

## Chapter 134 - The Offer

Kai stared at the floating scroll, reading the words again and again to be sure he understood them correctly. His heart pumped in his chest, any trace of exhaustion was banished from his head.

Since there was a way to break the First Seal ahead of time, he knew there must be a way to do the same for the Second Seal. Virya had told him there was no way to force it so he shouldn't concern himself with it.

Now, the chance to gain the strength he craved was at his fingertips. He didn't need to wait a second longer, with a single yes, he could gain the power and safety he yearned for.

He was tired of being outmatched by every adult with a below-average profession and terrible skills, just because they were older. He was tired of waiting, always waiting. He was tired of being at the mercy of the tides of fate, sailing in a dark ocean.

He had been kidnapped by a bunch of nutjobs, risked having his mind brainwashed and fought for his life in two uphill battles against terrible odds. He had taken numerous risks over the years but never walked this close to the edge. Just one wrong step and he would have died.

*I doubt I'll get the chance to start over a second time.*

Worse yet, all those challenges would have been a joke if he had just a few more years. The idea of leveling the playing field was beyond alluring. Every fiber of his being wanted to say yes.

The opportunity was offered to him on a silver platter, all he had to do was take it. With a single thought, he could finally stop being scared, powerless and at the whims of every foolish adult.

*Can't I let future-Kai deal with the consequences?*

The words hung in the air before his eyes, whispering sweet promises. Present-Kai had to scrape every morsel of willpower to not accept the offer immediately. Clenching his jaw, he pushed the notification aside for the time being.

*Why can't things be easy just this once?*

He opened the window to let the night breeze in, it was becoming too hot.

Kai took a deep breath, then another, then spent an hour in Meditation to calm his racing thoughts.

It would be heart-wrenching to waste years of blood and sweat on a rash decision. Kai repeated that mantra in his mind until he believed it himself. Being hasty—no matter how sweet the reward—could drown him in a sea of regrets down the road.

Outside his window, the Wandering Moon lit the world with its pale violet rays, accompanied by four of her sisters.

It must be close to midnight, probably later.

A fresh mind always made better decisions. Kai sat on his bed, tempting possibilities wandered through his mind. With a thought, he could pull the notification back and have a profession before dawn. Even if it was a few years early, he was bound to receive some great options.

Only years of training and self-discipline let him clear his mind and fall into a restless sleep.

The sun rose too soon, and the morning brought little clarity. Outside the streets were bustling with life, people busy cleaning the town and rebuilding.

Kai closed the window, the dampening enchantments took care of any sound. Kai sat at his desk and took out a blank piece of paper. He could already smell the coming headache. Like with any important decision, he pushed back the laziness and began to write down the pros and cons.

He had run the math. The loss of Life Experience was close to negligible. While the amount of XP had increased since he was a child, it didn't keep pace with his progress. With all his skills at Orange or higher, it made up only about 5% of his gains.

Every crumb of XP he could gather was welcome, but hardly worth crying over. There was a limit to how many new and challenging experiences he could find at his current level. Even fighting dangerous awakened beasts quickly gave diminishing returns.

He had some *safe-ish* ideas to try. The problem was they would take time away from skill training, meaning a net loss of XP. A decent payday required exceptional circumstances that always carried with them equal dangers.

The raid and kidnapping might have netted him over a thousand XP, but he wasn't eager to repeat them, ever. If he kept betting his life, it was only a matter of time before the coin fell on the wrong side.

The Guide had agreed that this time his brush with death came too close for comfort and offered him a choice.

*With the ability to gain XP by practicing my profession, this can't be considered a loss.*

Kai wrote down his conclusion, a small smile tugging at his lips. He needed to be rigorous.

*Next topic!*

He had defeated the beasts he could, and hunting for a Yellow one was pure madness. There were no more achievements he could gain from being under-leveled.

Not any that were viable anyway. He had to face it - he wasn't going to advance his grade before fourteen.

Kai had avoided running the math not to demoralize himself. Scribbling the numbers, his chances were even worse than he thought. Unless pirates raided Sylspring every week, it wasn't going to happen.

*Probably not even then, since I would have died.*

There might be feats he didn't know about, but taking a profession would also open new doors and chances to gain Favor. He would likely obtain a feat for taking it early.

*I can't count that as a con either. As for pros...*

His dad's pen wrote a single word down: *safety*. He couldn't know when the next storm would hit him. Even his Favor might not be enough. He had come close to losing his sister this time, what about the next?

What if something happened and he didn't have the strength to protect himself or his family because he chose to wait? A profession might not protect him from every danger, but it would improve his chances drastically.

And then there was Virya's riddle. The dark wooden cube appeared in his hand. He needed three things to solve it: time, higher mana skills and attributes. A profession wouldn't help with the first, and only indirectly with the second, but it would make a great difference for the third one.

He remembered the leap he made when he reached Orange ★★★. This was as close to a cheat as he would get.

On the papers, there were two strong pros, while the cons were mitigated by other circumstances.

*And fine, I also really, really want to know what options I'll get.*

Unless he broke the Second Seal, he couldn't know what profession he would be offered, even if he didn't take them. The burning curiosity was driving him mad.

His silver pen tapped on the table, the pros were clearly winning.

*Fine, I'll do it!*

The more information he could gather before making a decision the better. Unfortunately, knowledge about the Guide's mechanics was close to non-existent in the archipelago.

Linking to his spatial ring, Kai took out a leather-bound book: *Initiation to the Mysteries of the Guide*. It was his best lead—likely the only one he would ever find. He had read it many times, but there were several chapters that had warning labels.

*I'll need some help...*

"What's that?" Ele gave the book a curious glance, finishing to scrub a pristine window.

Even with a low tide, she chose to remain home helping their mother rather than go pearling. The town was officially free of raiders, but it would be a while before things went back to normal.

“Can you read this part and tell me what it says?” Kai pointed to a chapter that was recommended not to be read before unlocking the Second Seal. It was one of the milder warnings, but he hadn’t wanted to risk it.

The topics discussed in Elijah’s book might be considered *controversial* to someone who believed the Guide was a gift from the spirits. He couldn’t go to his mom, Moui wouldn’t keep a secret from her, and Kea hadn’t gotten a profession yet.

It only left Ele, thankfully, she was used to entertaining his requests without asking questions. Her brows furrowed in confusion which soon morphed into shock. Her gaze darted back and forth through the text, page after page, without a word.

Her eyes snapped on him. “Where did you get this?” Ele stood with both her hands at her sides in a lecturing pose, a finger still keeping the sign of the page.

Kai caught himself lowering his head with guilt.

*I’ve not done anything wrong, why do people always assume the worst?*

“It’s a gift from my teacher.”

“Oh, I see,” she deflated slightly. “I’m not sure this is an appropriate—”

“Does that chapter mention any serious drawbacks if I read it too?” Kai didn’t want to get dragged into that conversation right now.

His tone lowered to a whisper, Moui was out, but Alana was cleaning downstairs. “Does that chapter mention unlocking the Second Seal early?”

Her mouth hung agape as she made the obvious connection. There was bound to be a mention of it in the book, and that chapter was the most likely suspect.

“Does it say some reason why I shouldn’t read it, sis?” Kai pressed on her hesitation, he couldn’t let her think too deeply, or she would begin lecturing him again.

“Wait! Did you really...” She glanced at the book again, quickly browsing through the pages  
“I guess it makes sense...”

Kai struggled to keep his voice perfectly calm. “So, can I?”

“Yes, I don’t see ho—”

*Good enough.*

“Thank you, sis, you’re the best!” He gave her his brightest smile. “I’ll explain later.”

Taking back the leather-bound book from her hand, he dashed to his room. His ears listened through the door, her steps wandered closer but soon brought her downstairs.

Ele wouldn’t mention the book to somebody else without asking him first. Though Kai didn’t delude himself, he had only postponed the conversation.

Eager to find out more, he sped through the pages. He found his answers and confirmed some suspicions he hoped weren’t true.

*Such a killjoy.*

Attributes, skills, feats and repeated actions all had an impact on his future profession. All things that tended to improve until fourteen, when the benefits reached a plateau. Some people chose to wait a little longer if they weren't happy with their choices, though that only helped if you had slacked during your childhood, according to the author.

Taking a profession early meant he would receive worse options than what he would get at fourteen.

However, if you were at the risk of dying *repeatedly*, the Guide would offer to break the Second Seal early. A failsafe for extreme situations. What would be the point in getting a better profession if someone died before choosing any?

Most commonly it was triggered during periods of war or when children were stranded in dangerous wild environments.

*Seems like running into a pirate raid after almost getting skewered by a hunter counts too. Who would have thought...*

The author specified it required *true* and *repeated* danger. It wouldn't work if Elijah or Moui were watching his back, no matter how many beasts he fought. The Guide couldn't be cheated, it knew when he wasn't actually in mortal danger.

Even if he honestly believed his life was about to end, the Guide didn't care. There was only one way to brute force this failsafe, that was to actually put someone's life at risk, multiple times.

*I knew Elijah didn't really leave me alone. Damn butler, he could have stopped that drake from chasing me through half of Veeryd.*

That was also why it was advised not to read this chapter. Overeager kids might be tempted to put themselves into unnecessary danger.



*Well, I can't say I wouldn't have considered the option if I knew...*

The chapter contained more information about professions, mostly stuff he had already been taught and little new details.

*Never an easy choice.*

He would get better options than any other native in the archipelago if he chose now. That wasn't a matter of arrogance, it was a fact. But they wouldn't be as good as if he had waited.

*Will the difference be that big?*

Kai reread the chapter, but the book didn't offer more insights.

Reaching Yellow would be the greatest boost, but he wasn't going to do that before selecting a profession. The biggest difference he would miss out on were the levels in his general skills.

*How much do they matter?*

He had always been a bit of a perfectionist. Before Elijah and Dora left, he always tried to min-max his status as much as possible. But a lot has happened since then.

Even with Hallowed Intuition, he couldn't expect to be always warned in time. As the raid and kidnapping taught him, sometimes life just really wanted to fuck with you, and you could only take it. There were going to be dangers he couldn't predict, that hit him out of the blue for no apparent reason.

All he could do was become stronger and prepare himself to weather the coming storms. A profession would be one hell of a preparation.

A slightly better profession would do him no good if he was dead, or if someone he loved died.

*There must be a reason why the Guide offered me to break the Second Seal early.*

Then there was whatever Virya hid in the cube. The mage could be infuriating, but she had never lied to him. With the attributes from a profession, he would ensure he beat her challenge.

Hidden behind layers upon layers of intricate puzzles, the reward was bound to be exceptional. Perhaps worth breaking the seal just for that.

*And I'm back at the starting point. Amazing. Just truly fucking wonderful.*

The list of pros and cons and his messy thoughts filled five pages. Kai crumpled the papers and threw them in a corner of his room in frustration.

*I need to get a garbage can.*

After the raid destroyed the little order, he had put into his life, he had wanted to believe so *badly* that the Guide offered him the next step to take. The solution to his problems.

Reality could never be so merciful.

Someone would think he would have learned the lesson after he had been repeatedly fucked over by fate, but no. He couldn't stop himself from hoping that, for once, it would be different. Hoping that the optimal path forward had been delivered straight to him.

Life and choices were never just black or white, they came in a thousand infuriating shades of gray. An endless series of trade-offs, and the only way to find the right decision was after the fact.

Kai lay on his bed, tempted to scream into his pillow.

*Why does it need to be so damn frustrating?*

His mind wandered back to the estate, things had been much simpler then.

*Elijah and Dora would know what to do. Spirits, I'd settle for Virya and her enigmatic answers.*

Who else could he ask for advice? His mom and Moui had the best intentions, but they knew less than him on these topics.

*Maybe Reishi knows something? I'll need to check on him, I hope he didn't lose too much in the raid.*

He could postpone the decision for another day.