

Chapter 97 - Change and Growth

"I'm going out," Kai announced heading for the door.

"Okay, stay safe. Don't come back too late." Alana gave him a worried glance.

Not only did he have to deal with the lumbering figure of the hunter first thing in the morning, his mom also looked at him like he was about to break. Kai almost preferred Kea's taunting about his lacking magical talent.

And this was supposed to be a relaxing vacation.

The brisk morning air welcomed him outside. Their large house was becoming suffocating.

It's all going to pass, just give it time.

Taking a deep breath to reset his mood, Kai did a quick stretching and headed down the streets in a jog. It was frowned upon to run at full speed inside the town boundaries. Children without a profession were the sole exception, their attributes low enough not to be dangerous. Naturally, if *he* were to go all out, it would raise more than a few eyebrows.

Away from the richer districts, the large straight streets grew smaller and meandering. On both sides, cramped buildings leaned against each other to reach some sort of balance. The day began earlier here, with kids and adults already going about their business.

Kai easily found his way through the maze of winding streets and alleyways. He couldn't tell if his increase in Mind made him smarter, but it definitely improved his memory. The docks were closer to poshtown and the merchant district, but the most direct path to the sea cut through *the dregs*.

He had made numerous visits over the years, but he had never felt at risk, like in Greenside. Growing stronger and more skilled had played a factor too. It certainly helped boost his confidence.

Without conscious thought, Kai's eyes and ears were constantly scanning his surroundings by habit. Elijah had drilled in his soul to never let his guard down, submitting him to far harsher training than stray pebbles to ensure he'd never forget. Together with Danger Sense, there was little that escaped his notice, especially if someone was targeting him.

The soft presence of people passing glances brushed against his consciousness to be quickly forgotten. A sharper prickle made him falter. It lasted just a moment. A subtle pulse of Mana Sense pinpointed the source. A scarred man stood by a dingy establishment, his eyes watching the people passing by. The bouncer of some illegal activity if Kai were to take a guess.

Where there were people, crime would follow. With the heavy presence of the Republic in Sylspring, they usually tried not to attract attention. Peeking out of the last line of buildings, he waved at the enforcer guarding the southern gate, before continuing along the shore to his destination.

A short stretch of sand extended before him. The northern side of town offered much prettier sights, but it was chock-full of tourists. Sometimes kids and teenagers looking to have fun came here, but no one was within sight this early.

Kai left his shirt and shoes by a palm tree. After performing a more extensive stretching session, he jumped into the sea. The water was cold but pleasant. His eleventh birthday had been just a month ago and Spring was about to get into full swing.

Blessed Swimmer enhanced his every movement. His muscles pushed against the waters with all their strength, relinquishing all shackles.

Elijah had not given him any *homework* for his brief stay, they were past such things. This was for himself. To relieve all the stress and tension of the past days. There was nothing quite like letting his body loose. He slipped beneath the waves faster than humanly possible. At least on Earth.

His mana begged him to be unleashed and Kai obliged. Blazing his skills for a moment, the seafloor flashed past. Tiny blue and yellow fishes darted away from his path. It was exhilarating. His heart beat fast and strong. A feeling of rightness and invincibility filled him.

Kai let his momentum drain away to a standstill. Floating underwater with Blessed Swimmer everything was in his place. Rays of sunlight penetrate the waters from above. Open sea on his left, a kelp field on his right. Large dark green leaves gently swaying in the currents. Thousands of swimming fireflies of light shone through Mana Sense. The call to explore the underwater forest beckoned him forward.

Another day, he promised.

Breaching the surface, he wasn't even winded. The shore extended hundreds of meters behind him, a thin line of sand and trees, clear to his sharp gaze. Buildings and ships rose further up. He had errands to take care of and potions to sell. Adventure could wait a couple days.

Damn, being responsible sucks.

Diving again, Kai explored the coast underwater, using only his passive enhancements. If he used Water mana and Empower, he could keep swimming for hours without growing tired. He didn't have that time. Plus, it was a chore to refill his reserves away from the estate.

As the butler said, it wasn't true training if you could stand on your own two feet by the end. Kai made sure to strain his muscles against the waves.

He emerged an hour later, heaving and satisfied. With barely a thought, the water flowed off his body, leaving him dry. He put on his clothes and sat on the beach against the palm tree.

Skills:

- **Acting (lv67>98)**

- **Mana Sense (lv58>73)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv36>58)**
- **Empower (lv26>55)**
- **Inspect (lv25>48)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv6>41)**
- **Water Magic (lv1>40)**
- **Alchemy (lv23>40)**
- **Runes (lv14>37)**
- **Nature Magic (lv10>36)**
- **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv1>20)**
- **Herbology – Advanced (lv1>28)**
- **Danger Sense (lv1>14)**
- **Attuned Meditation (lv1>10)**

Untold years of toil had paid their dividends. A beautiful wall of orange, with a single red skill on top. He had worked tirelessly and now he was so close to evolving Acting to the next tier. If some snotty brats on the mainland had a higher grade than him, he'd bet very few had higher skills.

Herbology and Swordsmanship proceeded on the same path. Their breath of possibilities carried them beyond the red tier. He had been offered the chance to branch off with a more specialized path but refused. It was better to be fully grown before deciding what type of sword to choose, and devoting himself to a particular type of plant or habitat held even less appeal.

The downside to possessing such high-level skills was in their slow growth. They might give three times more XP, but they were four times harder to train, and often more than that. The difference only grew starker as they climbed in level.

Blessed Swimmer and Water Magic sped through the earlier levels—in no small part thanks to his affinity—but were slowing down too. To not even talk about Alchemy or Runes. There was a reason many mages dedicated their whole lives to those skills, building their whole status around them.

Kai couldn't afford the same privilege. He was conscious of leaning towards a jack of all trades and master of none. Apart from mana skills, which took the biggest chunk of his

focus, he touched upon numerous more or less correlated fields. Each of them could have taken his entire focus.

He had spent long evenings discussing the matter with his teachers. Specializing in a single field brought many advantages, but it also left great vulnerabilities when you stepped out of your comfort zone.

There was one remedy for those who embarked on this path: relying on other people with a complementary focus. It could be friends or colleagues, but more often it was far larger structures. The army, the government, guilds and companies. Become a cog in a bigger machine.

He wasn't completely against the idea. Joining some group or organization sounded feasible if they were a good fit and didn't put heavy restrictions on him.

When he imagined himself traveling the world, he wasn't usually alone. Kai knew he might not be the most sociable person, but fate certainly never helped him on that front. How could he relate to his peers when they were years younger than him, and the difference wasn't any smaller skill-wise?

On the Baquaire Archipelago, there was only one organization with the resources to satisfy his needs if he chose to specialize. And he'd rather cut off his hand than join the Merian Republic.

It didn't leave much choice. If he wanted to travel to the Talthen continent without selling his soul, he needed skills to defend himself, to deal with people and to earn money.

His best chance was to reach Yellow and increase his skill slots once more. Not an easy or fast solution. He once dreamed of reaching it before fourteen. With his skills stalling, that looked each day more unlikely. He was going to try his hardest regardless, even if he reached it at fifteen or sixteen it would still be incredibly good.

Time to go back.

Suddenly the world darkened. Kai glanced overhead, a moon was obscuring the sun. Eclipses weren't a good omen in the archipelago, but the Church of the Seven Moons taught it was a sign the gods were watching. So who knew?

Kai passed by his house to grab his bag. His family was all at work, sparing him from another dose of awkwardness. Changing his clothes to a more expensive pair worthy of an alchemist, he headed out again, this time toward the merchant district.

Poshtown was as opulent and extravagant as he remembered. Even the mana had been slightly enhanced with a gathering array. The increase wasn't high, but over such a vast area, the investment must have been considerable.

At this time of the year, most tourists were on the older side. Retiree and walking moneybags. It would still be a few months before families swarmed in droves on these shores.

The new addition to the menagerie of poshtown were young teenagers sporting a hawk pin on their puffed chests. They walked down the streets in their blue uniforms like proud peacocks.

With all the bullshit nonsense the Republic forced down their throat at the training centers, that was the only possible result. As Kai suspected, the governor would never do anything without an ulterior motive. Now the best and brightest, chosen by the sponsorship program, went around spouting republic propaganda.

Worse yet, people still sent their children to participate in the annual selection. It left him dumbfounded. Could they not see what they were doing?

Reasoning with a clear head he could see their motives, even if it still made him furious. Many of the kids who got in reached Orange at twelve. And the added monetary incentive

only sweetened the deal. When the Republic was their only chance at a better life, who was he to tell him to refuse?

Not every kid turned into an obnoxious brat regurgitating the Republic's nonsense, but many did. In a couple more years the first generation of kids would reach adulthood. Kai wasn't looking forward to that day.

Maybe they'll see reason after they mature. Hopefully.

Disturbed by the sight, Kai took a small detour to the *Sage Tree* to leave a message for Flynn. Mrs. Calla—the owner of the establishment—had a way to get a hold of him. If Flynn was in town, he would pop up at some point. Getting some inside information about the program, and talking with someone who didn't fall for their propaganda, was reassuring. Or depressing, depending on what the little thief reported.

Kai reached the merchant district without further distractions. Knocking on the metal gate of a mansion, a man in servant clothing hurried to open the lock.

"Please come inside, Master Kai. We've been waiting for you. Master Reishi has just come back from his voyage. I'll inform him immediately." The butler—a real one—wore a pristine maroon uniform.

Kai was led to an elegant room with two plush sofas.

"I'll send someone to bring the refreshments. If there is anything you need don't hesitate to ask. We are at your service, Master Kai."

"I'm fine, thank you."

The butler bowed and left. Not a minute later, another servant came to bring an icy drink and cute glazed fish pastries in all colors.

“Is there anything else you need, Master Kai?” the woman asked without meeting his eyes.

“No, thank you.”

The obsequious ways of the servants grated against the casualness of the islanders he was used to. It made him uncomfortable, but it wasn't his place to tell them how to act. This wasn't his house. Most of Reishi's employees were from the mainland or far away islands, recruited together with the crews and ships the merfolk bought.

More times than not, Kai delivered his order to his subordinates, since Reishi was usually at sea. This time he got lucky, they were both here by chance.

Kai sipped on the cold minty drink and got comfortable on the couch. Knowing Reishi, the merfolk could be on the other side of town closing a deal right now.

Soon most of the fish pastries were gone. The door opened again. As Kai was about to tell the servant he didn't need anything for the third time, he recognized the familiar scaled features.

“I hope I didn't keep you waiting for long,” Reishi smiled, with a heavy breath.

Did he actually run here from across town?

“About twenty minutes,” Kai stated flatly.

“My deepest apologies.”

“If you really want to repay me for my time. A 5% increase in my share of the profits would solve it,” Kai said with a cheeky grin on his face.

Reishi laughed and sat down, “Should have expected that. 1% just because I like you.”

“Deal.” He hadn’t expected anything to start with.

“Well, show me what you brought this time.” The merman’s keen eyes focused on his backpack as if he could see through the fabric and enchantments. Maybe he could.

One by one, Kai took out what was promised. Healing potions of different grades made up the bulk of the order. Nothing sold better than that. Then he passed to rarer effects. Concoctions to stave off exhaustion, poisons and antidotes, potions for endurance and strength, a mana replenishing elixir and a pill that granted you clarity of mind for a short period.

The small coffee table could barely accommodate all the glass vials and containers.

“That’s quite the haul,” Reishi commented, filaments of mana already at work around his hands as he analyzed the potions with his skills.

“It’s been five months,” looking at them all together, Kai was also surprised to see how many there were. “They pile up quickly.”

Since they were both busy on unpredictable schedules, their deal didn’t include numbers, but a list of alchemical creations Reishi committed to buying. Quantities were left up to what he could scrounge up in his limited free time. And prices were based on the local demand.

On top of those, Kai brew the more exotic potions to see if the Reishi was interested in buying. He needed to challenge himself to push his Alchemy towards the first orange threshold.

“Let’s talk about the price.” They shared a smile.