

Chapter 152 – A New Accommodation

The glowing network of runes was his entire world, nothing else existed. Not the bead of sweat coming down his brow or his thumping heartbeat. Careful and precise like a surgeon with his scalpel, Kai split a fraction of his attention and twisted his mana. The thread connected to the fifth and last rune.

It was done.

Spirits bless me.

His senses tensed in anticipation, afraid he would have to start over due to some minor mistake. Instants ticked painfully slow. No pulse canceled his mana, the cube had accepted his solution.

Kai relaxed his stiff neck and let out a relieved ‘Yes’ with the breath he had been holding. Virya’s riddle hovered an inch from the table he was sitting at, a hundred filaments of mana swirling beneath the wooden surface.

Shit!

A greater wave of worry clutched him. The sleek dark pieces clicked and shifted by themselves, rearranging the countless chains of runes woven into the cube. This was the thirty-fifth layer, the last of the fifth configuration.

Come on, come on. How many cursed layers did Virya put into this thing?

With a snap, the last piece slid into place. A perfect and smooth cube gently fell on the table. The enchantments he had spent the last month studying changed into an entirely foreign configuration.

Fuck me! Why?

Seven more layers with six solutions.

Kai wanted to scream and throw the damn puzzle across the living room, but he was too exhausted even to properly rage. He slumped into his chair, staring at the pale cream ceiling.

It's going to be forty-nine, isn't it?

Seven by seven, yes, that was something Virya would like. He had made offerings to Yatei and Kahali on the feeble hope they could spare him from that, but even the Great Spirits were powerless before the heartless witch. No reprieve or truce for little ol' Kai.

The extra attributes in Mind and Spirits gave him the strength to push forward. He was going to do it even if he had to scramble his brain from dawn till dusk for the remaining five months and a half. He was too committed to pull back.

Virya must have known I'd find a way to cheat. Maybe not a profession, but something for sure. There is no way I'd solve it otherwise.

Multicasting (lv1) – To control mana to its full potential, a mage needs to learn how to split their focus and perform numerous tasks at a time.

It was the latest of a long series of skills he had unlocked by working on the cursed puzzle—probably the most powerful. The question was if he going to take it before or after reaching Yellow...

“Still working on that thing?” Flynn's upsettingly cheery voice breached his thoughts. He strode inside the room and set down his bag on the chair across from him. “What's with the face, did you fail again?”

“I didn’t fail, I just reset it. *Again.*” Kai struggled to force the frustration out of his tone. “I thought I might finally be done with it, but it wasn’t enough.”

“Have you considered how your teacher might have duped you? Maybe there is no way to open it.” Flynn tapped onto the lacquered cube. “I still think we should try with an axe.”

“No!” Kai swiped away the cube into his ring. “It won’t work. I’ll open it, I just need a little more time.”

“If you say so...” his friend stood back with a disappointed look.

“I’m getting close, just a few more layers,” Kai said, unsure if it was for Flynn or for himself.

“Let me know if you change your mind, I know just the guy to crack it open.” Flynn gathered his satchel and left for the kitchen, his voice dampened by the wall. “I’m going to cook lunch, we’re both going to starve if it was for you.”

The mention of food made Kai aware of his own hunger. A glance at the shining clock hung above the kitchen door confirmed it was indeed past noon.

I can’t believe I let Reishi convince me to buy it.

Even the cheapest one cost him *eleven* silver mesars, just to tell time. The rhythms of city life required punctuality, or so the merman said. The sun always worked fine for him.

Let’s get some good news.

The week would officially be over at midnight, an arbitrary rule he made to not constantly obsess over his XP. But everyone knew rules were made to be broken anyway.

Ding

Profession XP, General: 834 – Skills: 600

Something is going well.

While the goal of *Life Experience* was to encourage the exploration of new skills and activities, *General Profession XP* rewarded practicing Mana Child. New and challenging activities earned more XP, but routine practice was also useful. Limited to the domain of a single profession, one couldn't always push for new experiences.

Since they had landed in Highharbor more than two months ago, Kai had roughly figured out the domain of Mana Child. His profession pushed him to delve and expand his knowledge of the arcane. Deciphering the enchantments copied with Mana Echo, learning new runes and alchemy recipes granted the most XP, but almost anything to do with mana and magic would work.

Virya's cube fit in almost perfectly, it was hard, challenging and required the use of several skills. While the foundation of the puzzle remained the same, the runes and configuration were always changing.

He might earn more if he varied his practice with other activities, but the difference wasn't worth the time investment with the months ticking by.

I'll consider that after I open this damn thing.

With a thought, Kai summoned the next notification.

Profession: Mana Child lv2 – 7,000 / 7,000 XP

Boon:

- **Mana Spring**

Profession Skills:

- **Gifted Novice (lv8>42)**
- **Mana Echo (lv7>38)**

I thought it'd take one more week, but I'm not going to complain. I definitely need the boost.

His race at the peak of Orange was dragging the levels along. Profession skills worked no different from any other, except for their unusual effects.

Kai had thought Mana Echo would be faster to train since it was an active skill. Higharbor streets and passersby were a treasure trove of enchantments, while skills were relatively harder to come by. He had observed the mana abilities of adults and teenagers training on the southern beach or in the few green areas around town.

Still, it also required him to leave his newly rented house and spend hours to find the right target.

Gifted Novice perfectly overlapped with the domain of his profession. Slow and steady, it constantly grew without needing him to do anything more that he hadn't already planned.

Seems to be working either way, and Mana Echo can't go beyond level 100 unless I evolve my profession, but I can't do that.

Ding

You've satisfied the requisites to progress **Mana Child to **lv3**, do you wish to proceed?**

Yes, please.

Something akin to an electric shock crossed through him, his eyes shot open. There was a faint tingling from his mana channels as they grew more complex. Kai felt more awake than ever.

One and a half points in Spirit increased his mana capacity, pulling more motes from the world around him. The headache from skill overusage was washed away by the boost in Mind, granting him a new sense of clarity. His thoughts were faster, sharper, ready to tackle another twenty-four hours on the cube if necessary.

Last was Perception, the smallest increase at half a point, but the most glaring. The light filtering from the window was brighter, the grains of dust on the wooden table impossible to miss, his soft cotton shirt unbearably itchy.

Kai knew the colorful particles swirling around him would also be slightly clearer if he activated Mana Sense. There was no difference in his body attributes, but he got the impulse to jump and run. A shard of euphoria reminiscent of his race enhancement.

Yeah, I truly needed this.

The higher his stats the quicker *all* his skills and XP grew, advancing his profession faster in turn. He was ever more confident that taking a profession early had been the right decision.

His nose picked up a waft of cooking steak, herbs and spices from the kitchen. Kai was barely conscious of his steps until his head poked over Flynn's shoulder. A piece of meat sizzling on the stove, making his mouth water.

"How much longer?" He stared at the steak with yearning.

Flynn looked at him over his shoulder, jolting a step away. “Did you gain another level? You have that unhinged look in your eyes.”

“I don’t look unhinged.”

“Go look at yourself in the mirror and tell me if I’m wrong.” Flynn shoed him away. “I still need a few minutes here, and I won’t let you ruin my masterpiece with your creepy looming. I’ll bet you ten coppers if I’m wrong.”

Kai stomped his way to the bathroom mirror, an addition that came with the new place. He admitted that *maybe* his eyes showed too much white, and the half smile on his lips didn’t help his cause.

Vaguely unsettling at best.

He washed his face, the water like icy needles on his skin to his boosted Perception. Rubbing himself dry with a towel, his expression was back to his usual self. Quiet gray eyes and messy blond hair.

I forgot to finish the heating enchantments.

His stomach grumbled. Making a mental note for later, Kai walked back to the kitchen.

“So?” Flynn grinned. “Where is my money?”

“I didn’t agree to any bet,” Kai hid his sulk, setting the plates for lunch.

“But I was right, wasn’t I? I thought you were about to stab me when you appeared behind me earlier.”

Kai gave him a crooked smile. "I'm still in time to amend my mistake if you insist."

"Tempting, but then who would cook for you?" Flynn served two steaming steaks and a crunchy salad. "You'll be completely lost without me."

"Fine," he dramatically sighed. "Guess I'll have to keep you *for now*."

Kai was paying two thirds of the rent, but he wouldn't exchange the difference for the chores Flynn took on.

Unprocessed foods rarely lasted a week even with the coolbox he had enchanted. Someone needed to get groceries every second day, and Kai was glad that someone rarely had to be him.

Cutlery clinked on the plates. The juicy meat tasted even better than it smelled, melting in his mouth. It was a rare treat, away from the hunting grounds of the Veeryd jungle, they couldn't afford it more than once per week.

Flynn looked up from his meal. "You've got to level 3?"

"Yep."

Is he worried I'm catching up to him?

"And are still bent on your plan? How dangerous is it to discard your profession *exactly*? You said it like it was no big deal, but everyone I've talked to says the opposite."

Oh, that...

"I'll be fine, I know what I'm doing." Seeing Flynn wasn't convinced, Kai went on explaining. "The main danger is when you lose your attributes. If you have fifty Constitution and suddenly you lose half of that, there is the risk you can't handle the backlash and ends up crippled."

"...or dead."

"That too," he conceded, casually gesturing with his fork. "*If* you don't know what you're doing."

Having your attributes drain out of you wasn't a pleasant experience on all accounts. If you lost too many of your attributes, there was a high risk of permanent damage to the body or mind, depending on which stats you lost. Since Mana Child only offered mental stats, he knew where he fell.

Couldn't you wait till we were done eating?

"And is there a way to safely avoid that?" Flynn's voice dripped with skepticism.

"If you have a hundred Strength and lose one point you hardly feel the difference." Kai sent the last bite with a gulp of water, placing down his knife and fork. "The reason why people don't do it is because everyone has their profession higher than their race. If they discarded it, they'd lose most of their attributes, and probably die."

In a very painful and gruesome way according to Reishi. Let's skip that part.

Flynn was still frowning, but Kai could see the pieces clicking together, so he gave the last push.

“With my race at the peak of Orange, I’ll survive as long as I don’t raise my profession past red. I’ll simply need to pay for a healer and buy the right potions to ensure there are no permanent injuries.” Kai cleared the table and put the plates in the sink.

I’ll keep Mana Child a couple levels below ten to stay extra safe since my profession is above average.

It was rare, but people had successfully done it before. Otherwise, why would the Guide bother to offer the possibility in the first place? The healer was going to cost a pretty penny, and the potion too, if he couldn’t get his hands on a suitable recipe and brew it himself.

Yes, *perhaps* it wasn’t as easy as he made it out to be. The process was not going to be pleasant even if everything went according to plan, Reishi had been very clear on that.

Or I could just not discard it.

The thought came unbidden, though it wasn’t the first time. He liked Mana Child, it was powerful and could evolve in nearly any direction. Considering the age restriction, he’d be surprised if he met anyone else with it.

I don’t need to worry about that for a while.

“I’ll go brew some potions in my room, knock if you need anything.”

“kay,” Flynn said, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

His bedroom was spacious even considering that it doubled as his working place. A wide bookcase covered the wall opposite the door from the floor to the ceiling. His dad’s volumes took the two middle rows, with his journals and alchemy manuals below.

He had pushed his bed against the right wall, while a long workbench took the left one. Boxes of herbs and a shiny silver cauldron were waiting for him.

After two months in a dingy house close to the outer city, Reishi had convinced him to move to a place he owned. 'If you're so insistent on renting a place, you might as well pay me.' Kai couldn't remember how they got to that conclusion, but the merman made it sound like the only logical choice at the time.

He definitely used some kind of skill, damn merchant. Maybe I can copy it with Mana Echo and use it on him...

Kai browsed the book of recipes he had been working on. It was always exciting to get to work after an attribute boost. Steps of the recipes that had seemed incomprehensible suddenly became obvious or far easier.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human** ★★★ – 17,514 > 32,414 / 300,000 XP
- Profession: **Mana Child lv 3** – 0 / 8,000 XP

Body stats

- Strength: **20**
- Dexterity: **23**
- Constitution: **25**
- Mind: **28>31**
- Spirit: **32>37.5**
- Perception: **22>24.5**
- Favor: **34**

Spirit even went up a point naturally.

Alchemy was a nice distraction from the cube, a different kind of challenge that still fell within the purview of his profession. He was working in a limited capacity for about fifteen hours a week. Reishi had yet to figure out the logistics to supply the same volumes of ingredients as in Sylspring.

Bent on his cauldron and new discoveries, time flew by. Kai was finishing sieving a dexterity-enhancing potion when a knock came from the door. "One second."

Is it already dinner time?

There was still light outside his window. The door opened and Flynn poked his head inside.

"I said one second, I'm almost done."

Then people say I'm not patient.

"I thought you'd want to know this immediately. Your friends are back in Higharbor."