and dimwitted officer for the task. The incompetent buffoon found nothing suspicious except for a crazy child.

~This is all I can do for you, lad. With the gods' mercy, it will be enough.

Maybe he would sleep in peace tonight.