

Chapter 402 - Suspect Behaviors (Part 1)

Kai slipped off his covers, eyes still closed. He stretched his body, arching his back. A flick of his wrist to check his pocketwatch and return it to his ring. Tenth hour of the morning. When was the last time he had overslept?

Eh, it's alright. After yesterday, I can take one weekend of rest.

Thoughts of the previous night curved his lips. Four people weren't exactly a party, but it had been enjoyable.

Perhaps we could do it again. Sometime.

A good sleep did make problems seem more approachable. The lights flickering, flames engulfing the ceiling, panicked shouts, a shrouded assassin vanishing, and almost getting burned alive. All his fears and questions remained, just not quite as overwhelming. As if sleep had pushed all the craziness into perspective, a healthy distance away, now he could deal with them all with a cool head.

One step at a time. And I really told Valela about Earth, huh... she seemed... excited. That's a good sign, isn't it?

Kai covered a yawn.

Problems for later.

Whatever he chose to do would require caution and patience. And he had more pressing issues like his skill specializations and *breakfast*.

As he got dressed, Hobbes sprawled in a ray of morning light on his desk.

"Where did you vanish to last night?" He scratched the lazy cat, eliciting a low purr. Ivory claws and tiny pearly fangs gleamed as the fluffball rolled and stretched. "You didn't get into trouble, right?"

"Mew." He licked his paw with a dismissive air; their bond kept suspiciously muted.

"Yeah, yeah. You can't be blamed if people leave stuff around without nailing it down, eh?" Kai scrubbed his fingers through the silky fur. He was about to turn away when he did a double-take—half a stick of salted fish in the snack bowl. "Were you not... hungry?"

One violet eye weighed the treat. Hobbes pawed away the ceramic bowl.

"Oh... not good enough for you, is it?" Kai folded his arms. Since coming to Raelion, his familiar was getting ever more fussy with his treats. Flynn and Alden were spoiling him.

He lifted up the cat, brows scrunched up. "Hmm, I think you're getting chubby."

"Mroooow!" Hobbes protested at the examination, squirming away.

"No, no. This ain't just fur. How many treats have you eaten this week? And don't look away! I know you've been making rounds, begging everyone for treats. How many people have you pulled into your racket? You blink your big eyes at each one as if you're being starved."

"*Meeew.*" Hanging limp in his grip, he drew in his paws and looked up at him, as if to say:
"Who? Me?"

Yes, you.

"Try that innocent act on someone else." Kai fruitlessly interrogated his familiar, brushing his shiny coat. He was almost certain Hobbes was hiding something, but then again, when was he not?

Just make sure you don't get caught.

"Mroow." Hobbes sniffed at the obvious statement.

With a shake of his head, Kai sat cross-legged on his bed for his routine mana exercises. Waking up late, he'd need to speed through his homework before the meeting with Jolene later. Spirits willing, she had found some clue on Hallowed Intuition and his other, more arcane skills.

Surviving an assassination attempt should get me a couple freebies. Maybe half training? Three quarters? This must be Hobbes' laziness infecting me.

Ten minutes later, he walked into the living room, his platinum-haired roommate already there. "Morning."

"Morning!" Rain sat at the kitchen table, focused on a pyramid of purple and indigo sweet snacks. "Flynn left early. But we still have some leftovers from last night. Wanna try one of mine? Your pick."

"Uh, thanks. I'm good." Kai went to browse the cabinets for a *boring* breakfast. Not much in the field of plain-colored food. They'd need to restock; Rob usually took care of it.

Him too. Where did he vanish yesterday?

Settling for a blend of green tea, he sank into a chair, idly chatting while the leaves brewed. From the relaxed mood, no one would guess they'd nearly gotten cooked just yesterday.

"Speaking of, can I ask you a question?" Kai waited for a nod to continue. He still wasn't the smoothest casual conversationalist, but he found that resigning himself to a little awkwardness went a long way to make progress. "I never asked you when it's your birthday."

“Oh, that.” Rain shrugged. “It was a few months ago. Don’t worry about it. I didn’t expect you to get me anything. We don’t celebrate it like here on land.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope. Well, unless it’s a special milestone, like unlocking the Seals on the Guide. Or your first century. I never considered it could be any different. Not to say it’s bad. Flames aside, I enjoyed last night a lot. Just... my mother would say birthday parties would make your schedule too predictable. And celebrating each year seems like a *lot*. Like after the first few hundred times. Hmm, though Flynn would probably still like it.”

Right, centuries...

“We have other festivities, though. Like our first Blood Hunt or the Eve of the Whispering Deep.”

Kai blew on his steaming tea, glad he opted for a light breakfast. Few of the sirens’ customs seemed fitting for eating, though he found himself leaning forward in odd fascination.

That sounds a little terrifying. But also kinda cool.

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Alright, I’ve decided.

Outside the arching windows of the Caelus Tower, the sun dipped into late afternoon. Kai paced the hallway, the scroll windows with his specialization floating before him. Flashes of the *look* Jolene would give him if he dithered had convinced him to select them before their meeting.

I don’t have decision paralysis.

His mind was already set. It was a relatively easy choice, *meaning* he’d already wrecked his brains for weeks on skill repositories in preparation. That was the whole reason why he attended Professor Lysadener’s lectures: to plan his future status.

With Jolene’s help, Kai borrowed every skill path for Mnemonic Mastery and Split Mind accessible to first-years in the library. Luckily, he’d gotten both the specializations he’d been aiming for.

One more milestone, and he was almost assured to unlock the evolution he wanted at Yellow and Green. Taking a day to review such an important decision wasn’t half bad. No, it was just reasonable.

Though skimming them one more time can’t hurt...

Mnemonic Mastery (lv50) →

As you reach the first milestone, you are presented with four paths to continue your journey.

- **Stay the Course** - You won't gain new significant benefits, but you'll deepen the insight into your path.
- **Rapid Recall** - Swiftly retrieve faded memories and mnemonic chains. Once engraved into your memory, recall becomes near-reflexive, cutting through distractions, pressure, and altered mental states. Always at your fingertips.
- **Expansive Repository** - Expand the scale of your *ever-lengthening* mnemonic constructs. Increase speed and lessen the burden of creating larger chains, enabling linking and overlapping.
- **Cognitive Archivist** - Impose order on your mental landscape. Memories and mnemonic constructs can be swiftly sorted and categorized, allowing for easier navigation and cross-referencing.

His eyes locked onto Mnemonic Mastery as he scanned the lines he knew by heart. Knowing the skill paths up to Green only underlined how final his decision would be. One door opened, and many more closed.

Okay, twenty-one minutes to the meeting. First one up...

Rapid Recall was a convenient, but ultimately superfluous path. Its main benefit would be the ease of retrieving and preserving faded memories. With a fitting second milestone, it could evolve into a flexible, semi-eidetic memory at Yellow.

Not a terrible choice, but his mnemonic chains already worked well enough. By the time he got it, he would already be through most of his Raelion education. His goals already were a little more *ambitious*.

He dodged a hurrying clerk as he took a set of stairs, looking at the next option. Expansive Repository filled him with wistful thoughts. By itself, creating larger and more complex mental constructs wasn't particularly remarkable; the key ability was linking mnemonic chains, the door to a sea of possibilities.

If he followed the proper training, specializing again at level 75, he could learn to link every mental mnemonic into a *single* construct. Then, taking Constructed Mind at Yellow would gift him even more flexibility and the ability to create conditional triggers. Input one thought or feeling to receive a certain output or action.

Effectively, he could turn his mind into a human computer, programmable for basic tasks. And from there to Green, the possibilities only grew wilder. Storing perfect memories was just a side effect; he could automate calculations to levels unseen outside the modern age, and even automate casting simple spells and reactions.

He recognized the potential, though the drawbacks were just as large.

Even with Jolene's signature, the books he could access had contained scant details. The lack of specifics and the exercises necessary to acquire the specializations only grew foggy towards Green.

Most importantly, this path would demand a proportional investment: hours of specialized training, each day, for years. And still, the ability wouldn't mature until high-Yellow at the earliest; even then, it would require other supporting skills to shine.

It's a pity, but I already have enough on my plate with elemental magic. This would be a whole magic path on its own.

That left Cognitive Archivist. The ability to sort and categorize his mnemonic chains looked similar to Expanded Repository, though it built on different principles. Rather than arranging mnemonics into massive interconnected constructs, he'd be able to index them.

To continue the analogy, rather than a computer, he could turn his mind into a search engine. Not as fancy or potentially powerful, but just as useful. Better yet, it would be immediately useful at Orange, and take a fraction of the investment to set up.

Whelp, do I need to say more? And I love the path at Yellow. Especially if I can get that evolution at Green.

With steely resolve and no dithering whatsoever, Kai locked in his choice.

Ding

You chose to follow the path of a Cognitive Archivist. Congratulations, Mnemonic Mastery (lv50) can now reach lv75.

See, I've no problem deciding. Eleven minutes to the meeting. Full speed ahead!

A single floating scroll remained.

Split Mind (lv50) →

As you reach the first milestone, you are presented with four paths to continue your journey.

- **Stay the Course** - You won't gain new significant benefits, but you'll significantly deepen the insight into your path.
- **Parallel Casting** - Lessen the burden of splitting your mind to cast spells with greater precision and reduced focus. Spell weaves align more cleanly and lower the risk of backlash and collapse.
- **Threaded Consciousness** - Separate your mind into distinct, semi-independent threads of thought. Each can process, decide, and act concurrently with minimal overlap.

- **Feathered Mind - Reduce the strain of sustaining and splitting your focus. Maintain multiple chains of thought at all times with less effort and fatigue.**

This choice had been nearly as hard and exciting. Though both skills had reached their first milestone, they stood one grade apart. If specializations at Orange promised minor tweaks and distant potential, at Yellow, they brought immediate power.

His eyes darted across the options.

Even among them, Parallel Casting would offer the fastest returns. With one mental click, he could improve his casting speed, efficiency, and power. The issue was that it would help with spells, and *only* spells.

It would do nothing for dodging, battlefield awareness, sword fighting, or just following people talking while his mind wandered elsewhere. For a mage who safely cast behind an armed backline, it would be the ideal choice. For him, it would be a crippling specialization, turning one of his most flexible skills into a single-purpose tool.

It would be a damn fine tool, but too much of a glass cannon.

In stark contrast, Feathered Mind sounded much more unremarkable, yet it was one of the most powerful paths. Less strain on his mind meant he could do more and for longer: greater mental endurance in battle, longer training without skill strain. One of the most underrated benefits: the easier he could use a skill, the faster it would level.

Already at Yellow, skills became drastically harder to grow, while his available time and energies didn't nearly keep pace. If he trained one skill, he wasn't improving another. He couldn't do everything—he had to choose.

A solid option. If only I could pick two...

Unfortunately, he couldn't refuse the other option.

Despite the name, Split Mind didn't actually let him *split* his thinking mind. It enabled highly efficient multitasking, letting him juggle simple actions with minimal focus, but his conscious mind could still actively engage only one task at a time. At least, until he picked Threaded Consciousness...

Is there even a contest? If I can't make more hours in a day, I can make more of me. Muwhahaha!

A second-year student took a wide berth around him as he chuckled darkly. Ignoring the looks, Kai locked in his choice.

Ding

You chose to follow the path of a Threaded Consciousness. Congratulations, **Split Mind (lv50)** can now reach lv75.