

Chapter 133 - The Path Ahead

Kai squeezed his eyes shut, covering them with an arm. Noise and light chipped away at his slumber. He wanted to cling on to the dream just a little longer. He was back at the estate, taking a refreshing swim under the shining sun, carefree and happy.

Just five more minutes.

No matter how hard he tried to grasp it, sleep slipped away like sand through his fingers. His thoughts grew too loud to ignore, pressing worries dragged him like chains toward wakefulness. Reality demanded his attention.

Fine!

Kai massaged his eyelids to stave off the throbbing headache, like someone had played soccer with his head. Sitting upright, he winced when he pressed his weight on the bruises. Sore muscles also protested, but he was used to that.

A brief surge of Empower banished the remnants of sleep.

Yes, that actually happened, and I've survived.

Hallowed Intuition was blessedly silent. No screams, only the bustles of people talking close and far.

His hair brushed against a dark green canvas. The fabric couldn't entirely shield him from the light outside. A rolled blanket for the pillow and two more to cushion the ground underneath. Moui had a similar tent, though this one looked new.

Untying the flaps of the tent, Kai stepped outside. Free to stand upright, his body protested every movement, but hunger made him forget the pain.

His stomach grumbled, seeming about to eat itself. He was famished, more than he had ever been in his entire life. His ring was empty, he had already eaten his emergency snacks the day before.

Dammit. I should have remembered that no number of snacks is ever enough.

The sun was close to noon, shining a pleasant heat on his skin. Tents and improvised shelters spread around him as far as he could see. The sea of people made him falter before he recognized the familiar farmland. The jungle behind them and the town walls on the other.

“You’re awake,” Moui’s deep voice called.

The whole family hurried towards him, even Kea joined the group hug.

“How are you feeling?”

“We were so worried, but we couldn’t get hold of a healer.”

Ele and Alana bombarded him with questions, without giving him the chance to answer. Ignoring his protests, they dragged him to a campsite where a bowl of cold vegetable stew was placed in his hands.

“I can go heat it first.”

Kai held on to the bowl with both hands when his mother tried to take it away. “It’s fine, Mom. I like it cold.”

With a piece of hard bread, he began to fill his mouth as fast as he could swallow. His hunger only grew after the first bite.

“I’ll heat the next one, then. Remember to chew.”

Alana came back with more bowls, bread and salty jerky. Not what he usually went for, but they all made his mouth water. His belly was like the insatiable depths.

“I think you’ve had enough,” Alana snatched a piece of cheese from his hands.

His look of betrayal didn’t move her, nor did his pitiful expression with Improvisation. “Mom, I’m still hungry.”

“You’re going to vomit if you eat any more.”

Maybe he needed time to digest everything. His belly was bulging, and the hunger had settled down to a muted yearning.

“What happened?” Kai finally asked.

Alana and Moui shared a glance.

“We’re safe, the pirates are gone,” his uncle said, glancing behind his shoulder.

Kai noticed the numerous enforcers patrolling through the camp. Usually, people preferred to keep their distance, but now no one seemed to mind.

“They announced an hour ago that the last stranded pirate had been found and executed.”

“Don’t worry, they said we should be able to return to our houses soon.” Alana’s smile dimmed. “Those of us who still have one anyway.”

Kai thought he would be put through an interrogation. But after his third not-so-subtle hint at the subject was ignored, he stopped prodding.

His family had moved the conversation to mundane topics. They acted like they were in their house talking about the weather over breakfast, while the town had been raided and burned.

Alright, it’s too soon.

After ensuring he still had all his fingers and toes, they left him alone—for how much privacy someone could get in a camp packed with people. Moui left for the jungle to hunt with Kea, any morsel of food would be welcome. Ele and Alana went to help other families and check on people they knew.

The whole camp wanted to keep busy. Laughs and smiles were shared, people were happy to be alive. Each one had their way of coping with what happened.

Kai wanted to ask Ele how much she told them of last night. His sister’s smile was particularly bright, but it didn’t make her eyes shine. Getting the hint, he didn’t bring up what happened.

There will be time later.

“Do you know where Flynn is?”

“We offered him to stay with us, but he left soon after we came back. Probably went looking for his family.”

“Yeah, that must be it.”

They were overdue for a long conversation, but he wasn't surprised the boy cut and ran. Squads of enforcers filled the camp, pulling people aside to ask questions. It was better Flynn made himself scarce for the time being.

He'll be fine. Unless the rebels kill him for letting me escape. Or the enforcers find out he associated with the rebels, or—

Kai shook his head. Flynn knew how to take care of himself. Maybe he actually went to check on his family. Though they might also be part of The Voice of the Ancestors, he should be safe.

The only person who knew Flynn had helped him escape was Tridel, and the hunter was fertilizer for the jungle. No corpse, no proof.

Damn, Flynn, you could have left a note before disappearing.

The headache slightly reduced after he ate. His steps were stiff, each movement made muscles ache. He could use one more healing potion or two, but he was already suffering from overdosing on the alchemical concoctions.

Gritting his teeth, he held off. He might take a weak one after his hunger abated.

He dismissed the notifications blinking in his peripheral vision. He wasn't ready to look at what happened either. It felt wrong to celebrate his gains and levels after so many people died.

Using a trickle of Empower, Kai began wandering around to kill time. The camp was divided into two areas. The one he was in, near the fields, and another smaller one, closer to the northern beach, where the mainlanders had been gathered.

He didn't have news of Reishi. The merman was resourceful, but Kai still worried. The merchant district was close to the docks, with its wealth it would have been a prime target of the raiders.

No doubt, the most likely place to find the merfolk was with the rich people. A line of enforcers separated the two camps. They required an official ID to let you through. His own was stored in his spatial closet. Casually walking behind a tent, out of the sight of any officer, Kai took out the fancy paper from his pocket.

The man signed his name down before letting him through with a stern glance. "Don't make trouble or you'll be thrown out."

Neat rows of wide tents immediately highlighted a stark difference. Each person seemed to have their own place to sleep. There were even stalls with free rations of water and fruits if he presented his ID.

Despite the better treatment, the mood was gloomier. Cries and sobs resounded from more than one tent, a woman was weeping in the open, uncaring of the stares of the passersby.

Others argued animatedly with the enforcers, demanding better food or a passage to Highharbor.

The higher you are, the steeper the fall.

To be fair, if he had gone to visit an archipelago that flaunted absolute safety, he might also not react in the best way.

Maybe those lunatics will truly strike a blow to the governor's pockets in the end.

There was no worse advertisement than getting your clients killed. If the rumors of the attack spread, it would be a big blow to tourism. His fists clenched, the thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

And all at the low, low price of burning a town and killing a few hundred people whose biggest fault was being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The place wasn't particularly big, but looking through all the tents, Kai couldn't find Reishi. After asking around, someone told him they'd seen a young merfolk wearing extravagant clothes that morning, though they couldn't remember where.

I bet he has convinced someone to let him inside the town.

Kai was about to march out of there when he spotted someone he didn't expect.

Relief filled him. "Flynn?"

He was walking with two boys his age Kai didn't recognize. Stranger yet, he was wearing the blue uniform they issued to the kids who joined the scholarship program.

"Oh, Kai. Long time no see," Flynn gave an apologetic look at his group, as if a nuisance who acted overly friendly had come to say hi. "I'll catch up to you later."

Throwing a long glance at him, the duo left.

It's nice to see you too.

Flynn grabbed his arm and dragged him away like he was ashamed of him. Kai didn't know if he should be annoyed at the treatment or impressed with his acting.

As long as he's fine, though he could look happier to see me too.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Flynn looked down at him.

"Neither did I, last time we met you disappeared without a word."

"Really, I don't remember."

They walked towards the beach. The enforcers on duty let them through after giving a glance at Flynn. A small crowd of people stared at the waves, some looking happy, but mostly with empty expressions.

They continued along the shoreline, keeping up the awkward talk till the buzz of the camp was covered by the wind.

"You could have left a note."

"Were you worried about me?" A smug grin immediately lit his face.

"No, just that you would do something stupid."

"Like helping a grumbly short child?"

His glare didn't manage to wipe Flynn's smile.

"I'm sorry, I made you so *deeply* worried. It would have been hard to explain if I were seen with you. And I didn't want to draw attention."

Kai rolled his eyes. "It's fine. How are you doing?"

"Great."

"I mean for real. What do you plan to do now?"

"The original plan was to disperse after the events. I've got a job with the Republic."

The governor wasn't a forgiving person. There was bound to be an extensive investigation after what happened. Whether they would find the culprits or not, they weren't going to give up easily.

The pirates' ships would receive most of the attention, but there was no way they wouldn't find the link with the rebels.

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" Hiding under their nose was good till they didn't find him out.

Flynn's smile faltered for a moment. "Do you have a better idea? I don't have much choice, do I?" He snapped before taking a deep breath.

Kai wanted to tell him he had the solution. He could come with him, and he'd figure something out. The truth was he didn't even know what he was going to do himself, much less take care of someone else.

"Do *they* know you helped me?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know. I'll ask around when things settle down."

"Can't you go with your family?"

Flynn laughed with no mirth. "You've met my mom."

When would I...

His eyes widened. "Your mother is the crazy lady?"

Flynn winced, his gaze wandering over the waves. "She wasn't always like that, but yes, the *crazy lady*. I've heard worse names."

How would it be growing up with a mother who can fuck with people's minds?

"We'd better go back. They might start to wonder what we're talking about if we don't. The enforcers are already suspicious of every shadow after the raid." Flynn walked ahead toward the camp.

In the early afternoon, small groups began to be allowed back into the town. Though some people looked reluctant to go.

Walking back into Sylspring was a surreal experience. The fires had long been quelled, but the faint smell of smoke and ashes grew stronger as they moved toward the center. He almost expected to see a pirate jump out of an alley at any time.

Apart from the rebels' distraction, the outskirts had been left untouched. The deeper they went, the more apparent the destruction became.

Abandoned everyday objects and debris lay strayed in the streets. Broken windows, doors barely hanging on the hinges and the occasional dark red patch that had yet to be scrubbed clean.

The pirates had been repelled just before pushing into their neighborhood. They were among the lucky ones. Apart from a crimson spot on the white door, their house had been left untouched.

The arrow-shaped hole on the painted wood left little to the imagination.

Mouï did say he would come back here.

Alana hurried to open the door. Everything was as they left them, even the smell of herbs and cooking was the same. Walking up the stairs to his room felt like a dream. Kai sat on his bed, sinking slightly into the mattress.

Even though it hadn't been long since he was here, so much had happened. Right as he thought he was figuring out his life, everything had been thrown upside down.

Would Reishi want to double down on their business, or cut his losses? Maybe he would leave the archipelago.

Why? Why did this happen?

Kai lay down hugging his pillow, hanging on a piece of familiarity when everything else seemed to have changed.

Two days ago, he thought he had all the answers, now he was back at the starting point.

The streets came to life as more people looked for their homes, though the buzz of activity held a mournful note. Families crying over their losses.

After a quiet dinner, his stomach stopped demanding more food. Kai took a low orange potion with a slow-acting effect. He was lost, and the ceiling had no answers, as usual.

It will look better in the morning. It always does.

Kai lay on the covers, the night was warm enough that he didn't need them, but sleep eluded him.

Might as well get it over.

Kai pulled up his notifications.

Ding

New skill added to the Archive! **Perseverance (lv1) – When your mind is set, no amount of persuasion will make you waver in your convictions.**

Ding

New skill added to the Archive! **Poison Protection (lv1) – Slows down the absorption of toxins to give your body better odds of survival. Increase effectiveness against substances you've already come into contact with**

Ding

New skill added to the Archive! Strategist (lv1) – No task or battle is insurmountable with a proper strategy. Every mighty foe has a weakness waiting to be exploited.

Kai had long lost count of all the red skills in his Archive, though one more option never hurt. They would increase the chances of learning higher-grade skills related to them.

No doubt, meeting the crazy lady—Flynn's mom apparently—had played a part. Gaining a skill after a single encounter was rare. He must have been rewarded for the danger he had been in, same for Tridel.

Both Perseverance and Poison Protection could be useful, but then again, each skill was. Kai grumbled to himself.

What's the point of dangling shiny gifts in front of me if I can never take them? That's just cruel!

Strategist could complement his strengths and shore up his weaknesses. The number of orange skills was much smaller, each one was a welcome addition.

Now, if only I didn't have a list of skills I want that will soon reach the moons, I might even take it. Fuck me, maybe after I reach Yellow.

With the frustrating notifications over, he moved on to what really mattered.

New Feat: Crossing the Chasm – For your contribution to the defeat of multiple opponents far above your level. You are awarded: +2 Favor!

People had died but he was alive. Kai swallowed his guilt, none of his opponents gave him any choice. They had been the ones who tried to kill him and his sister.

Elijah would be mad if I felt guilty for defending myself.

He was about to try to sleep again when he realized the notifications weren't over. With a frown, he gave the go-ahead.

Ding

For being confronted with multiple mortal dangers in a short period of time, the Guide has judged you eligible to break your Second Seal early.

If you were to choose this option, you'll gain the possibility to select one profession at any time, but you'll forever lose access to Life Experience.

Any further XP will be gained by pursuing the domain of your selected profession.

Be warned this change is irreversible and will take effect immediately. Do you still wish to proceed?