

Chapter 413 - Last Day

“...sponsored by House Verelune. To think, after the last one dropped out like that.”

“I’ll allow you to join my team if we meet. You won’t get a better offer. It’s your best chance to reach the second year...”

“...haven’t seen her since last week. It’s like she vanished. Even her roommates haven’t seen her.”

“Sorry to tell you, man. But if she missed your dinner, she clearly ditched you. Her roommates are probably in on it.”

“She’s not like that! Ann would never!”

“Hey! I’m not—”

Voices drifted from the garden around the dorm. Rumors, plotting, and laughter. It all blended together, laced with a subtle undercurrent of tension for the upcoming Trials.

Sprawled on the couch, Kai watched the oak branches sway outside. Sunlight spilled through the open balcony windows on the spot he’d deliberately positioned. A breeze brushed his legs draped over the armrest. Hanging at the side, one hand idly curled Hobbes’s silky fur, where the cat napped on a pillow on the floor.

No one else was in the apartment. Alden had booked a laboratory for a private alchemy project. Rob had vanished somewhere, as usual. And Rain had charmed a professor into letting him swim in the Veiled Eye.

Kai had been mildly curious about the lake surrounding the Augury Tower. Divination had been among the electives he’d considered, but not enough to trek to the eastern edge of the academy at the crack of dawn. It was also a popular spot among the upperclassmen, and crowded besides.

Way too much hassle.

Tomorrow, every first-year student would enter the Moon Trials. Only about two-thirds would make it out and pass the year. Perhaps he should be honing his skills, strategize about possible challenges, plot alliances, and scout the competition.

He had done enough of that. Months of ceaseless grinding should entitle him to a little lazing. So, he’d sunk into the couch, intending to lie around and do nothing for a bit. That had been several hours ago. He had yet to find the will or motivation to move. Studying, mana exercises, meditating, even napping. It all felt like too much effort. He just wanted to do nothing and *be*.

The warmth of the sun on his skin was too pleasant to abandon. Perhaps, it was Hobbes' instincts bleeding through their bond. Perhaps, Hobbes was onto something.

With an idle thought, he pulled up his status.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn** (*Matthew Reece Veernon*)
- Race: **Human** ★★ – 205,850 > 310,200 / 800,000 XP
- Profession: **Favored Mystic of the Isles** (lv6>7) – 4,800 > 6,529 / 30,000 XP

Body stats

- Strength: **45**
- Dexterity: **48**
- Constitution: **59** (48+11) > 60 (48+12)
- Mind: **75** (53+22) > 78 (54+24)
- Spirit: **83** (61+22) > 85 (61+24)
- Perception: **56** (45+11) > 57 (46+12)
- Favor: **96**

Profession Skills:

- **Spatial Shift** (lv33>47)
- **Echoing Empath** (lv32>40)
- **Astral Pathway** (lv31>40)
- **Nature Healing** (lv30>39)
- **Natural Prodigy** (lv26>35)
- **Water Cannon** (lv25>32)

General Skills:

- **Hallowed Intuition** (lv96>98)
- **Mana Observer** (lv64>67)
- **Hobbes** (lv55>60)
- **Mana Weaving** (lv53>59)
- **Body Augmentation** (lv53>58)
- **Split Mind** (lv50>57)
- **Water Magic – Advanced** (lv49>55)
- **Mana Analyst** (lv49>54)
- **Elemental Swordsman** (lv30>35)
- **Mana Engraving** (lv27>29)
- **Nature Magic – Advanced** (lv27>33)
- **Space Magic – Advanced** (lv21>29)
- **Runic Scholar** (lv20>25)
- **Arcane Enchanting** (lv20>22)
- **Herbal Alchemy** (lv9>18)
- **Herbalism** (lv12>16)

- **Shadow Magic** (lv89>100) >> **Shadow Magic - Advanced** (lv1)
- **Earth Magic** (lv88>100) >> **Earth Magic - Advanced** (lv1)
- **Blessed Swimmer** (lv84>86)

- **Mnemonic Mastery (lv50>72)**
- **Swift Learner (lv43>64)**

Not too shabby, not too shabby...

The massive XP requirement for Yellow ★★★ had felt like trying to grasp the horizon. No more. Bit by bit, he was closing the gap, another step on the way to Green. The higher grades were farther still...

I've got time.

His pace would accelerate once he stopped siphoning Domain XP into his profession. He had already calculated filling through the last levels with his profession skills. Most students waited until the third year for their Yellow profession, and he walked an uncharted path.

If someone had records of Favored Mystic of the Isles, he hadn't found them in the library. Still, some principles always held true. Skills, attributes, feats, and experience. The deeper and more solid his foundation, the better evolutions the Guide would offer.

The skill condensation at Green both stressed and appealed to him, narrowing his focus and efforts. While he could reliably channel Earth, Water, and Shadow through Elemental Swordsman and Body Augmentation, he still felt like an amateur. Each skill required dedication and more time than he could spare.

His profession skills continued growing through daily practice, but most demanded real battle to truly push them. Even his experimenting with Echoing Empath felt like he was barely scratching the surface.

Never enough hours in the day.

None of his skills suddenly spiked, at least not by his standards. Still, maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

Skills, attributes, professions, affinities, and boons, all built and fed into each other. The entire point of status planning was maximizing those synergies.

Space Magic made a good example. Without Astral Pathway, he wouldn't have the mana to practice. Without Zervathi's Spatial Attunement boon and his bond with Hobbes, he could have spent years of study without reaching the same intuitive understanding. Without Mana Observer, Mana Analyst, and Mana Weaving, he would lack the fine control necessary to weave spatial spells. And without Mind and Spirit from his profession, he wouldn't have the raw attributes/power to use any of those skills to their potential.

He could draw similar connections for most of his status. Progress fed on progress. Remove a single piece, and the whole structure risked coming tumbling down.

And that doesn't even touch on external aids. Hmm... guess Professor Lysander's rants sort of had a point...

He'd always known the importance of synergies, but only now did he *truly* understand their scope. It was what made catching up to higher elites incredibly hard.

Ironically, Hallowed Intuition was the biggest outlier, only working through his Favor.

Or perhaps, it was his most synergistic skill of all. After all, he couldn't level anything if he were dead.

Just two more levels there...

His gains spread across the board, reflecting his eclectic studies.

All his magic skills had steadily grown. Earth and Shadow Magic had finally hit Yellow. His class on Runes and Enchanting had been mostly theoretical. Herbalism had become somewhat redundant after gaining Herbal Alchemy, though he was still hesitant to discard it.

Better save the slot for Green.

Jolene had helped him cobble clues to improve Hallowed Intuition's evolution, but not how many slots it would take. The average fell between two and three. Even worse than unlocking no evolution, he dreaded hitting level 100 and getting something awful like four skill slots.

Let's not panic yet.

Adjusting his head on the pillows, his gaze caught on a bowl of peaches on the kitchen counter, their fuzzy peels flushed gold and pink, seemed to beg for a bite. They were no mangos, but he was getting hungry.

He was still weighing whether a juicy fruit was worth getting up for when the familiar clicks of the locks sounded. Too cheerful voices carried through the opening door.

"...go there again." Rain came in first, bright smile and hair still damp. "I wish we'd found that spot sooner."

Flynn tossed a satchel onto the nearest chair. "We'll have the next few years for that. The older years hog all the best spots."

"Sure... *next* year." Rob trailed in last, hands in his pockets. "Honestly, I still can't believe you got permission to go there. How did you do it? First years are never allowed there."

"A mage never reveals their secrets, Bert."

"*You...*"

Thick into their conversation, no one glanced at the couch. Kai sank deeper into the pillows. Maybe if he stayed still enough, they would leave without noticing him.

"Uh... Mat. What are you doing there?" Flynn peered down from above him.

Dammit.

Rain pursed his lips. "I thought you said you were busy."

"Have you not moved from there since I left?" Rob chuckled.

Kai put aside the pillows, offering a shrug that didn't quite lift his shoulders. "I was busy."

The trio scan his sprawled form with unconvinced looks.

"Right." Flynn crouched to pet Hobbes. "C'mon, we were thinking of going to grab a bite. We can't let you spend our last free day shut in your dorm room."

"I'm perfectly fine, thanks. As I said, I'm busy."

"From the couch, I see... doing what?"

Kai opened his mouth, scrambling to search through his memos. He'd been too diligent lately.

Right! How could I forget...

The white envelope Reishi had passed him appeared in his hands. "I have mail to read and write back." Kai drew himself up, holding the letter from his family.

"That looks thick." Rob studied the blank envelope. "Who's from?"

"Uh, it's... private stuff." Kai shrugged, inwardly cursing himself. "Just some investments and contracts." Proof of the family Matthew Veernon wasn't supposed to have. His cover mostly relied on the fact that nobody cared to look deeper. Why would they? His mixed features clearly identified him as coming from the archipelago.

Rob leaned closer. "Want a hand?"

"Nah." Kai moved the letter away. "It's just boring paperwork. I need to get it done."

"Well, we can go ahead and find a spot then." Rain motioned. The knowing gleam in his eyes was gone in an instant. "I'd like to avoid the mob. You promise to catch up to us, *right?*"

"Yeah. Of course." Kai smiled stiffly. He wasn't sure how, but the siren clearly knew.

"I'll help you with the numbers." Flynn threw him a side-eye, badly whispering. "And make sure he doesn't mysteriously forget."

“Don’t take too long.” Rain winked with equal subtlety. “I’ll see if Valela wants to join.” With him dragging Rob along, they quickly grabbed their things and cleared the apartment.

Kai glanced at the last intruder. “You really didn’t need to stay. I’ll follow you later.”

“Then it’ll be no problem if I stay.” Flynn grabbed one of the peaches, giving a satisfying bite. He gestured to the letter. “It’s from your family, isn’t it? I don’t need details, but I’d like to hear how they’re doing. I spent a lot of time hanging out at your house after... You know.”

Fair.

Kai bit his cheek in hesitation before tearing open the envelope. Several folded pages slid out. From the neat handwriting, he immediately recognized both his mother’s and sister’s hands, along with a crooked scrawl that could only belong to Kien.

He’s already learned to write...

It had been easy to avoid thinking about home while classes kept him busy. Now... How much had he missed already? Only Kea and he were missing. From her erratic messages, she remained determined to keep adventuring with her group.

At least, she’s being more cautious.

Without lingering, Kai unfolded the letters and began to read. His mother had packed pages with precise updates, interspaced with reminders to eat properly and take care of himself. The little mundane details filled him with the ache of homesickness.

Kien’s contribution occupied barely half a page, the handwriting shrinking toward the margins with a few misspelled words. Most of it revolved around a turtle he had been feeding, as well as strict orders to tell Flynn hello. Kai chuckled softly—right until the final question.

When are you coming back?

When...

The distance to the archipelago made it impractical to visit often. He rubbed his eyes, turning the pages to his sister’s. His smile at her teasing remarks quickly froze over.

“What is it?” Flynn frowned at him. “Is everyone okay?”

“Hmm, yeah.” Kai blinked and lowered the final page. “I’m an uncle.”

“Oh, *that*. I thought you’d have counted the months. Don’t scare me like that. Congratulations!”

“Thanks...” He muttered, mind still blank.

A flood of conflicting emotions churned in his chest.

He'd known his sister was expecting when he left for the mainland. Between finding Kea and enrolling at Raelion, he'd lost track of the time.

He had a niece. He was an uncle. Little Mira was already three months old. She'd been born at Red ★★. Though he'd bought the same enhancement potions as for Kien, natal elixirs were notoriously unreliable. Even so, she'd begin her life years ahead of most of the archipelago.

An old guilt twisted in his gut. He wouldn't be there for her first steps or her first words, just as he'd miss Kien growing up.

I made the choice. You can't have everything.

Rationalizing didn't make him feel much better.

The envelope contained one more sheet: a colored portrait of lifelike realism, likely commissioned from a skilled artist.

His family stood on a weathered bench by the shore. The cloudless sky and crystal sea stretched in the backdrop, sunlight shimmering on the cresting waves.

Moui stood at the back, broad-shouldered and steady as a cliffside. The stern lines of his face softened around his eyes and smile, peeking through the hunter's usual stoic demeanor. One arm wrapped gently around Alana. A light breeze tugged at her cascading hair and dress. Her fond look and bright smile made her appear years younger.

Beside them, Ele leaned comfortably against her husband. She shared their mother's wavy brown hair and vivid green eyes. Cradled in her arms rested a bundled infant, wisps of hazel hair peeking from the blanket, tiny fingers curled around her pinky.

Sabe draped one arm protectively across her shoulder. Dark tribal tattoos coiled across the tanned muscles of his forearms. The artist must have been quite skilled to change his swagger for an air of dependable seriousness, looking down at the baby with quiet pride.

As long as she's happy. He's not too bad.

At the front, Kien sat in the sand, his cheeks puffed with the absolute seriousness only a toddler could muster. One tiny hand gripped the bench while the other held a familiar-looking wooden cube.

Seeing them together made Kai's throat tighten again.

"Aww! Look how cute they are! That's so nice." Flynn peeked from behind the couch. "We should send back a portrait of us!"

"I'll... think about it." Kai smiled and put the portrait in his ring away. That was not going to happen.

"C'mon, I know a great artist. It won't take long to pose. And you can save the piece for posterity!"

"Mew." The bond rippled with dangerous curiosity.

"Of course, you can pose too." Flynn picked up the fluffy cat, both staring at him with wide eyes.

Ah, dammit.

* * *

From their table, Kai glanced at the clusters of packed students. Even inside the restaurant, the atmosphere thrummed with tension. Wards muffled the conversations into a low buzz.

Beyond the glass windows, he caught fragments on their lips, mentions of the Trials, alliances, and combat pairings.

"Some people really don't know how to relax." Shaking his head, he turned back to the table. "Uhm, what's that look for? "

Valela leaned beside her empty plate, her smile hidden in her palm. "Nothing."

"Sure..." Kai eyed her skeptically. "I'm just saying scrambling on the last day won't help them."

"For those not confident in passing, every little bit helps. I heard the Trials will also determine what opportunities you get in the second year."

"Same for me. And you're underestimating their scale." Flynn brought a shrimp tart to Hobbes' nose for inspection. "Alliances and plotting are basically a tradition for the Moon Trials. You didn't see it as much during the Mid-Terms, because people didn't expect they would test the courses of study together then."

"It still feels a bit pointless," Kai said. "There'll be over three thousand first years participating. Unless we get to pick out groups, the chances of running into any specific person are tiny. And striking alliances with strangers the day before the Trials doesn't seem like a good idea anyway. We don't even know if the challenges will involve other students."

"No, but they usually do. And again, you're underestimating the resources rich people are willing to throw to increase their chances."

"What? Like money? They're actually paying him for help?"

Flynn sighed and booped Hobbes. "You should really socialize more. Money, favors, influence, threats. Everything is game. The top Martial students are getting swarmed with requests. Some students even offer sign-on bonuses with their house. If you don't meet them in the Trials, it's free mesars. And if you do, you've got guaranteed allies. I even heard of students offering money for people to throw matches against them if they end up in an adversarial challenge."

Kai blinked. "Won't people just go back on their words inside the Trials. I can't imagine these are legal contracts."

"There are many ways to enforce a deal. Most students rich enough to bribe others come from ancient Houses. Breaking your word to them can cause problems outside the academy."

Valela frowned. "Is that allowed?"

Flynn shrugged. "It's not, *not* allowed. Money and connections are part of life."

"Did you accept any offers?" Kai asked.

Flynn grinned smugly. "Perhaps. There are many kinds of contracts. I don't discuss the affairs of my clients."

That sparked another round of speculation and teasing before Rain segued into a heated argument about the virtues of scarves in summer.

Halfway through, Kai drifted off, spitting his mind by habit.

Hallowed Intuition was so close to advancing.

Two levels in two months in the high nineties. While not absurdly fast, it was definitely noteworthy—especially given the absence of deadly situations/battles he'd faced.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, I guess... It was always an odd skill.

He hadn't forgotten the burning party. The mnemonic folder of strange happenings around the academy had only grown. At times he even thought he heard a whispering, like a shadow that vanished whenever he turned.

After months without clues, his investigation had died down. Besides keeping his guard up, what could he do? From his research, conspiracies were woven all throughout Raelion's history, an inescapable consequence of gathering the future elites of the Republic in one place.

The months of study had also brought him a much-needed realization. He was painfully underqualified to meddle in the plots of Green tier and higher.

It's not my problem unless I make it.

Someone more qualified would handle it.

"Hmm, sorry." Kai looked at Valela. "You said you'll travel back to the archipelago for the summer break?"

"Yes, my father organized the transport. Each time, it's a nightmare to align the connections. Uh, sorry... It was prepared this Fall, but I can help you find tickets."

Kai bit the inside of his cheek. The airship could carry him as far as Higharbor. From there, he'd still need to reach Sylspring. How long would he get at home? A great deal of effort for a family he technically wasn't supposed to have.

"It's probably better I not..."

Valela brushed his hand on the table. "Tell me if you change your mind. I can carry letters too, of course."

"Thank you. I'll definitely do that." He nodded.

"Oh, I do have some positive news too!" Valela smiled at him. "If I do well in the Trials, I'm planning to sponsor Lou here next year. Maybe you can have another piece of home here."