

Chapter 112 - Humility and Pride

Kai ended up soundproofing Kea's room for free. It didn't feel fair to profit from that. And he didn't need money, at least not the sums his sister could afford.

Kea did look slightly impressed when his *scribbles* worked as advertised. Blocking noise was one of the few enchantments that could be sustained in the low mana density. A basic absorption script could siphon enough essence to keep the runes going indefinitely, if they weren't damaged.

The more pressing issue was restocking his ink supply. The one he used for soundproofing was a cheap blend, good for experimenting and little else. It would decay quickly if used with mana-hungry scripts.

To make a gathering array and improve their shower situation, he needed something stronger. Choosing the right type of ink and material was fundamental to inscribing a successful enchantment.

His reliance on Dora was once again slammed in his face. Half of the herbs he used to concoct the more exotic types of ink came from her garden.

If they had warned me they were going to leave, I would have restocked.

Brewing alchemical compounds wasn't his forte. They required mineral or animal ingredients that behaved differently from herbs. He never stocked up on those materials, and he only had four half-used jars from previous projects.

Dora had made him study several tomes on the topic regardless. As she pointed out, the main advantage of pursuing multiple crafts was when those fields met. The generic ink he could buy from merchants would never work as well as those he specifically made for a task. All famous enchanters brewed it themselves or worked closely with an alchemist.

Right, the book!

With a thought to his spatial closet, *Practical Potions from the Baquaire Archipelago* fell into his hands. He'd been too busy to properly check the recipes, and their embarrassing names didn't help.

Sitting at his desk, Kai opened the leather cover to the first page. Written with neat cursive words, he found an unexpected message.

To my dearest pupil,

I hope this book will prove of help in your journey and light the way forward. The exploration of alchemy is never over.

Theodora

The sudden storm of emotions left him unprepared. Kai blinked repeatedly and turned the page to look for the index.

He skimmed through the forty-nine entries, cringing at names as he tried to guess their purpose. He found a few promising recipes, *N. 26: Kai's Handy Mixture*, *N. 33: Kai's Trusty Ink* and *N.42: Kai's Unforgettable Signature*.

Just why?

With his ears burning, he browsed the book and quickly found the respective pages. *N. 33* and *N.42* were both beyond his capabilities. He might manage the first if he wanted to dedicate a month to the project, which he didn't.

He focused on *N.26*, it was one of the longer entries, sixteen pages total. Besides the basic recipe, *Kai's Handy Mixture* contained dozens of possible alterations to suit the ink to his needs. More importantly, the ingredients didn't look hard to source.

It's certainly handy.

It was too late to buy the materials he didn't have at hand. Kai spent a few hours reading about all the possible variations. The process wasn't totally foreign, but it would have to wait till after his excursion into the jungle.

The next day, Kai prepared any potion that might prove useful, fastened his sword at his side and took a satchel to mask his ring. Kea was too unpredictable to be trusted with such a secret.

Moui and Alana were already waiting in the kitchen, talking softly. Their words were too quiet even for his keen ears. To make matters even more suspicious, they turned quiet when he arrived.

"Good morning, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?" His mother's tone was guiltily cheerful. No doubt they were talking about him.

"Yes, I've never felt this rested," Kai observed them closely. With the new soundproofing runes, he had truly slept wonderfully.

Alana wasted no time piling breakfast in front of him. "How are your wounds? If you need more time to heal.

"We can always do another day." Moui reminded him.

"My scratches are fine, Mom," He showed her his arms. "See, like they never happened."

Kea appeared minutes later, strangely also in a good mood. Soon they were ready to go.

"Be careful," Alana saw them off at the door. "And come home for dinner."

“I’ll make sure to bring them back before sundown,” Moui promised, exchanging a long look with his mother.

Kea rolled her eyes, loudly clearing her throat. “We need to go if we want to come back early. We’re already late.”

Exiting the gate towards the fields, Kai silently looked between his companions. Moui walked at the front, inscrutable as usual. His sister kept pace with a smug smile.

He had been the one to propose this trip, but now he wasn’t sure how to act. It had been a long while since they did something together.

“So, where are we going?”

“In the jungle to hunt,” Kea said with the smart-ass tone of a teenager. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you from any scary beast.”

“Oh, my brave hero.”

“Just wait till you come face to face with an awakened beast, we’ll see how you react.”

“I’m trembling in fear.”

Moui sighed, realizing what it meant to bring both siblings together. “We’ll be checking on the traps first. Then we can move a little deeper to see what we can find. Unless you want to do something else.”

“No, it’s fine.”

With a quick pace, they reached the green sea. Kai was surprised to find a path leading through the middle of the jungle. Not like the faux path to the estate, but a proper wide line of dirt devoid of any greenery.

“There are many more people hunting here compared to Greenside. The outer reaches near Sylspring are as safe as it gets in Veeryd, but you won’t find much. They are left to the folk who want to forage.” Moui explained.

“Can we increase the pace?” Kea asked. “The other hunters will take all the best spots if we don’t move.”

“Rushing things is a good way for things to go wrong.”

Kea snorted a half-apology.

“It’s fine, Uncle. I don’t mind,” Kai said, eager to continue. Spirits, he should have showcased all his abilities in front of Kea years ago.

Their slow jog quickly increased in pace as Kea vainly tried to tire him out. This couldn’t even be considered training by Elijah’s standards. He enjoyed her bewildered glances as he easily kept pace with her even without Empower.

Ele was right, she has no idea how I trained at the estate. I may have understated the events a little, but it’s not like I gave no details. Did she think I was overselling myself?

As the run turned into a sprint, Moui grabbed both their shoulders to put an end to it. “That’s enough, this is not a race. You know better than this.”

Under his heavy gaze, Kea showed a few surprising hints of guilt.

“You too,” the hunter turned to Kai, who scrambled to mask the amusement on his face.

With a temporary truce established, they proceeded in silence with Moui standing between them.

Kai had never taken the time to explore the jungle around Sylspring. The forest indeed looked different. Evident signs of human presence were everywhere. Broken branches, boot tracks, each bush or tree growing edible fruits had been picked clean with brutal efficiency.

The proximity to the path was part of the reason, but it remained baffling. They even passed a couple other groups of foragers as they headed deeper. He'd never use the word *tame* to describe Veeryd, but this was far less wild than what he was used to.

As they continued, the strip of dirt they were following separated into multiple strands. “Those loop around back to Sylspring,” Moui pointed at the branching tracks.

The last path finally thinned out till it disappeared in the weeds. A much more familiar sight. Without hesitation, Moui and Kea took a sharp turn through a wall of shrubbery.

“We're almost there,” the hunter said.

The mana density was still below the inner parts of Veeryd. “Is this where you hunt?”

“Not exactly.”

Nothing could prepare him for what came next. The treeline opened up to reveal a building, a two-story wooden structure standing in the middle of the jungle.

Kai was about to shrink back into the greenery. What demonic construction was this? Yatei's mercy, he could see the blue sky overhead.

"What's this?" There were at least half a dozen people walking around, briefly glancing in their direction before continuing with their tasks. Everyone sported bows, spears, knives or some other kind of weapon.

"Welcome to the *Hunter's Lodge*," Moui said with a knowing look. "It's a place for hunters to gather and sleep if they want to head to the inner parts of Veeryd. I was surprised too when I first saw it."

The closer they got the more surprises were revealed. The wide-open grove was remarkably large. "I guess they didn't lack the wood."

Beyond the main building, there were smaller cabins. Yells of people bargaining for money caught his attention.

Moui stopped him before he could wander off. "It started as a shack, and quickly grew into this. We'd technically need a permit from the Republic to trade and for the tavern, so we don't advertise its existence in Sylspring. Even if they know what's going on here, it would be too complicated to regulate us out here. There is a sort of silent agreement with the officials to let us manage ourselves as long as we don't make trouble."

"Don't embarrass us," Kea said, walking ahead.

Moui shook his head with exasperation.

"Can I take a look around?" Kai eagerly asked.

"They don't like strangers. Some hunters can be a touch paranoid."

Kai hung his head in disappointment. “Can’t you just come with me then?” An unregulated market supplied by high-level hunters. Whatever got sold here was sure to be worth a peek.

“Sorry kid, no exception for newcomers,” a new voice interrupted them, a man was approaching them. He wore brown and green clothes to camouflage in the jungle and a long knife hung at his belt. But what caught his attention was his fake smile.

Kai found himself already disliking him. It wasn’t just the words—at least not entirely. The man gave him an unsettling feeling.

Moui stiffened, speaking with cold courtesy, “Hi, Tridel. We are just passing through. I seem to remember there is no problem with that.”

“No, of course not. You know Ceila’s rules. As long as you move on quickly,” Tridel observed him more closely than it was comfortable. “Have a fruitful hunt.”

The unpleasant man walked away. They headed directly for the opposite edge of the grove.

“What’s his deal?” Kai whispered.

“Some hunters are a bit *particular*.”

“So, he’s an asshole to everybody?”

Moui got a complicated look. “It’s my fault.”

“How so?”

“I came out of nowhere and I beat him in the last three hunts.”

“Oh yeah, that’s *entirely* your fault.”

“Anyway, most people aren’t that bad. If you want, I’ll ask permission to show you around next time.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I mean, if it’s not a problem.” He really wanted to see what kind of materials were sold by high-level hunters.

From what little he did see, their grade was far higher than average. Anyone past their early twenties had reached Orange ★★. A few might possibly rival Moui’s race level.

He’d tried to be discreet with Mana Sense in case someone would recognize his touch. They already seemed a touchy bunch.

“Don’t worry. Despite what Tridel makes her appear, Ceila isn’t an unreasonable woman, she’s just prudent.”

They found Kea chatting idly with a group of two other teenagers. From their attire and weapons, they were apprentices too.

“You need to do as I say from here on out,” Moui reminded him.

“It’s not my first time hunting, Uncle.”

Kea scoffed. “When was the last time, four years ago?”

“About a month, actually.”

They looked at him as if they expected him to burst into laughter for a joke.

Damn, I'm sure I told them I went into the jungle a few times. Did they think I went picking flowers?

From the look in their eyes, they probably did. Did they imagine he spent his day throwing random herbs in his cauldron while reciting arcane mumbo-jumbo? He could understand his sister, but even his Uncle?

“I thought you were apprenticing as a mage,” Moui finally said.

“Yeah, I also use magic to hunt.” His frustration was rapidly rising in front of their surprised expressions.

I've been too humble, time to show off.

Without further words, they headed back into the lush vegetation. Kai diligently scanned their surroundings, hoping to find the chance to shatter their assumptions.

His sister kept throwing looks at him, frowning deeply. Kai fluidly moved through the vegetation and made it look effortless—though it was not. Unless she was blind, his hunting experience would be obvious. It wasn't something that could be faked.

Moving silently in the shadows was an art Elijah had given him no choice but to learn. He was only allowed a pass when he successfully stalked an orange-grade snake for half a day. Kai had lost count of all the times he had to repeat the exercise before getting it right.

Masking his mana was the other half, but Kea wouldn't be able to appreciate the nuances required for the finer control.

Unfortunately, no awakened beast crossed their path. They checked upon half a dozen traps, four of which had caught something. Kai had to admit he was a bit impressed by their design. He couldn't understand little of the mess of rope, knots and weights.

Kea quickly regained her bravado as her fingers expertly pulled them apart and reassembled them. "Want to try setting one?" she asked with an amiable smile.

"I prefer to make traps for beasts."

"Yeah, sure."

They had just touched upon the inner area of the jungle to check their last trap when Kai froze in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" Moui asked.

Kai took a moment to realize what was going on. The murmurs of Hallowed Intuition were whispering in the back of his mind. It was different from how they usually presented. They were indistinct, and yet the meaning was clear. Danger awaited in that direction.