

Chapter 135 - The Future

In little more than a month since he reached the peak of Orange and started his alchemy business, he had progressed nicely. More than nicely actually. Those numbers would make even Elijah give him a nod of approval.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human** ★★ ★ – 0 > 16,789 / 300,000 XP
- Profession: **None**

Body stats

- Strength: **19>20**
- Dexterity: **23**
- Constitution: **25**
- Mind: **28**
- Spirit: **31>32**
- Perception: **22**
- Favor: **30>32**

Skills:

- **Mana Sense (lv74>76)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv60>64)**
- **Empower (lv59>64)**
- **Inspect (lv51>53)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv43>44)**
- **Water Magic (lv41>44)**
- **Alchemy (lv42>44)**
- **Runes (lv38>40)**
- **Nature Magic (lv37>38)**
- **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv21>24)**
- **Herbology – Advanced (lv30>34)**
- **Attuned Meditation (lv12>14)**
- **Improvisation (lv4>8)**

- **Hallowed Intuition (lv2>4)**

If pirates raided the town each week, I might make it to Yellow before fourteen.

The Guide never missed to reward conflict. It left him with a somewhat sour taste, profiting from the death and misfortune of others.

Madly brewing large batches of potions also played its part. It hadn't been easy to get used to the rhythms and demands of an alchemy business, though his gains would have slowed down in a couple more weeks.

There was only so much he could learn by creating the same potions over and over again. If nothing had happened, it would have become an endless repetition of tedious recipes.

Beautiful boring days. You truly don't know what you have till you lose it. Now I'm not even sure if I have a job.

Another day hadn't brought him any closer to the solution to his profession dilemma. There was no time limit on the Guide's offer, but he couldn't wait too long if he planned to use it to solve Virya's cube.

He had about ten months left on the mage's timer, and a profession would take time to level and grant more attributes. Kai wouldn't make the mistake of underestimating Virya's puzzles. It wasn't going to be easy even with a higher Mind stat.

The sooner I make a decision the better.

The mood in the market was surprisingly cheerful, though that quickly changed as he walked through the paved streets of poshtown. Summer was in full swing, but the streets were emptier than he had ever seen them even in the off-season. Hardly any tourists could be spotted and foreign sailors were almost as rare. The few people he saw didn't seem to be enjoying themselves.

Poshtown, with its ostentatious appearance, had been hit the hardest. The signs of pillaging and destruction had been cleared with surprising efficiency, but not everything could be swept under the rug.

While the paved tiles of the main avenue had been scrubbed clean, most shops were closed, sporting panels of wood instead of glass to cover their large windows. Some had people bustling inside to fix them, but they were in the minority. The store where he bought a painting of the Vastaire ruins on the opposite side of Yanlun had been torched, a husk of blackened wood with no sign of the owners coming back.

An enforcer stopped him halfway to the merchant district. Kai didn't need Improvisation to keep calm. Squads of officers were still sweeping the town in frenetic activity. This was already the third time he was questioned *today*.

The woman in uniform didn't raise her gaze from her notebook. "Did you see anything suspicious on the night of the accident?"

Kai stifled a sigh. "I don't know. It happened all so fast. What kind of suspicious?"

"People running in the wrong direction, hiding their faces or looking much calmer when everyone else was panicking." The enforcers began listing. She had the curt and bored tone of someone who had repeated those same words countless times.

Kai kept to the rehashed story he had agreed with his family. He'd been coming back from playing in the fields when the *accident* happened. He ran back to his house where he found his parents and they all went to safety outside the town walls.

Speaking of the rebels would garner unwanted attention and risk exposing Flynn. Not that Kai knew much about the rebels' plans anyway. There hadn't been any official announcement yet, but it was clear the Republic knew of their involvement from what they asked.

With patience, Kai entertained the series of questions he'd already answered less than half an hour ago. He hoped the culprits would be brought to justice, but he wanted to stay as far away as possible from the investigation. The Republic was on a war footing, and he didn't want to get caught in the middle.

"If you remember any detail or notice something suspicious you can report it to the first officer you see. The governor has offered a generous reward for any useful information a citizen can provide."

Having said her piece, the enforcer marched to question another passerby. The woman hadn't given him a glance throughout the whole conversation.

Hopefully, Zerith will figure it out.

Weirdly, Kai hadn't seen him yet. The man always seemed to be everywhere, but he had disappeared since the raid.

He's probably busy dealing with this mess.

Thank the spirits—and probably his Favor—Kai managed to reach the merchant district without getting stopped again. Streams of people filled the usually quiet neighborhood, with different groups of armed guards warily observing the street.

Many merchants employed private security for their residences. Kai heard this area had seen intense fighting during the raid. Located in the southern side of town, it managed to hold till the enforcers organized resistance to push the pirates back.

Reishi's mansion stood proudly, looking unaffected by the attack, though the shiny gate didn't sparkle like a mirror this time. Getting a hold of the merman had been surprisingly complicated. He'd already come by the day before but had been informed the merchant wasn't home and politely sent away.

Waving at a servant carrying a package, Kai waited for someone with the authority to let him in. A minute later, the familiar butler with his pristine maroon uniform hurried towards him, giving him a short bow.

“Master Kai, what a pleasant surprise,” the man glanced at a silver pocket watch. “We didn’t expect you so soon. Master Reishi is currently busy, I’m sure you’ll understand. I’m afraid you might have to wait a while. Maybe you could come back later.”

“It’s fine,” Kai raised a hand to stop him. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“Of course, this way.” The butler let him inside.

“Is Reishi fine? Was he here during the raid?”

“Master Reishi is in good health, he is very busy dealing with the fallout of the raid.” The man opened a door for him, stepping aside to let him pass. “We’re somewhat short-staffed at the moment, but don’t hesitate to let me know if there is anything I can do for you, Master Kai.”

The butler made another short bow and was gone before Kai could add anything. He hadn’t missed how the man only answered half his question.

Guess I’ll just have to ask him.

He sat cross-legged on a plump couch. Strings of mana began weaving between his hands. He needed to catch up on his training. Getting kidnapped had thrown his schedule into chaos.

Better not to fall into bad habits.

Time flew as he lost himself in creating mana constructs. Contrary to his previous visits, no servant came to check on him. He didn't know if he should consider that rude, but he preferred not being interrupted.

It was about three hours later when the door finally opened, and Reishi walked inside carrying a pile of ledgers and papers in his arms.

Kai absorbed the mana of the three-layer structure he was working on, glad to see him safe and sound. The merman didn't realize he had company. He sat at his desk and began flipping through his documents murmuring to himself in an unknown language.

Hello? I've yet to learn how to turn myself invisible.

"Reishi?"

The merman jumped in his chair, letting out a small shriek. Fumbling with his pockets, he pointed a mat black stick towards him. Whatever it was, Kai noticed it was pulsing with many layers of enchantments.

"Just me," Kai raised his hands in a peaceful sign.

And I didn't even intentionally scare him. What a scaredy-cat.

"Kai?" Reishi relaxed slightly, putting his black stick back into his pocket. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you?" Kai watched him worriedly. "I stopped by yesterday, but they told me you didn't have any time. Today I was told to wait here by your butler. Are you alright?" He wasn't an expert in merfolk biology, but the orange crest on his head was flopping to the side and his blue scales looked a shade paler than usual.

“Yeah, someone probably told me. I must have forgotten.” He straightened the pile of papers before him and continued sifting through them. “Things have been pretty hectic after what happened, and the Republic had kept me busy till yesterday. So, what did you want to talk about? I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Kai took the seat across from him, leaning forward. “Are you okay, *okay?*”

I thought he’d present me with a twelve-step plan for the future of our business or ditch me.

“I’m fine.” Reishi waved him away.

“Maybe you should take a small break.”

“I can’t, one of my vessels has been stolen by those damn pirates, two warehouses were burned down, and I lost five employees. I need to finish sending compensation to their families yesterday. Then I need to check our stock and revise my plans. My employees need instructions and...”

Okay, he’s definitely not fine. Maybe this is the first setback he suffered.

“You’re going to take a break right now,” Kai pulled a fold of papers away from him. “I’m sure your employees can survive an hour without you.”

“Give it back,” Reishi demanded, palmed hands vainly reaching over the desk.

“Nope.”

The merman glared at him. “You know I can have you thrown out of my house with one word.”

“Then do it, because I won’t leave until you take a break.” Kai met his fuming gaze with firm determination.

I’m almost sure he won’t do it. That would be embarrassing.

As his eyes were starting to water, Reishi finally blinked and fell back in his chair. “Fine!” He marched to the red velvet couch and sat down, pouting like a moody teenager.

Sometimes I forget he’s still eighteen.

Kai called a servant to bring tea and took a seat across from him. His troubles about breaking the Second Seal could wait. “I’m always here if you need help or someone to talk to.”

“Do you know how to lead a business?” Reishi grumbled.

“I know enough and I’m a fast learner.”

The merman looked skeptical. He sighed deeply, sinking into the puffy couch. “Thank you, but I’ll figure it out. I started with a ship and one gold, it won’t be a problem to rebuild.”

With a knock, the butler came in carrying a tray and left bowing after receiving one glance from Reishi.

Kai poured the spicy blend of green tea for both. “Did something happen during the raid? Were you caught up in the fighting?”

“I was at my warehouse near the docks, we hid in a cloaked storage room,” Reishi added three sugar cubes to his cup, slowly stirring.

That doesn't sound too bad.

“We weren't discovered until the very end. There was some kind of explosion and the enchantments started to fail. I was sure we were going to die. I decided running out would give us a better chance.”

Reishi stared blankly at his tea. “When we came out, I almost thought that someone had cast an illusion. The place had been completely razed to the ground. There was nothing left. Just ashes and burnt corpses. Except for two people fighting each other.”

“Pirates?”

“I think one of them was a pirate captain, while the other was an enforcer. I tried to help him, but it didn't make much of a difference.”

Kai had thought the Republic had simply waited for the raiders to leave. It was a bit surprising to discover they fought so hard to push them back.

“So the enforcer won?” If Reishi was safely sitting before him after all.

“He did,” the merman took a sip. “But he also died from his injuries. He saved my life and I couldn't help him. I tried everything I had, but I— Maybe if I had come out sooner, I could've made a difference...”

Kai found his mouth completely dry. He had to force the words out of his throat. “Who was the enforcer?”

“The captain of the garrison, I think his name was Zerith.”

Why him? Why couldn't it be another nameless officer?

Reishi looked at him. “Did you know him?”

“I met him a few times.” Kai entrusted himself to Improvisation, he didn't want to make the merman feel worse.

Zerith was one of the first people he met in Sylspring. Always popping up with his ridiculous excuses each time he visited. Eccentric and more than a bit nosy, but still a reassuring presence.

He had helped him during the selection on his first visit. The man had immediately figured out that he was downplaying his skills, but the Republic had never come to bother him over that.

Thinking back, after his teachers had left, the enforcers barely questioned him. He thought Elijah was to credit, but the Republic could probably have bothered him much more if they wanted.

I should have trusted him more. Now it's too late.

They had never been particularly close, but the captain had become one of the constants of his life. One of the few he had remaining.

“—Kai. Are you listening to me?” Reishi raised his voice.

“Yes, sorry. I was just lost in my thoughts for a moment. What were you saying?”

“I asked if you needed my help. Or did you only come to check on me?”

“Oh, yes.” Kai smiled with Improvisation. “I also wanted to ask you about what you wanted to do with our business. If you want to cut your losses, I understand.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t inform you sooner, I’m sorry,” Reishi moved a hand over his eyes. “Perhaps I’m actually too tired. We might need to reassess our strategy, but no, I want to continue. Selling only in Sylspring might be a problem, so I’ll need some time to decide how to proceed.”

Yay, I’ve not been fired.

“Unless *you* want to stop...?” Reishi probed. “I can void our contract if you want to do something different.”

Kai hid his surprise. “No, it’s fine. Take all the time you need. I also need a break to reassess my plans.”

The merman smiled at the news. “Was there anything else? Taking a break with you was nice, but I have a lot of work to do.”

“There is one thing... it’s a bit personal.” Kai glanced at the door.

“No one can hear anything when the door is closed. I’m happy to help if I can.”

Gathering his thoughts, Kai described his dilemma. He explained most of his reasoning, except Virya’s cube. The merman never tried to pry when he skipped over details.

“How much worse would my profession be if I took one right now?”

Reishi had almost managed to hide his surprise completely, though his blue eyes peered at him with noticeable intensity after his revelations. “Well, I can’t say for sure. It would depend on what you do in these last two and a half years, but it will probably be significant.”

“I shouldn’t do it then?” His head hung low.

At least I have my answer, even if it’s not the one I hoped for.

“As long as you stop trying to get yourself killed, that would be the better choice” Reishi scolded him. “You shouldn’t be so reckless with your life.”

Not you too!

“I don’t intentionally look for trouble.”

“Well, if it finds you so often, there must be a reason,” the merman pointed out, biting his lip. “There is also another possibility to solve your problem.”

“Really, what?” Kai perked up.

Reishi hesitated. “Like with skills, profession can also be discarded.”

That seemed like something that should be common information, he frowned. “Why did nobody tell me that before?”

“Because *nobody* does it. Abandoning your profession is often fatal, and always dangerous. Who wants to erase all their efforts anyway?”

The warnings fell on deaf ears, the only thing Kai could see was a third path opening before him. He'd need to consider it carefully, but this would take care of his biggest con.

“If the Guide allows it, it's possible to survive without permanent damage, right?”

Reishi sighed like he already regretted his words.