

Chapter 114 - Honesty

Kai picked three thin bluish stalks from a dusty drawer. The last red-tier plant that would fit his budget. He had more coins in the ring, but spending silver would raise questions.

“Are you sure this is what you want? These won’t be much use without an expert herbalist,” Bebo eyed the selection of mana herbs on the counter. “I got a really nice bow just last week, should be the perfect size for you.”

I'd rather use a rock than an accursed bow.

“I like these better.”

His excited smile would hopefully be enough. Kai had considered coming up with a random explanation for his choice, but sometimes less is more. Kids often had weird passions at one point or another. The story Bebo made up in his mind would always be more believable than anything he said.

The merchant glanced at Moui to get his silent approval. The hunter made no objection, naturally, maintaining his usual impassive demeanor.

With the deal closed, Kai carefully packaged each of the fourteen herbs he found hidden in Bebo’s cabin. He had already seen most of them in books or on merchants’ stalls, though he never got the chance to brew with them.

They were uncommon plants, which didn’t mean powerful, but it did mean interesting.

Unfortunately, their conditions were a stab in the heart of every alchemist. Only half of them had been properly harvested, the others showed the hands of incompetent hunters. A few had been straight-up ripped off the ground.

Such uncivilized brutes.

“Do you have more?” The innocent question would be in line with an excitable child.

“Sorry, kid, this is all I got right now. Few hunters are interested in mana plants. I usually sell them in Sylspring as I get them. These are the ones no one bought.”

Maybe someone would take them if they didn't look harvested by monkeys.

Kai let his disappointment show.

It explains why they are such uncommon herbs. Rarity is a good thing only if a plant is useful. With mid-red plants, it isn't worth the effort to figure out their uses if you can't get a steady supply.

At least, that was true if he was an herbalist looking to make money. For an alchemist looking to hone his skill this was a gold mine, testing new strange plants just meant more levels. Mana Sense and Inspect would help him learn their properties much faster.

Let's hope the other alchemists stay away from Sylspring for a few more years.

The merchant saw them to the door. “Don't worry, kiddo. I'll get you permission, so you can pass by whenever you want.”

“Really?” Kai squealed before recomposing himself, embarrassed. “You can do that?”

I'm sure the fact I spent a pouch of mesars on herbs no one wanted doesn't have anything to do with it. Absolutely nothing.

“You have my word. Leave it to me.” The man solemnly announced. “I always keep my promises.”

“You’re the best, Uncle Bebo.”

With no more reasons to dally, they looked for Kea. The Hunter's Lodge consisted of a few buildings and some shacks, but his sister was nowhere to be found. It soon became obvious she must have left.

Please, tell me she didn't run into the jungle.

A lanky boy walked up to them. Kai recognized him as one of the teenagers who spoke with his sister this morning.

“Ehm... Kea said she would be going home early.” The guy talked fast, nervously mumbling his words.

“Thank you for telling us, Celou,” Moui said.

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll go then.” Celou quickly retreated, intimidated by the hunter’s presence.

I don't get it, Moui's basically a puppy. You just need to dig a few miles beneath the stone-hearted killer facade.

“Let’s go,” Moui led them towards the green sea. “Try not to leave a trail, we don’t want random gatherers to show up here all the time.”

“Are you sure Kea went home?”

If she ran into Veeryd to do something stupid, she wouldn't have bothered to tell anybody. His sister didn't plan ahead when she was upset. Despite that, Kai couldn't help but worry.

He knew showing off would have consequences, even if it was the best solution. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her.

“Don't worry, she knows the way. She'll be waiting for us at home or near the docks where the other kids gather.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I know her.”

“Right...” After three years of apprenticeship, while he was away, Moui knew her better than him.

The hunter realized the unwritten implication. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that.”

“It's fine, Uncle. I'm glad you were there for her.”

Moui looked uncertain about what to say. “You know your sister, she's impulsive, but she knows the dangers of the jungle and the limit of her abilities. I made sure of it.”

They traveled through the lush shrubbery, vines and bushes, careful not to leave obvious traces. The occasional squelch of their steps was the only sound to interrupt the calls and whistles of the jungle. They knew the spongy ground would quickly hide the signs of passage.

Before long they came across a path. The dirt trail grew larger as they moved toward Sylspring.

With the worry about his sister gone, the uncomfortable truths Kai revealed hang between them. The hunter was rarely chatty even at the best of times. With his stoic demeanor, Kai couldn't get any hint of his thoughts.

Damn, Moui got too good with Mana Manipulation, even his mana flow doesn't let anything slip.

"Do you want to ask me anything?" Kai didn't want to drag things out longer than necessary.

"I'm not sure when you reached Orange ★★, but you must be on your way to your next enhancement."

It was a strange start, but something he could answer easily. "A few months give or take. I'm pretty close."

A ripple swept through his mana at the revelation. The first tell Moui let escape.

"I didn't realize you were that close," Moui murmured.

Ele was the only person who had an accurate idea of his status. And it seemed she kept the secret.

"What are your plans for the future? Someone doesn't learn to fight like that unless they think they are going to need it."

Wouldn't I like to know...

"I want to travel to the mainland." That was the clear objective that never left him. Kai had never made a secret of it, but maybe they thought they were the dreams of a kid. That he wasn't serious and would forget as he grew older. "That's still my plan. I'll look for a crossing after I get a profession."

"Many people say they want to go but never truly end up doing it for one reason or another." Moui looked pensive. "I knew you wouldn't be one of those."

"Despite what everyone likes to repeat, the continent isn't always a deadly place with monstrous awakened beasts at every corner. I've met a few people who made the journey. They had some interesting tales. Most of them agreed that, as long as you keep to the main cities and use your common sense, the dangers are overstated."

Kai wasn't sure what Moui was getting at. "Yeah, I know. My teachers told me." While Virya kept some information from him, life on the continent wasn't one of those subjects.

He had never given much credit to those ludicrous stories even as a child. Maybe it was because he came from another world. People on the continent were just people born under different circumstances. While he had read enough history tomes to know wars weren't all that uncommon, it didn't mean armies appeared from the fogs to raise cities to the ground without a warning.

"As I thought, you knew. Becoming an alchemist can help you make a good living. And I heard enough about mages to know nine out of ten have no idea how to wield a sword or any other weapon. But you clearly spent a lot of time training your fighting skills." Moui's expression tensed. "You aren't planning to be completely safe, are you?"

"Oh." The pieces fell into place. "I don't really know."

Kai wanted to say learning to fight was just a result of how powerless he felt as a child. While that certainly played a part, he didn't only study offensive magic in case someone mugged him in a city.

“I wanted to leave my options open. I can’t decide what I’ll do before I see what’s out there with my own eyes.” He debated how much to add. “It’s not like I plan to do anything dangerous in particular, but...”

“You won’t just go see the vistas from a city, buy a trinket and come back to tell us bizarre stories about the habits of the people of the mainland. How everything there is bigger and crazy expensive. You’ll jump at the opportunity to run off the charted path to explore some mysterious place people say you shouldn’t go.”

The ripples in his mana came stronger than before. His deep tone, heavy with restrained emotions.

Faced with the unexpected reaction, Kai didn’t know what he should do or say. “I’m sorry, Uncle.”

“Don’t say that. You should never be sorry for who you are. I just—” Moui took a deep breath. “It’d be hypocritical if I asked you to remain in the archipelago. Even if I really want you to.”

The raw concern in his tone hit Kai like a sledgehammer. The warmth of knowing that someone cared about you.

When Moui continued talking, his voice was steady. “You know, there was a time I would have jumped at the opportunity to set sail and never come back. When I wasn’t able to, I became a hunter to fight awakened beasts. My parents weren’t happy with my choice. I can’t tell you to give up on your goals. Especially after I’ve seen how serious you are. Yatei’s mercy, I still can’t quite believe how easily you killed that drake.”

“It wasn’t that easy,” Kai said. “I just made it look easy to impress Kea. And I was tired of being treated like a child.”

“Well, it was pretty obvious you were trying to show off,” Moui chuckled. “But if you can worry about how you look while fighting a drake, then it wasn’t a hard fight.”

The conversation paused as they passed a man picking berries. The stranger eyed them suspiciously as if he expected them to steal his find.

The sight of everyday life granted Kai a moment of levity. While a flood of emotions threatened to sweep through him, people moved on with their lives. It was so obvious, and yet so strange.

Moui’s words weighed on him. “I don’t plan to throw away my life.” It sounded stupid when he said it, but he couldn’t think of anything better. “That’s why I trained so hard. I want to live a looong life.”

“I know, kid, but you also plan to take some risks. To push as far as you think it’s reasonable.”

What was the point in having them worry? The impulse to weave a nice, reassuring lie tempted Kai.

I'd like to know the truth in their place. And I'd only be lying to not make myself feel guilty.

This brutal honesty policy truly sucks.

“I won’t jump into danger without planning and preparation.” That was part of the truth.

“That’s all I can ask.” Moui smiled, though he didn’t look relieved. “You’ll also need to tell your mother.”

Kai paled. “Do I *really* need to tell her now?”

Ancestors have mercy, I'll join you soon.

"I'm not going to tell you how to live your life, but you need to own up to your decisions."

"Right now?"

"Well, you can wait a day to make an offering to the spirits."

"That's not funny."

"I wasn't trying to be," Moui couldn't suppress the smile. "Okay, maybe just a little. But you really need to tell her. The sooner the better."

"I'm not really sure what I'll do on the mainland. Maybe I'll end up growing cabbages in a peaceful corner of farmland."

"Kai. If you want to be treated like an adult, you also need to behave like one."

Touché.

He sighed, defeated.

"I can talk to her first if you want," Moui said.

"You'd do that?"

“Yes, but that means you’ll have to talk to her tonight.”

“Okay.” Maybe that was better. With no way out, he could only move forward. “Thank you. *Truly.*”

“No problem, shorty. You are my favorite nephew after all.”

Kai rolled his eyes, “And you’re my favorite uncle, lumbering giant.”

For the rest of the journey, several conversations with his mother played in his head. When the jungle opened up to reveal the sky, he still didn’t feel ready.

Moui was right, he didn’t know what the future held, but he knew his intentions. And they hadn’t changed much in the last few years.

At home, Ele informed them Kea had stopped by to eat. She had probably gone to let off steam with her friends.

“Everything okay?” his older sister asked, squinting at him. There was something different about her today. He couldn’t really put his finger on it.

He needed to talk to Kea too. His mind could only worry about so many things at once, and he already had plans for that.

One problem at a time. I’ll invite her to train with me. If the fight wasn’t enough, there’s no more solid proof than that.

Kai anxiously paced around the house till dinner. He did his best to avoid Alana. His mom knew something was up, she could smell the blood. With or without the hunter’s, she would corner him to make him spill the beans. Moui said he’d talk with his mother after they ate.

“What’s got you so riled up? It looks like you’re running from your shadow.” Ele asked with a knowing look.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

Fine. Time for a test run.

“Well, you know I want to go to the mainland one day.”

Ele nodded, “You just keep blabbering about it since you could speak.”

“Well... what do you imagine I’ll do there?”

Ele shrugged. “I don’t know, pick flowers and marry a princess.”

“Be serious.”

His sister thought about it with a slight frown. “Knowing you, it will probably involve doing something reckless and dangerous along the way.”

Yeah, that’s not hurtful at all. At least I didn’t have to say much.

“Do you think Mum knows as well?”

“I’m still counting you’ll change your mind before then. As for Mum... she probably suspects something, but she’s not always objective with her *perfect boy*.”

“Mum doesn’t think I’m perfect,”

“Yeah, and you’re not her favorite either.”

“I’m not!” Kai protested, where was this coming from?

Was he?

“Maybe not intentionally.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” he waved her away. “Hypothetically speaking, what if there was something that would show I might be planning to take more risks than expected?”

“I’d say you’d best change your mind. Because that’s a very bad idea.”

“Would Mum say the same?”

Ele gave him a flat look, “Maybe you should go make an offering to the spirits.”