

## Chapter 104 - Out of the Nest

“You’ll have to send me to the ancestors if ‘ou want my turnips!” Old Ven threateningly wielded his hoe in one hand and an oil lamp in the other.

“It’s just me.” Clouds hid the moons tonight, leaving only some fickle light through. Kai stepped within the range of the lamp. He didn’t expect the grumpy farmer to still be in his field at this hour.

Old Ven squinted at him, recognition flashing in his eyes. “I didn’t think I’d see ‘ou before a month, lad. Whatchu doing here? Did your master finally get tired of ‘ou?”

“My mum complained I wasn’t home long enough,” Kai said. Better to avoid any details if he wanted to play dumb, even though Ven would sooner cut his tongue than talk with any Republic official.

“Do as your ma’ tells ‘ou, lad.” The geezer frowned at him. “Spirits’ mercy! You really got kicked out, didn’t ‘ou?”

Kai grimaced. He only wished for his bed, instead, he had to deal with the scowling farmer. Old Ven shunned tactfulness as merchants did with honesty. But his disregard for social clues didn’t mean he wasn’t sharp.

“Something like that.” He replied vaguely, marching through his field. If he stopped right now, he wouldn’t be getting up again.

“You’ll be fine, lad. Your teacher’s the one who’s losing out.”

The words hit him so unexpectedly that his foot missed a step. Kai stumbled forward, coming close to planting his face beside the turnips.

“Thanks, Ven.” It wasn’t exactly how things went, but it was nice to feel appreciated.

“Don’t make ‘uor ma’ worry,” he waved him off. “And give my cabbages some luck too while you’re at it. They’re on the left. Yes, over there.”

“Will do, and take care of yourself, gramps. What would I do without your happy mug greeting me?”

Old Ven grunted something about insolent youngsters and went back to his patrol.

Kai easily found the patch of cabbages. He scraped together what Nature mana he had. It wasn’t much but he made the most out of it with his skill.

The lights of Sylspring shone in the distance, giving him the strength to push the last stretch. He had put away his enchanted crystal to avoid unwanted attention. Traversing the farmland with little to no light caused him to almost fall into an irrigation canal twice.

Despite filling his ring to full capacity, his backpack was far heavier than usual. His last strands of mana fueled Empower enough to keep him standing.

*I didn’t think I had this many books.*

Experiments, botanic knowledge and random scribbles filled more than two dozen books. Without Dora to answer his questions and point him in the right direction, any passing sentences he wrote down could prove invaluable.

Kai had been stunned by the number of notes he had taken over the years. He had been planning to organize them in a neater format, but always kept postponing the task.

*Now I won't have any more excuses to procrastinate. There will be plenty of free time.*

The enforcer at the gate asked for his ID. Kai had to endure a reprimand about kids who shouldn't stay out this late, but was eventually let through. The man probably thought he was a local. Who else would be out at this hour?

*Guess I am a local from now on...*

It was a hundred times better than getting stranded in Greenside again, though it still left him with mixed emotions.

*I'm too tired to think about this now. I want my fluffy pillow.*

The town lights improved considerably inside the walls. Following the main street through the gate, Kai grinded forward. His back was killing him, his legs felt like wet noodles. Empower was the only thing that kept him standing.

*Almost home.*

Despite being close to midnight, sparse groups of people walked the streets, only increasing as he moved toward the touristy parts. The clipped accent of the mainland overshadowed the flowing speech of the locals.

"How're you doing, kid? You're running late today."

*Am I so tired I started hallucinating?*

Alas, the spirits weren't so merciful.

Captain Zerith's towering figure appeared before him with a jovial smile. Not a hint of sleepiness on his face, but with his race grade that was to be expected.

Kai gathered all his motes of patience. "I was about to go home."

"Do you need a hand?" He hinted at his backpack. "You look like you'll start snoring at any moment."

"I'm quite alright. My house is nearby." Kai was fairly certain the captain had a way to tell if someone was lying, so he always had to jump through hoops when talking with him.

He'd also rather not have him anywhere near his spatial bag. Zerith knew he possessed one—or that Kai's master did—and it wasn't an overly precious object for someone at his level. The problem was if he peeked inside and guessed he was moving permanently to Sylspring.

The longer he kept the secret, the less attention the disappearance of their villa would get. That was Kai's hope. Maybe he was worrying for nothing, but the man was the captain of the enforcers for a reason.

"It's no bother at all," the man waved him off.

"I'm fine, reall—" Kai was too slow to react. Instead of grabbing the bag, Zerith grabbed him, lifting him up. It was a very awkward position to carry someone, though Zerith seemed to have no problem with it.

"Don't worry, I know the way," he chuckled.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Kai asked, exasperated. "Aren't you off duty at this hour?"

“A captain is never off duty, kid. And it’s my job to help all the citizens of this charming town.”

With his leg flailing over the gravel road, Kai seriously considered kicking him in the shins before resigning to the embarrassment. With both his hands carrying him, Zerith would have no chance to sneakily open his backpack.

“You came back sooner than I thought. Did anything interesting happen?”

As expected, the obvious question didn’t take long to come.

“My mother wished I spent more time with her. So here I am. What about you, how do you always know I’m back in town.” Kai was too tired to weave a convincing story. The best way to stop further inquiries was to go on the offensive with a blunt question.

“It’s my duty to keep tabs on the town.”

“I don’t treat you like an idiot. I’d appreciate it if you did the same.” Kai could feel the grasp at his side stiffen slightly. His question was bordering rude, but so was having a conversation while the man carried him. And Zerith’s answer was clearly bullshit.

The silence made him doubt his assumptions when the man put him down.

“You’re right, kid. I apologize.” For once Zerith didn’t sound like he was making a joke. “I put a mark on you.”

“What?” His fuzzy brain woke up by a surge of anger and indignation. “What did *you* do to me?”

“It’s harmless,” the captain added. After some hesitation, he continued in a lower tone. “It’s a skill of mine. It lets me mark people and keep track of them. So, when you come back within range, I come to greet you.”

The unexpected sharing of private information took Kai by surprise, but it didn’t abate his anger and alarm entirely. His first instinct was to scan his body for this mark, though if he hadn’t noticed till now, there was no shot he would find it while exhausted.

“Why did you mark *me*?”

“It was an order from higher up. I’m sure you can imagine why.”

*Fucking governor.*

“Was it for the selection I participated in, or for the permit I received?”

“I made no mention of the skills you showed during the selection.”

*So it’s the second. Dammit, I should have refused that letter immediately. I never even used it.*

“Don’t worry, kid. You aren’t in any trouble.”

“Can you take off your mark then?”

“Ehm...” The captain looked uncomfortable. “I could, but then I’d have to send in a report which would invite more attention. You shouldn’t worry. You’ve never done anything to warrant further scrutiny. I’d bet they’ve already forgotten about you.”

“But you’re still keeping tabs on me.”

“I’ve marked more than a hundred people throughout the town,” Zerith chuckled. “Trust me, you’re not that special. I come to say hello more out of personal curiosity.”

That was a bit reassuring. Kai yawned and looked around. “My house is two blocks from here. I better go.”

“Let me know if you need anything. Your family seems lovely.” The captain finally left him alone.

Kai headed home, hiding the irritation he felt. If Zerith’s confession was an elaborate scheme for some obscure goal, he couldn’t really see what they were after. Sure, he thought the man was telling the truth, but he would also be more vigilant.

This seemed like a whole lot of trouble for basically nothing in return. The captain was right, he was not that special. Even at the selection, the only skill he showcased in full was his Swordsmanship. The real people the governor showed interest in were his teachers, not him.

*The question is how the governor will react when he finds out they’re gone... Is it too optimistic to hope he’ll lose interest in me?*

This was going to give him a headache, but it could wait till the morning when his mind was clear. The white door of his house stood in front of him. Kai rummaged through his bag to find the keys. Luckily his mother gave him a copy.

He turned the lock as softly as he could. His family was probably already asleep, and he didn’t want to wake them.

“It’s you. Why are you back so soon? Is everything alright?”

The deep voice made him jolt. A figure was walking down the stairs without making a sound. Kai couldn't really see him in the dark, but the voice was unmistakable.

"I'm fine. Just got back sooner than I thought."

"It's been four days, did you leave as soon as you got there?" Moui stepped close enough to recognize his frown in the glimmer of light from the window—and the ax he was trying to hide behind his back.

"The journey takes just one day."

"Even so," he said with a note of astonishment. "That would give you just two days. Did something happen?"

He sighed, feeling the worry in Moui's voice. "It did, but can we talk in the morning? I'm tired and I want to sleep."

Kai could feel the hunter's gaze scanning each inch of his body.

"Okay." Moui finally said, making way for him.

"Uncle?"

"Yes?"

"Can you help me bring my bag up the stairs? I don't want to wake the others." His limbs were too heavy to be stealthy, and Alana wouldn't let him get off so easily if she woke up. He really wanted to hug his pillow and travel to the kingdom of dreams.

The weight of his backpack lifted off his shoulders. A second later he also got lifted for the second time that day. He was too tired to protest, so he just leaned against Moui. He fell asleep before he could get to his bed.

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The next morning, Kai was surprised not to find his mother observing him an inch from his face.

*Moui must have convinced her to wait outside the door.*

Kai suppressed a grimace when he tried to stand up. His body protested the treatment of the previous day. Crawling to the edge of his bed, he reached for his bag.

He drank one of his emergency tonics and lay on the covers, waiting for the potions to take effect. As soon as he opened his door, his family would be all over him and he'd have to go through a lengthy explanation. Being barely able to move would not look reassuring.

Using Attuned Meditation, he began to manually refill his reserves. Outside the estate, a whole night wasn't enough to top his mana.

*Spirits, I'm going to miss that. I could build a gathering array, but that might attract attention...*

His thoughts were captured by the memories of the previous night.

*Where is that damn mark!*

He wasn't sure what he should be looking for, but from what he read the mark would probably leave some kind of mana imprint. Mana Sense methodically scanned him from the top of his head to the tip of his toes, unsuccessfully.

With the glowing motes flowing through his body, it wasn't impossible he missed it. It was also possible that his skills weren't good enough to identify it even if he looked straight at it.

*I got tagged with a magic GPS tracker, where are the privacy laws?*

Kai took a deep breath. If Zerith was telling the truth, he had little to worry about. But damn, the idea of being watched was frustrating. Like an itch he couldn't quite scratch. His first impulse was to ask Elijah or Dora for help. Then he remembered a small problem - they were gone.

*Is it possible they never noticed?*

Zerith had marked him years ago. While the man was certainly strong, Kai didn't think he was more capable than Elijah, let alone Virya. Nothing escaped her notice.

*Then why did nobody tell me or get rid of the mark?*

His brain formulated and discarded a dozen possibilities. There was only one that made sense: they didn't want Zerith to know they could do it. If they got rid of the mark, the captain would notice.

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced. They couldn't really stop the governor from keeping tabs on him—especially if they were planning to leave. The less impressive they looked, the fewer questions he was going to get asked.

Even if Kai could find the mark and a way to get rid of it, doing that would reveal the extent of his skills and invite more attention.

*Spirits help me, the best thing I can do is to just do nothing and hope they lose interest. If Zerith didn't lie they already don't care much.*

There was no chance in hell he would stop looking for the mark, but it didn't matter if it took since he wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

Feeling better—at least physically. Kai pushed down his irritation and opened the door. He had yet to reach the stairs when his mom was upon him with a shining smile.

“I've missed you, sweetie.”

“It's only been four days.” Kai tried to get away from the hug after a few seconds.

Alana reluctantly complied, taking a good look at him. “I'm so happy that you're back. How long are you staying?”