

Chapter 403 - Suspect Behaviors (Part 2)

"So, I hit the milestone for both Mnemonic Mastery and Split Mind." Kai sat straight, chest puffed with a hint of pride. His shoulders felt lighter now that his choice was made. "And I've already picked the specializations."

At her desk, Jolene lifted a porcelain teacup to sip. "Meaning you selected the paths we've extensively studied, discussed, and agreed upon over the last few weeks?"

"Well, yeah..." He shuffled in his seat.

When she puts it like that...

"That's good," she said. "I'm glad you're making progress with your decision... *problem* and didn't dither."

"What—" Kai scowled, arms folded. "I don't have any problem."

Jolene sipped her floral tea again, ignoring him. Her gaze browsed the papers on her immaculately tidy desk. "Do you want a cup too? It's a new blend. I was told it helps clear your mind for important decisions."

"*I'm fine.*" Kai ground his jaw. "Thank you, professor."

She set the teapot down with a nonchalant *clink*. "Anything else you'd like to tell me to start? I've heard you've been busy. A very unfortunate affair. Something about a party at the Arboris Tower, a *student* dragging a girl on a dance while flames rained over you."

"I... That's not what happened!" He kept away from other students all day, looking to avoid attention. Still, those damned blabbermouths kept spinning stories.

Professor Thornwyn studied him over the rim of her glasses. "So you did not attend a party that went up in flames?"

"I did, but—"

"And you did not lead a girl to dance under the burning ceilings?"

"Well... sort of. But it wasn't like that!"

Jolene pressed her lips in disapproval. "I know teenage boys suffer a reasoning deficit when there is a girl to impress, but next time, think once. Preferably twice. Regardless of your skills, that was needlessly reckless of you. I expect better from my mentees."

Knowing better than to debate extenuating circumstances, Kai hung his head. "Yes, professor."

“Hmm.” She held the stare a moment longer before nodding. “Split Mind hit the threshold faster than I had anticipated. It’s an important milestone, but don’t rest on your laurels. With your stubbornness on keeping eight electives, we might just stand a chance of keeping pace.”

At her gesture, Kai began catching her up on his weekly progress. He’d need time to fully digest and explore his new specializations. Cognitive Archivist, in particular, would need to be actively implemented to reap its benefits. Though it would also speed up and smooth sorting his tangle of memos, important memories, and stored knowledge.

*Memo 148: You should really, **really** stop procrastinating and tidy up your mnemonic chains. Having memos doesn’t help if you hit the triple digits.*

Kai gave a mental shake at his shortsightedness.

What procrastination? Waiting for the best tools to complete a task is just smart planning.

Though it was Threaded Consciousness that excited him the most. He’d already started tinkering. The Guide only offered vague impressions. Specializing a skill was an odd feeling, but not unpleasant, as if he suddenly became aware of a muscle he never knew was there. He’d stumbled through his first attempts, then quickly gained confidence.

Strange— two thoughts— at once— This is— crazy!

His head buzzed with possibilities. Could he read two books at once? Practice double the skills? What about his casting? He was quite good at holding multiple weaves, but until now, those had only been copies of the same practiced spells engraved through habit. With Threaded Consciousness, he might actually customize two unique spells at once. Perhaps more. How many ways could he split his mind?

“*Matthew*.” Jolene’s tone cut through both the mind listening to her and the one lost in wanderings. “Are you practicing your new ability while I’m speaking?”

Damn— Shit—

“Uhm, I...” As he scrambled for damage control, Split Mind let him grasp the full particulars of her disapproval: from the stiff curve of her lips to the expression hardening around her eyes. “Maybe... Sorry, professor.”

Jolene stared at him for a dangerous second, then let out a small sigh. “I’m familiar with the eagerness to test a new ability. Still, I’d like to have the same full attention that I give you. Your Mind’s resources are not endless; splitting your thoughts doesn’t come without a price. For minor tasks, it’s mostly a net benefit. But when it comes to more complex work, a single focus will bring better results.”

Kai bobbed his head. “I understand, professor.”

“And stop with that polite *professor* nonsense. You only use it when you’re trying to appease me. Just listen and pay attention. Contrary to what students believe, I don’t give warnings for my own enjoyment.” She exhaled again—he noticed she tended to do that a lot around him. “I’m glad you listened and didn’t split your mind in more than two ways.”

“Of course, profe— I followed your instructions. Though... how can you tell?”

“Because you’re not writhing on the floor with a splitting migraine. Skills that deal with mental processing are among the most delicate and dangerous if used irresponsibly. But if you’d like to try, go ahead. Better you do it now, under supervision. Some students don’t believe fire burns until they stick their hands in it.”

“That... I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

She sipped her tea. “Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

Her eyes lingered on him, almost disappointed. “If that’s the case... don’t split more than two conscious threads, and limit yourself to one-hour sessions, with an equal rest in between.”

Kai bit his tongue to think twice before replying. “Are such long breaks truly necessary?” That would only give him eight or nine hours of use a day.

“With your current Mind attribute, yes. More and you’d risk a physical backlash beyond skill strain.” She arched an eyebrow. “Unless you’d like to test it?”

“No, ma’am... I trust your judgment.”

“Good. Record your experience for next week. No more than two conscious threads.” She underlined again. “Hold off on experimenting until you’ve gained ten levels. That’s merely the threshold where I’m confident you won’t risk damaging your brain. It’s always better to apply extra caution with pure Mind skills. I’d recommend some restraint with Mnemonic Mastery too, but at Orange, you’ll suffer a severe migraine at worst.”

Memo 154: Record any side effects of the new specializations.

Memo 155: Follow Professor Thornwyn’s advice.

“I have a question...” Kai hummed in thought. “Will training these specializations help me gain natural points in Mind?”

“That’s... an apt observation.” Her eyes set in a stiff line. “Should I expect you to abuse your skills and mind if I say yes?”

He reached for Hobbes’ bond, blinking innocently. “No?”

Jolene looked skeptical. She removed she her glasses to wipe the spotless lenses. “Indeed, consistent use over *months* can stimulate natural attribute growth. Up to a point. Every body

and soul has a limit to how much they can sustain in each attribute. The cap is apparent with Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution, but it also applies to Perception, Mind, and Spirit. Even if the latter one is the most flexible.”

“I see. And... are there ways to raise the cap?”

“Of course. Many. You can likely guess the simplest one?”

“Increasing your grade?”

“Correct.” Jolene nodded. “Natural attribute growth is a complex subject, with many variables to obtain results. Chief among them is years of consistent effort.” She gave a brief overview of the fascinating topic before they returned to his training and skill paths. Lastly, they breached the topic of today.

Kai laced his fingers to keep from fidgeting. “You found something?”

“I have. It had to scour thirteen deep vaults, but I found mentions of Hallowed Intuition.”

“Really?” He gaped, surprise edged with a pinch of disappointment.

Jolene gave him an amused look. “Don’t tell me you thought you were the only one to have ever learned the skill? Raelion holds centuries of records from across the Republic and far beyond. There are *very* few Yellow skills we have no knowledge of.”

Kai leaned against the desk. “So...”

“Unfortunately, none of the skill holders recorded evolving Hallowed Intuition to Green. The highest one brought it to the peak of Yellow and got stuck there.” She slowly sipped her tea, as if enjoying his squirming. “That is *why* I expanded the search and cross-referenced other Fate-based skill paths that we *do* know. It’s not a perfect comparison, but they should give you an idea of what you need to unlock a good Green evolution.”

A sealed folder appeared in her hand for him. “This is everything I’m allowed to show to a *first-year*. And it took a trip to the highest office even to get permission for this much. Pure Fate-based skills are the least studied and the most unique. Take your time reading. We can discuss it, but these papers can’t leave my sight.”

* * *

Half an hour later, Kai left her office, his head swarming with thoughts that even two mind threads couldn’t keep up with. Advancing skills to Green was a different beast. It wasn’t uncommon for people to hit level 100, only to receive no paths forward at all. The requirements were *steep*. And that was before considering the issue of how many skill slots they’d take. A bad evolution could be worse than none.

At least I've got some solid leads for Hallowed Intuition. Lemme see...

With a tug, he pulled up his status scroll.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn** (*Matthew Reece Veernon*)
- Race: **Human** ★★ – 174,032 > 205,850 / 800,000 XP
- Profession: **Favored Mystic of the Isles** (lv6) – 0 > 4,800 / 28,000 XP

Body stats

- Strength: **45**
- Dexterity: **48**
- Constitution: **59 (48+11)**
- Mind: **75 (53+22)**
- Spirit: **83 (61+22)**
- Perception: **56 (45+11)**
- Favor: **96**

Profession Skills:

- **Spatial Shift** (lv29>33)
- **Echoing Empath** (lv30>32)
- **Astral Pathway** (lv27>31)
- **Nature Healing** (lv28>30)
- **Natural Prodigy** (lv22>26)
- **Water Cannon** (lv25)

General Skills:

- **Hallowed Intuition** (lv93>96)
- **Mana Observer** (lv63>64)
- **Hobbes** (lv52>55)
- **Mana Weaving** (lv52>53)
- **Body Augmentation** (lv51>53)
- **Split Mind** (lv47>50)
- **Water Magic – Advanced** (lv48>49)
- **Mana Analyst** (lv47>49)
- **Elemental Swordsman** (lv28>30)
- **Mana Engraving** (lv27)
- **Nature Magic – Advanced** (lv25>27)
- **Space Magic – Advanced** (lv19>21)
- **Arcane Enchanting** (lv17>20)
- **Runic Scholar** (lv19>20)
- **Herbalism** (lv11>12)

- **Alchemy** (lv97>99)
- **Shadow Magic** (lv85>89)
- **Earth Magic** (lv85>88)
- **Blessed Swimmer** (lv84)

- **Mnemonic Mastery (lv47>50)**
- **Swift Learner (lv39>43)**

It's all coming along quite nicely.

One step closer to the peak of Yellow.

Mana Analyst, Water Magic, and Alchemy were also nearing their respective milestones and evolution. Naturally, he'd already extensively researched those paths. Still, good planning allowed for flexibility and adjustment if he unlocked something truly exceptional.

Ninety-six. Just four more levels.

Hallowed Intuition would undoubtedly be his first skill to Green. He couldn't let all that effort go to waste and risk receiving no worthwhile evolution. Even the small chance wasn't acceptable.

Jolene gave a few ideas...

Lost in aimless wandering, he almost didn't notice someone approaching from behind.

"Excuse me, Mister Veernon?"

Shit, I forgot to veil myself in Shadow.

Ready with an excuse to slip away, Kai peeked back. Instead of a nosy student, he found a petite woman in the steel-blue livery of the House of Mirrors. His brows furrowed. Those couriers only looked for students for one reason, but the only person who'd ever looked for him was Valela. And she was at Raelion.

Seeing the woman shuffle, he cleared his throat. "Hmm, yes... that's me."

The courier offered him a sealed envelope with a polite bow. "A client has requested a connection with you."

Glowing gossamer threads wrapped the letter; the weave of mana ensured no one had opened it. Breaking the wax seal with a satisfying *crack*, Kai took out a single black paper. From touch, the smooth and thick sheet was expensive stuff. One side was blank; the other bore the embossing of a snake coiled around a flower in deep purple ink.

After hours of lectures, he recognized it at a glance—the Blackwood crest.

Huh, did Alden send this? Or did they get the wrong person? This doesn't make sense...

Lifting his gaze, he was surprised to find the courier hadn't left. "Wait, you mean I have to come *right now*?"

“The client is currently waiting. All fees and arrangements have been taken care of.” The woman nodded with a half-bow. “If this isn’t an opportune time, she did offer to reschedule at your convenience.” She hesitated, then cast a furtive glance around and leaned in to whisper. “If you’ll forgive the indiscretion, in two years here, I’ve never seen the branch’s head stutter like this. Whoever invited you, they’re not the kind of client you’d want to leave waiting.” She punctuated with a meaningful look.

“I see...” Kai engaged Split Mind to analyze the possibilities.

To go or not to go? The safest course would be to ask his roommate... though he couldn’t deny his own curiosity. They were talking about Alden’s mysterious family.

It’s probably nothing serious. Or maybe it is. Either way, refusing won’t help much.

“Alright, lead the way.”