

Chapter 383 - Exhausted

The midday sun filtered through the half-drawn curtains, the edges casting a blue stripe over the living room. Kai dropped his satchel by the table in the kitchen's corner. The door clacked close at his back.

His last lectures had strayed into his weekend. Professor Lysander's dry talking felt endless. The dorm was nearly empty. Rob and Alden must be outside, enjoying the spring weather blooming across Raelion's gardens.

Where did they find the energy?

He was too beat, drained, exhausted, a dry rag wrung till the fibers came apart. The world outside was too loud and bright.

Kai ambled toward the couch and dropped onto the soft cushions with a groan. His bed was way too far. Sprawling with his head on the armrest, he barely found the strength to kick off his boots. A book dug into his side—probably one of Rob's abandoned textbooks. He wiggled for a more comfortable position, lacking the strength or will to dislodge it.

Days of skill strain and tight sleep, pushing his body and mind, all blended into a migraine. The throb pounded behind his eyes, unrelenting.

His overworked skills ached like metaphysical tendons pulled raw in his mind. How many? He could usually count them with a soft tug, but the pulsing pain knotted together.

I survived.

He had done it. He had kept up with his four mandatory courses and nine electives, mostly evaded his stalkers, and drawn more efficient routes for the future. Against patricians with a lifetime of tutors, he'd not just limped along, but thrived in most of his classes. He had done so much, and yet so much still remained. Notebooks to organize, essays to write, mana exercises to weave, Jolene's words to ponder.

He should chat with Rob about Space Magic, inquire with Alden about Alchemy and weird patricians, talk with Rain and Flynn about Mixed Combat, meet with Valela to study mana theory together and... other stuff.

Endless tasks. Decisions that could determine his future. So many. *Too* many. He was scared to check how many memos his mnemonic thread had reached. He should move, plan out his hours, get ahead on work.

A little break. Later. Later, I'll move.

Kai nestled among the cushions. The weekend—his shining goal—he'd gritted his teeth to hold on. Now that he'd reach it... he had nothing left to give, like a marionette with his strings cut. No strength. No will.

Maybe I overdid it...

His hand covered his face and massaged his eyes. Thinking and worries could wait. For now, he just wanted to do nothing—be nothing.

Too exhausted, yet unable to find sleep, he lay there for what could be minutes or hours. Finally, the throbbing slightly lessened.

One week done. Countless more to go.

Eyes still closed, he summoned his status for a distraction.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn (Matthew Reece Veernon)**
- Race: **Human ★★ – 95,020 > 174,032 / 800,000 XP**
- Profession: **Favored Mystic of the Isles (lv5>6) – 9759 > 0 / 28,000 XP**

Body stats

- Strength: **45**
- Dexterity: **48**
- Constitution: **58 (48+10) > 59 (48+11)**
- Mind: **73 (53+20) > 75 (53+22)**
- Spirit: **81 (61+20) > 83 (61+22)**
- Perception: **55 (45+10) > 56 (45+11)**
- Favor: **96**

Profession Skills:

- **Spatial Shift (lv26>27>29)**
- **Echoing Empath (lv24>28>30)**
- **Astral Pathway (lv21>27)**
- **Natural Prodigy (lv18>22)**
- **Water Cannon (lv23>24>25)**
- **Nature Healing (lv18>23>28)**

General Skills:

- **Hallowed Intuition (lv92>93)**
- **Mana Observer (lv60>61>63)**
- **Body Augmentation (lv49>50>51)**
- **Mana Weaving (lv48>49>52) vanilla choice**
- **Mana Analyst (lv45>47)**
- **Split Mind (lv44>45>47)**
- **Hobbes (lv49>52)**
- **Water Magic – Advanced (lv45>46>48)**
- **Mana Engraving (lv27)**
- **Elemental Swordsman (lv20>24>28)**
- **Nature Magic – Advanced (lv19>22>25)**

- Runic Scholar (lv18>19)
- Arcane Enchanting (lv16>17)
- Space Magic – Advanced (lv15>19)
- Herbalism (lv10>11)

- Alchemy (lv96>97)
- Blessed Swimmer (lv77>84) Rain practice
- Earth Magic (lv77>80>85)
- Shadow Magic (lv72>75>85)
- Mnemonic Mastery (lv34>47)
- Swift Learner (lv26>39)

That's... quite something.

A sliver of satisfaction eased his pulsing mind. In the weeks since the Mid-Term Trials, he'd taken a significant step toward Yellow ★★★, progress to make most blanch with envy.

Most of his gains came from Elijah's tender tutelage, though the last week of craziness also showed, especially in Space Magic. The growth might slow, but it wasn't close to stopping. Raelion had centuries of knowledge to draw upon for his status; only time and energy restricted him.

"Meeew." Hobbes appeared on the backrest. Thoughts of napping laced with his own. Gracefully dropping on his stomach, the furball cozied up in the crook between him and the couch with lazy contentment.

I get you, buddy. I get you.

His fingers idly curled the silky fur as he mused over the numbers in his status. Ideas swirled in his head, stoking the embers of his motivation. The will to move yet escaped him, but it was a pleasant distraction. Elemental Swordsman and Body Augmentation had a sea of potential synergies. All his mana and elemental skills drowned in shaping exercises.

Head buried in wonderings and a pillow he'd pulled up from the floor, he almost missed the two people who entered, hushed tones and soft munching.

"I told you he'd be here. Hey, you alive, Mat?"

Opening an eye, Kai saw Flynn peer down at him, hand half-raised to poke him, and promptly retracted. "Awake and alive." He adjusted his position on the armrest, careful not to disturb Hobbes. From the glimpses of salty fish and springing bunnies, it'd be a crime to ruin his nap.

"What are you doing here?" Kai stretched and gave a small shake when Rain offered the bag of coal-colored nuts he was munching on. "Uh, what time is it? I lost track. Did we have to meet for..."

Shit.

“All good.” Flynn bent to pet the snoring cat and joined Rain to snack at the kitchen table. “That’s why we came to check. It was more an intention than a clear plan anyway.”

Rain bobbed his head, producing more bags and boxes. Fruit seemed to be today’s snacking theme. “We can use the pools any time this weekend. Professor Alynne is accommodating. She teaches my class of adept Water Magic this term. I found a few nifty tips for casting on dry land. Anyway, we can put off swimming for later.”

“Uhm, sorry. I think I’ll have to skip today,” Kai said, still not ready to move. “I’m dead tired and need to finish some homework.”

Flynn threw him a long glance. “You look like you could use a nap. Or ten.” He plucked out a peach-shaped fruit, a knife appearing in his palm with some sleight of hand. “I have about your same hours. But most of it is mandated practice. Martial Studies gets way fewer assignments. You look ragged.”

“I’m fine.” Kai attempted a nonchalant smile under the skeptical looks they threw at him. “*Really*. Live and whole.”

“If you mean that you’re still breathing, yes.” Flynn began peeling the dull silver skin in a single stripe.

“I’m still adapting,” Kai replied through a yawn.

“If you mean, slowly working yourself to an early grave. Then, yes again.” He sectioned the deep orange fruits into precise eighths. “Don’t worry, I’ll buy you a pretty tombstone and bring flowers once a month. Uhm, maybe every couple months. Have you seen the prices for fresh flowers at the Wing Aurea? Pure robbery. And the gardeners get cranky if you plunder their gardens. Scary bunch. Want a slice?”

Kai eyed the fruit suspiciously. “What is it?”

“No idea, but it tastes yummy.” Flynn threw it into his mouth. “A bit like a sour blueberry, but crunchy with a sweet aftertaste.”

“Moon apple.” Rain picked up the box. “The vendor said they only grow in the Florentail province and the trees only bloom under a blue moon. They’re apparently great for the sick and dying.”

Kai rolled his eyes. “Maybe later.” Rather than argue, he changed the topic. “About Mixed Comba—”

“We filled the team and registered,” Flynn said. “We got it handled. I’ve recruited the bravest and most skilled companion in all of Raelion!”

“Uhm, okay. Thanks. And... who is this brave companion?” Kai shoved down his rising worries. Maybe he should have paid more attention. The team might last the rest of the course. “We only had space for one or two other students, right?”

“Yup. Just one! I won’t ruin the surprise. They’re from Martial Studies. Between you and Rain, we have our magic covered. And honestly, I’d feel bad for any other mage who’d join. Not all egos are as resistant as mine. But don’t worry. I only accepted the very best. They drove a hard bargain, but I promised them your autograph.”

“Ah!” Kai snorted a laugh. “Very funny.”

“What?” Flynn met his puzzled gaze levelly. “I’m serious! You’re the most infamous first year in a long time! Actually... Could you sign me a couple books? There are some crazy collectors and fanatics who kill for that stuff. You’d better keep an eye on anything you use. School supplies. And clothes. Be mindful. I’ve heard of some strange requests.”

“Yeah, sure,” Kai rolled his eyes.

It was just teasing. Definitely. Why would anyone want my stuff...?

He promptly killed that line of thought. “Uhm, shouldn’t Rain be the most infamous first year? He’s done as well as I. And you know he’s... well, *him*.” His arm floppily gestured.

“Mhe?” Rain’s face snapped up from smelling a box of strawberries, cheeks bulging with food. His head tilted to one side. “What about me?”

Kai wrenched his gaze away before he could be pulled in by the innocent act. “Uh... I keep to myself, while you always have people hanging around. How do you not get swarmed?”

Rain shrugged. “I just ask the pushy ones to leave.”

“Right... And they do?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” His pale eyelashes batted in faux puzzlement. “It’s a polite request.”

“Well, he does ask *very* nicely.” Flynn reached to pull Rain’s cheeks into a silly face. “See! How can you tell him no?” He chuckled at the pouting siren, who raised his hands to return the favor and wrestle over the table. “Hey, you should try that too. Smile and be nice. Tell them to beat it.”

“Sure,” Kai said. Thinking about the times they went out together, it was indeed weird. Heads turned wherever Rain went, but hardly anyone got pushy with him. “What’s really the trick? Some kind of magic?”

“No.” Rain broke the contest, his tone more serious. “It’s not Mind Magic or a charm. I just... *know* what and how to say the right words. My mother taught me how to capture sapient’s attention from as early as I can recall. This is just doing the opposite. More or less.” His shoulders raised in a small shrug. “I can’t explain it better than that.”

“Plus, everyone knows he’s the secret bastard child of House Almeria, just look at his hair and face! Well, that. And he’s a lot less mysterious than you.” Flynn grinned as Rain averted his eyes, slightly embarrassed. “The more you hide, the more people want to know. Trust me, there is no one more starved for entertainment than loaded patricians. Especially after the latest rumors.”

Kai slightly rose from the couch. “What... rumors?”

“About *the most infamous first year in Raelion*, of course.” Flynn spread his arms in a grandiose gesture. “Don’t worry. It’s all good stuff. Mostly. Fun, at least.”

“Fun for whooom?” Kai stifled another yawn, bleary-eyed.

Flynn just grinned. “People of good humor.”

Kai suppressed another groan, fearing to learn more, but he couldn’t prepare without knowing. “What do they say?”

“Well, the common consensus agrees you’re a retainer of House Blackwoods. Smart move that, by the way.” Flynn gave him a thumbs-up. “There are murmurs you’re engaged to a girl at their house. A few fanciful tales of Moons’ crossed lovers. That marrying her is why you grew monstrously powerful and bloodthirsty. *That*, or that you’re dating Alden. Probably forming a harem. Playing the Houses looking for the Blackwoods’ favor, so they send you their daughters and you can pick who you like best.”

This time, Kai did groan, head still throbbing. “Is it all about my personal life? Why does anyone care?”

Flynn shook his head with a pitying sigh. “You poor, innocent soul. Have you never spoken with your classmates? People always gossip about who likes whom. Girls don’t hide it, but guys are much the same. And you *have* already left a streak of broken hearts. Scores of sad, sobbing girls.”

“Huh, *what?* That’s ridiculous!”

“My sources say otherwise.” Flynn spun on his chair, watching him over the couch backrest. He tapped the handle of his fruit knife on his chin with an investigative gleam. “Are you telling me you’ve received no confessions in the past week?”

“No! Like...” Kai pushed through the headache to recall. “Uh, maybe *one*...? It wasn’t a real confession. We spoke for less than a minute.”

“I’m sure it felt longer to her. Now, did no other girl come to speak with you?”

Kai shrugged. “Probably.” He’d had little focus to spare for the students who had approached him.

“Were any of them blushing and stuttering?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Lots of girls act like that. It’s not like it means anything.”

Flynn stared flatly at him, then spun back and slammed his head on the table, acting dead.

“What’s with the dramatics?” Kai exhaled, too tired to figure out his nonsense. He wasn’t so conceited as to believe that any girl who smiled was interested in him.

“I think he just ate too much fruit.” Rain walked to pat Flynn’s chestnut curls, who only let out a pained groan in reply. “Don’t read too much into it. Valela also sometimes acts like that around you. *Surely* it doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Yeah...” Kai sank his head back among the pillows. Lying down and relaxing with his friends, all his sleepless nights were finally catching up to him. Stray thoughts tugged at him, but the call of dreams was too sweet. Hobbes’ warm body purred beside him. Rain’s voice sounded farther and farther. He mumbled an excuse for them to go ahead, already plunging into sleep.

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Valela tucked back a lock, escaping the braid above her ear. Despite Lys’s rambles about her envy of her wavy hair, straight hair seemed much more convenient. Breeze rustled the budding trees. The air smelled of lush grass and faint flowers.

The old oak outside the boys’ dorm showed the sun. She fished out her pocket mirror. A reflection of emerald eyes greeted her. Months indoors and the cooler climate had paled her amber skin. Not that anyone would mistake her for a mainlander or fail to murmur comments under their breath.

Her only jewelry was the small flower hairpins dotting her braid. Were her eyebrows too thick? Nose too small? Forehead too wide? Should she have put on some makeup?

The voice of her etiquette tutor picked apart her appearance, the same despite the years. With an effort, she hushed it. She looked... fine. Not fit for a patrician gala, but comfortable. Studious, but not stiff.

Breathing out, she returned the mirror to her spatial purse and walked the gravel path to the white building. A group of boys hung out at the tables in the lounge. Ignoring the glances, she slipped into the stairway.

Halfway through the afternoon, few students hung out in the corridors. The dorm resembled her own. Same marble flooring and beautiful stucco framing the walls. Paintings of mana-dense scenery, famous alumni and deans hung on both sides. Yet, the greens, ochres and grays leaned toward cooler, more muted tones, giving a less hospitable feeling. Maybe it was just a matter of familiarity.

Reaching the third floor, she followed the Identical golden plaques above the doors. N.150. Her destination.

The rushed note to meet had contained few details. Not that it surprised her. She'd barely seen Kai this week, always rushing to the next lesson. Lys called her crazy for taking seven electives. With *nine*, Val couldn't imagine. She gave a rueful shake; her lips curved into an involuntary smile.

*I promised to talk with him. But why would he listen to me?*

As her hand raised to knock, the door swung open.

"Hey, come on in." Rain beamed. "Make yourself at home. That's the phrase, right?" He glanced back. Flynn was nodding as his head poked in above him, both boys grinning brightly.

"Hi, yes. It's nice to see you." Valela leaned in to spy the empty living room. Was she imagining it, or was there *something* about their smiles? "I'm a little early. Hope it's not a problem."

"Nah, you came at a perfect time." Flynn waved her inside. "We were just about to go swimming."

"Yeah," Rain hung his head. "Mat said he was too tired. He ran to grab a snack, but he should be back real soon. Sorry to leave you waiting alone. Hope you don't mind. Rob and Alden shouldn't be back till late."

"That's fine." Valela guardedly stepped inside. Her eyes scanned the kitchen corner on her right, the couch and armchair further in. Aside from a stray boot, a bright striped scarf and several abandoned books, the space was cleaner than the horror stories she'd heard.

Still, the odd feeling lingered just out of reach. She resisted resorting to her social skills. Using them with her friends was a sure way to exhaustion and paranoia. She'd seen too many people who ended up seeing a conspiracy in every shadow.

"Great, then. You're the best. Never forget that." Flynn winked, one arm draped on Rain's shoulder. "Please, knock some sense into Mat's skull. You know how stubborn he gets."

"I... yes. I'll try. Though I'm not sure why he'd listen to me—" Words still on her lips, they slipped out with a grin.

Something was definitely off about those two, though it might not regard her. She could think of several reasons why they'd be eager to leave together.

Stiffly standing beside the door, alone in someone else's space, she couldn't help the feeling awkward. How long would Kai take? Should she sit to wait? Yes, only a weirdo would wait standing around.

The floorboards softly creaked under her feet. Another question halted her. Take the table or the couch? One too formal, the other too familiar. Cursing herself for not bringing a book, she ambled between them.

Her mind was still debating when a whispered sound gave her pause, almost like... soft breathing? It sounded close, too close. Where was it coming from?

*They said I was alone.*

Moving to peek over the maroon couch, she spotted him. A boy sprawled among the cushions—Kai. Chest slowly rising and falling, soundly asleep.

The grins and looks clicked together.

*Those two bastards! The note's handwriting had looked slightly off. Too neat.*

Her heart drummed with anger and rising panic. Had she ever seen him sleeping? He looked different. His left arm hung above the floor carpet. Blonde locks tickled his face. Lips slightly parted. He looked so peaceful and relaxed without his watchful gaze.

*No, stay calm. Breathe out.*

It was just a misunderstanding. A prank. Kai would understand once she explained. What should she do? Wake him? From how he'd run himself ragged and the dark circles under his eyes, he needed the rest. Watch and wait for him to stir, then? That sounded worse. And creepy. Just leave?

Valela bit her lip. That was the most rational course of action. He must have been truly exhausted not to wake despite them talking. He wasn't one to take naps.

*I'll leave a note and go home. Flynn's right. We need to talk. He's burning himself out.*

Unaware of her leaning, she was about to straighten when a movement froze her. A lustrous ball of fur roused below. One violet eye opened amidst the shiny silver.

"Mew." Slow and graceful, Hobbes unfurled from his nap. Tiny fangs gleamed in a wide yawn, eyes turned half moons. Softly purring, he reached his front paws over on Kai's chest and stretched. His back arched, then his limbs. Ivory claws extended and poked the human beneath.