

Chapter 111 - The Good the Bad the Awful

Sitting cross-legged on his bed, Kai fiddled with Virya's puzzle box. Chains of interlocking runes shifted beneath the dark wooden surface as his fingers and mana tinkered with its patterns.

The sliding pieces of the cube changed the configurations of runes, and in turn changed how the enchantment responded to his mana threads.

The room was filled with clinks and taps. Hours later, Kai was no closer to finding a solution.

The ingenious design was diabolically complicated, but also fascinating. The interweaving of mechanical and runic components left him in awe. He never got tired of seeing how the pieces reacted to each other.

If Virya wanted me to get frustrated, she shouldn't have made the puzzle so entertaining.

Kai took his time to familiarize himself with the design and understand its underlying mechanics. This was going to be a long-term project. Planning and patience would bring him farther than rushing ahead.

He massaged his eyes. Even with them close and his skills deactivated, sliding runes shone in his vision.

I got a level in Inspect. Time to call it a day.

Kai put the cube back into his ring and got up to look through his wardrobe. Midday was approaching and he wanted to visit the market before lunch. His morning meditation had not revealed more clues on Hallowed Intuition either.

Right, I forgot to check it.

Ding

Life Experience: 838 XP

And this was supposed to be my week off. Well, I won't complain.

It was a nice chunk, risking his life tended to do that. Facing an orange-tier beast in a new environment and trying a new job also helped. He had checked all the boxes to maximize his gains. He wouldn't be able to engineer a better situation if he tried.

Though that still paled compared to his skill growth. Life Experience wasn't the only thing to benefit from unfamiliar and challenging circumstances. Danger Sense gained three before evolving, while Water Magic and Blessed Swimmer had advanced once each. To top it all off there was the 700 XP signing bonus on Hallowed Intuition.

Ding

Skill Experience: 2500 XP

He'd probably had to revise his estimates for his final enhancement. With a bit of luck, he might reach it before the month was over. And the surprises weren't finished.

Inspect (lv50) →

As you reach the first milestone, you are presented with three choices to continue your journey:

- **Stay the course on your current path. You won't gain considerable new benefits, but you'll greatly deepen your insight into the current capabilities.**
- **Through careful and prolonged observation, choose to improve your perception and understanding of plants and mushrooms.**

- **Through careful and prolonged observation, choose to improve your understanding and intuition of patterns.**

Kai carefully read each option multiple times. The Guide was influenced by people's thoughts and beliefs. While a single individual may not hold much power over macro changes, they could affect their own Guide, depending on their grade.

The wording of the descriptions was particularly susceptible. They were easily influenced by knowledge and experiences to ensure he would understand. A scholar, who spent his life studying arcane tomes, would have a very different description from an illiterate farmer, who never left his village.

If you didn't know how to read, the Guide would do that for you, though the functionality was lost after you learned. People said the words were spoken with their own voice; Kai had often wondered what that would be like. In certain cultures, it could also use drawings.

The only change for him had been when his texts had passed from English to Alvernian—the most spoken language on the mainland in the area around the Merian Republic.

His musings could only save him so long, he had to make a decision.

Why can't I just pick everything?

At Orange, each choice carried a much heavier weight. Even the vanilla option would come with significant benefits. The other two choices would respectively improve his understanding of plants or patterns, that is Alchemy or Runes.

Kai began fidgeting with the buttons of his shirt. Words couldn't describe how much he hated this. Each time it was the same story, he didn't want to lose the flexibility of his skills and ended up staying on the course to improve a little in every aspect.

I can't take the basic option every time. I'm already enough of a jack of all trades.

It was fine when he was a kid at the estate, unsure of his own path, but it couldn't go on forever. The fear of committing to a choice would make him lose more in the long run. His teachers had been clear on that.

Well, Inspect is useful for so many things...

His eyes moved between the three options, lingering on the first.

Fuck no! I can't keep doing this.

Continuing on the same path wasn't always the wrong decision, but it was in this case. He needed to approach this rationally, what did he need Inspect for?

The answer stood before him: Alchemy and Runes. It was why he was offered those specializations to begin with. Naturally, Inspect was useful for a myriad of other things, but those were the most important. Deducing the grade of other people was also convenient, and a specialization wouldn't stop him from doing that. At worst, his reading abilities would stay the same.

Okay, it would be dumb to take a vanilla option when my two favorite perks of Inspect have their own specialization. The question is, which one do I pick?

Kai preferred Alchemy to inscribing runes. But the spirits wouldn't allow a choice to be so easy. If he wanted to solve Virya's cube, specializing in Runes would be a great help.

Ding

You chose the third option, Inspect (lv50) can now reach lv75.

Too late for regrets.

He could always specialize in Alchemy at the next milestone. If Virya had taken his choice into consideration when creating the puzzle box, he would be screwed if he took anything else. And if she had not, this would ensure his success. It was a win-win.

Something tells me it can't be that easy. She must have anticipated this, which would make this the only viable option. Yay!

Forcing himself to make a decision through the fear of losing the super awesome prize inside the cube might not be the definition of success, but he had to start somewhere.

Progress is progress. Time for round two.

His plans to visit the market would have to be postponed. He had three full days before Moui would take him to hunt. His mother wanted to give his *grievous wounds* time to heal.

With the cube in his hands, the difference was stark. Kai could recognize even the most obscure rune at a glance. Their different combinations flashed in his mind with little focus.

Yeah, no way Virya didn't take this into consideration.

His thoughts swirled in a hundred possibilities. If a single skill could make such a difference... Kai browsed through the numerous red entries in his Archive.

Decoding (lv1) – Use your knowledge, brain and obscure sources to get to the truth.

He learned it while studying his father's research ages ago.

What better way to solve a puzzle than with Decoding? Has Virya considered this too?

Could he game the system? Could the all-knowing sorceress be tricked? But more importantly, what skill could he abandon?

Fuck me! I'd rather put my hand in the fireplace than discard something.

Each skill in his status had been selected after many sacrifices. Even his waiting line contained more than a dozen names he'd love to take.

Damn you Virya, you've won this time!

He had been arrogant to think he could cheat a mage with centuries of experience. If Decoding was at the orange grade, it would be worth considering. But a red-tier lv1 skill? The benefits wouldn't be noticeable for months, and even then, it would never be comparable to a lv50 Inspect.

I can't maim myself for so little.

Kai went back to tinker with the cube, his mood steadily improved with his progress. A thread of mana formed a winding loop through the enchantments of the cube. When he tried to light the sixth rune, the box pulsed and dissolved his tendril.

His fingers moved rapidly to rearrange the sliding pieces to avoid the same error. Almost there. In a few more tries, his thread touched the seventh rune. And the damn cube destroyed his efforts again.

Dammit.

As he prepared for another try, the dark wood began glowing. Before he could react, the sliding pieces fell back into place with a series of rapid clicks. A moment later, the runes followed suit, aligning themselves in a new configuration.

At least I know how it works.

Apart from the runes, Kai could see no other changes. The cube looked no closer to revealing its contents. He could only imagine how many configurations Virya had prepared for him, and he had the inkling he wouldn't like the answer.

A whole year of time made much more sense now.

One puzzle done, a dreadfully big number to go.

After his success, Kai was tempted to give it another go but decided against it. After several hours, his head was pounding with skill overstrain. The improved functions of Inspect had come with an increased burden on his mind. If he kept pushing, the recovery time would exponentially increase.

Kai went downstairs to cook lunch. Everyone else was out working or taking care of some errands. He only had to reheat the stew Alana prepared for him. He opted to see it as his mother being thoughtful and not as a lack of faith in his culinary skills.

I should prepare dinner, the last time I cooked for them I was seven.

Even though he was no chef, he had learned something after observing Dora for years.

Who knows, even Kea might have also improved.

Down the streets of Sylspring with a full tummy, Kai checked on Reishi's residence. The merman was at sea and wouldn't be back for at least another week.

The butler offered to put him into contact with an affiliated merchant, but Kai told him that wasn't necessary. He didn't trust anyone else to sell the pearl, and he wanted to see that scaled face's expression when he saw the mana treasure. Risking his life entitled him to some boasting.

What was weirder was that Flynn wasn't in town either. The boy said he had graduated from the Republic's program. So there shouldn't be any reason for him to leave Sylspring.

He'll sprout back at some point. No need to worry.

Kai was browsing the herbs in a stall, lost in his thoughts, when he felt the sudden whim to move. He took a step back right as a large seagull flew overhead and something splattered at his feet.

"The spirits must like you, kid," the owner of the stall gave him a smile that missed half her teeth. "Just for today, I'll give you a discount on the heartleaf—"

Kai tuned her out. This was no coincidence. "Thank you, maybe next time."

Hallowed Intuition finally did something, and it was to help him avoid bird poop. Not exactly the classiest use for his sole yellow skill, but it was something.

Was the guano of a seagull enough to be considered harmful to him? Well, he was glad if that was the case.

Maybe the problem was that he always Meditated in secure places. The description of the skill made him imagine himself as a seer, which arguably had been dumb. Hallowed Intuition evolved from Danger Sense. It meant these two skills must possess some overlap.

In the busy street, Kai closed his eyes and cleared his mind from thoughts to see if he could feel something. To his great surprise, something actually happened. There was a subdued murmur at the fringes of his mind. Though he felt no impulse or whim to take any action.

Am I imagining things? Or is standing in a crowd not enough?

The market wasn't as packed as in the morning, and it wasn't exactly *dangerous*.

Should I pay a kid to slap me? I could always ask Kea, that will certainly satisfy the requirements of the skill.

Before resorting to extreme solutions, Kai decided to try a safer idea.

Spirits, I hope this works.

With his eyes closed, he walked through the busy streets. Ignoring the sounds and listening closely to his mind, Kai stepped to the left, feeling a person brush him.

It actually worked.

Distracted by his own success, he bumped into a man. "Look where you walk, kid!"

Kai was too hyped to care. A few more tries confirmed his theory. It wasn't the most glamorous training exercise, but it beat getting slapped by his sister.

Moving through the busiest streets, Kai narrowly avoided the passersby. The closer the 'danger' the clearer and more precise the feeling was.

An enforcer started eyeing him for his strange behavior. Satisfied with his success, Kai headed home. He was dying to know how the skill would react when he was in actual danger inside the jungle.

His offer to cook dinner raised a few eyes. Working with his mother looking over his shoulder added another challenge, but the compliments he received made up for it.

The next day he also got the answers to his question. No, despite her eagerness to cook the next meal and prove herself, Kea had not improved. Her steak was the only thing acceptable.

From Moui's proud gaze, Kai could almost smell all the burnt prey that had sacrificed their meat to get her there.

Studying the cube and enchanting another lighting crystal helped him pass the time. With the upgrade to Inspect, he needed to revise all his enchanting schematics.

"What are you doing?" Kea looked at him curiously.

Kai stood with a thin brush and a bottle of dark blue ink before the wall that separated his room from that of his mother.

"Soundproofing." The walls of the house were much thicker than in Greenside, but you could never be safe enough.

Kea observed silently for a few seconds before speaking, "How much do you want to do my room too?"

Kai smiled, "I'm sure we can reach a deal."

