

Chapter 118 - Defining Choices

Kai blinked twice. Yes, it was finally time. Acting—the second skill he ever learned—was evolving after more than ten years. The last splash of red in his status.

Not giving the mental command immediately was harrowing. If he saw the options, he would end up sitting down in the middle of the street and probably start wandering aimlessly till he made a choice.

~Home first, then I'll have all the peace and quiet I need.

A fortune in silver mesars weighed down his backpack. He hadn't used the spatial ring in front of Reishi. Even though he trusted the merman, the fewer people knew the better.

Driven by eagerness and paranoia, Kai flew through the streets. The white door was within his sight when a very inopportune man stood in his way, forcing him to stop.

"You seem particularly cheerful today," Captain Zerith peeked at him curiously. "I heard *your sister* found quite the catch a few days ago."

~Spirits, if he has a skill to appear at the least convenient time I wouldn't be surprised.

Salvation was within his grasp, hidden behind the towering man.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Captain? I really need to get home, it's getting quite late." The sun hid behind the line of buildings. Time flew by while he bargained with Reishi.

"I simply wanted to say hi, kid. No need to worry. You haven't been up to any mischief, have you?"

“Of course not. My master taught me to be respectful.”

~Even when someone is as aggravating as you.

The man’s gaze was unnerving, like he could garner all his secrets if he stared long enough. Was he here for the pearl, or just to torture him?

~Too bad I’ve already sold it.

“So, I assume you’re aware that, luxury goods sold without a vendor license are subject to a 30% fee, right? Because trying to evade taxes is equivalent to stealing from the Republic, and that’s a serious crime.”

Surely Reishi would have told me if that was something I needed to worry about.

“Kids would get a reduced sentence.” Zerith casually added. “And they might avoid punishment entirely if they pay a fine equal to three times the stolen amount.”

Cold sweat ran down his back. Only Acting kept Kai from betraying himself.

~Keep calm, he’s just bullshitting. Worst case, he doesn’t have any proof.

“I’m not sure why you’re telling me this, I’ve not bought any expensive goods lately.” Kai furrowed his brows in confusion. “If that is all... Mom is waiting, and she gets angry if I come back too late.”

His attempt to slip past was easily thwarted as Zerith grabbed his shoulder in a *friendly* gesture. Starting a contest of strength would be pointless.

“Whether to consider pearls as luxury items is debatable. Both parties would be allowed to argue their case and it would be up to the local judge to decide. Unfortunately, there isn’t one Sylspring. In a new territory, such as the archipelago, that duty falls on me.”

~Oh, fuck me!

“I’m not sure what you’re insinuating.”

“Nothing. None of that is a problem since you must have used a licensed intermediary to sell the pearl. Right, kid?” Zerith let him go.

“Yes, I obviously wouldn’t deal with a merchant personally. It’s better to leave it to a professional.”

“Well, that’s a relief then. You know, some officers got curious.” Zerith ruffled his hair. “Now, don’t make your mother worry and bring her my regards for raising such a wise kid.”

Before Kai could understand what was going on, the captain left, leaving him in a daze.

~What just happened?

Kai hurried toward his house. Whatever it was, it could wait till he got within the walls of his room.

“I’m back,” he announced to no one in particular.

Moui met him by the stairs. “Did something happen?”

“I was about to go looking for you.” His mother poked her head through the kitchen door.
“Where have you been?”

“I’m sorry, I just lost track of time closing a deal with a merchant.”

“Next time, warn us if you think it could get late. I was worried,” Alana scolded him.

“Yes, Mom. You’re right.”

She nodded satisfied, “Dinner will be ready in five minutes.”

Moui's eyes followed him till he closed the door of his room behind him.

Kai shut the curtain on his window and transferred all his silver into his ring. What were Zerith's intentions? He could never tell with the man.

Replaying the conversation in his head, Kai put together all the pieces. He should have known people would take notice of such a valuable treasure and look for ways to fleece me.

Basically, Zerith showed him how someone could easily take advantage of ambiguous laws to extort money from him if he wasn't careful.

~Such a convoluted warning. Were the theatrics necessary?

Perhaps it wouldn't be as easy as the captain made it out to be. If abusing authority was so easy, Reishi would have informed him. You didn't run a successful business without knowing the loopholes.

~Unless I confessed something incriminating by accident and got screwed. Maybe he didn't think someone would watch me so closely...

Kai resolved to get his hands on a copy of the Merian Republic's code of law. Diving into bureaucracy would be horrendously tedious, but he had no choice. Ignorance left him at the mercy of others.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only problem.

~Does Zerith know my teachers have left?

It had hardly been a week, was it possible the Republic already knew? A powerful backing was what ensured he didn't have to worry about these things. Worst case scenario, Elijah would bail him out, and it was why he got a letter from the governor.

~Is it too much to hope they'll leave me alone?

Kai could only hope his Favor would pull him through. He'd need to stay vigilant. If he attracted unwanted attention, it wouldn't be long before trouble found him.

"Dinner is ready!" Alana's muffled call came from downstairs.

The cheerful atmosphere around the dining table quickly turned his mood. Even Kea looked not-cranky. Despite the cold shower he received, this had been a great day, and it was only about to get better.

With a full stomach, Kai excused himself and returned to his room. Before a meteor could fall from the sky to interrupt him, he summoned the Guide and gave the go-ahead.

Ding

Acting (lv100) →

As you reach the final milestone, you are presented with four choices to continue your journey forward:

- **Acting – Advanced (lv1)** — Push the limits of your performance to new heights and perfect the nuance of human expression.
- **Improvisation (lv1)** — Never be caught unprepared, no matter the circumstances. Before the cold edge of a blade or a crowd of thousands, you'll always know what to say and do.
- **Calculating Performer (lv1)** — With the right words and gestures, nudge people toward the result that best suits you. Make them dance in the palm of your hand, like puppets on a string.
- **Method Acting (lv1)** — Inhabit the character you want to perform without faltering or misstep. No act or lie is more convincing than the one you yourself believe is true.

His eyes flew through the lines, torn between the desire to know everything and grasp the details. His last red skill certainly didn't disappoint, four evolutions was a new record. Though he never specifically trained it, he had used Acting in a myriad of circumstances over the years. Now he was going to reap the rewards.

The evolutions were assigned in the order they were first unlocked. At the forefront was the one everyone got: Acting – Advanced, a straight-up upgrade that would leave his future path wide open.

That didn't mean it was a bad choice. While Kai could make himself act however he wished, his performance wasn't perfect. Human emotions were complicated. He could cry and laugh at command, but selling those impressions to an observant audience wasn't easy. He had learned that lesson the first time he came to Sylspring, expert enforcers could tell when he was using Acting.

If he got this option, who knew? He might be able to trick even the most seasoned officer. Naturally, if there was a skill to lie, there must also be a skill to see the truth. Though such an ability shouldn't be too common.

~Let's get to the fun stuff.

Improvisation was similar to the specialization he took at the first milestone, and likely the reason he gained this evolution. If he wanted a skill to react to unexpected events and get him out of troublesome situations, this would be perfect.

It wasn't fancy or mystical, but it would come to his aid when he needed it the most. Preparation was the key to safety, when that failed it was nice to have a safety net.

His attention moved to the more *curious* choices. Calculating Performer was basically a skill to become a manipulative schemer. Spirits knew why he got that offered.

~Fine, I know. Guilty as charged.

There was only one problem. Mhmm... how to put it? The skill sounded like the toolkit of a villain who pulled the strings from the shadows.

Descriptions were aspirational, they depicted what a fully realized skill would do. It wouldn't magically transform him into a great mastermind at level 1, but it would open a path to get there.

The Guide was neither good nor evil, even though Calculating Performer probably wasn't made for a righteous hero.

~Don't fall for whispers of the dark side.

Jumping to the final option wasn't a great distraction. Method Acting seemed the skill of a spy, a way to fully inhabit the shoes of a fake persona. This time, Kai was truly puzzled about how he got this.

~I guess, I've occasionally made up characters to fit into a situation.

The innocent mail boy in Greenside, who sold potions on behalf of his reclusive master came to mind. There was also the rich scion who walked into poshtown and dealt with merchants. Or the perfect son who is always fine. Plus a ton of other minor characters who lived and died within the same day. Impersonating someone different could be useful at times.

~Yes, I've dabbled a tiny bit.

It was an interesting choice. No matter where he went, he would be able to create a role that fit in. Though the last line about believing the lie himself wasn't the most reassuring. Method Acting was performative, not an ability that would be easy to cast aside when the show was over.

~These last two skills sound shady as shit.

Kai reread the four paths he could take twice to garner as much as possible. The Guide didn't require a high grade before it began to tailor the descriptions to him. The wording itself was likely influenced by his knowledge, which meant his interpretation of their purpose should be correct.

~I need to make a choice, yay!

Using a tested and proven method, Kai worked by exclusion. Discarding Acting – Advanced was an easy start. A vague potential for the future wasn't enough. Acting was a broad skill that included numerous offshoots. Sooner or later, he'd have to specialize. He shouldn't postpone the choice when he had better evolutions.

The next to go was Method Acting. Again, it would be useful in many situations, but it was too niche to occupy his only slot reserved for a social skill. While 'be yourself' might not be an advice that worked in every situation, building relationships on a pile of lies wasn't either.

With silent mourning, he abandoned his dreams as a secret spy. When he imagined himself living that life, it sounded less than ideal. Quite shitty actually. Spies were pawns in someone else's game, sacrificing their lives for a cause.

~Hard pass.

He was already working on a no-lie policy with his family, choosing Method Acting would be like giving drugs to an addict. A temptation he'd rather do without.

That left only two choices. Improvisation was exactly what he used Acting for. A solution to unexpected situations and a fallback plan when things went wrong.

Then there was Calculating Performer. Kai couldn't deny it held a certain appeal. There was some satisfaction in seeing the pieces fall into place—or people in this case. Have someone be unconsciously led to the result he wanted.

~A skill is just a tool. It all depends on how I decide to use it. I could convince people to act in their best interest. I'm not turning into a third-rated villain.

Kai paced back and forth. Improvisation was more flexible while Calculating Performer was more situational.

~But if I manage to pull it off, the rewards could be greater.

No matter how many times he went through this, the idea of closing any door forever made him falter. The fear of regret loomed over him.

~I can't choose both. Just have to pick the best one.

Writing down a list of pros and cons helped clear his head. There were some details he hadn't considered.

Skills were just tools, but if you bought a rifle, you probably didn't plan to go rescue bunnies. If he had the power to do something, odds were he'd use it. Skills had to be practiced to gain levels. To train Calculating Performer he would have to play with people.

His morals could be flexible, but not *that* flexible.

~Dark Kai, your time has yet to come.

He had shed blood and tears to learn how to fight. Endured countless migraines and diligently practiced mind-numbing exercises to cast spells. There were ways to earn what he wanted that didn't include manipulating people.

Acting was the slot he dedicated to a social skill to deal with uncomfortable public situations. Improvisation was going to fit perfectly. It did something his other skills couldn't do. Gave him a comeback when he was too tired to think. Grant him the perfect response when he wanted to crawl into a hole in shame.

~I won't have to stay up nights thinking of cringe moments any longer.

Are you sure you want to evolve **Acting (lv100) into **Improvisation (lv1)**? Be Aware this choice is irreversible.**

Ding

Congratulations, **Acting (lv100) has successfully evolved into **Improvisation (lv1)**.**

Kai flopped down on his fluffy pillow, the tension flowing out of him. It was done. The last speck of red gone from his status.