

Chapter 141 - Favorite Uncle

“Why? What are you planning?” Moui peered down at him with a stubborn frown.

“So, that’s a yes,” Kai grinned. “I knew I could count on you, Uncle. Come on, let’s go, you need to show me your wonderful skills.”

Not waiting for a response, Kai strolled into the Veeryd jungle humming a happy tune. With a heavy sigh, a second set of steps followed behind. His smile grew larger.

Glad you can still see reason. You had me worried for a moment.

“Do you know a quiet place where you can show me your skills?”

“Follow me,” Moui grumbled and marched off the trail into the thick vegetation, uncaring of any shrubbery or branch in his way.

Kai followed the path the lumbering hunter opened. “I’m sure we’re going to have the best time together.”

The outskirts of the jungle around Sylspring were the home ground of gatherers, whether professionals or people wanting to make ends meet with herbs and small game.

Awakened beasts preferred the higher mana regions deeper in, and large predators had long been hunted out of the outskirts. The main danger was getting lost or bitten by a venomous creature, as safe as it got inside Veeryd.

“Uncle, what kind of skill do you use to keep critters away? Does it use mana?”

No fly buzzed around them. Kai had managed to recreate a similar effect by projecting his mana presence, though it never worked quite as well. Observing the blinding figure with Mana Sense, Kai tried to use Mana Echo, but the skill couldn't latch onto anything.

Is it because I can't copy that skill or am I doing something wrong?

Moui glanced over his shoulder. "It's a passive effect of a profession skill to heighten or hide my presence inside the jungle."

I'm not sure if that counts as a mana construct or a casting. Maybe if I knew exactly what to look for.

At Yellow in both race and profession, Moui's twin network shone with blinding light. Being incredibly intricate on top also didn't help. His Mana Sense was high enough to observe the main pathways, but he quickly lost himself in the myriad of branching channels thinner than a hair.

At least I can look without getting a headache now.

He'd need a month just to figure out the flows of mana, as for understanding what any of that meant or how it worked...

I'd have better luck trying to reinvent astrophysics.

"Are you going to tell me why you need to observe my skills?" Moui asked, the scowl fading.

With a mysterious smile, Kai answered just as the hunter was about to open his mouth again. "I want to try to copy them with my profession skill." Teasing was an art that required balance.

A broken branch crunched under his boot, breaking the silence, his eyes bulged in disbelief. "You can copy my skills?"

"Well, as long as they use mana, probably? *Hopefully*. I'm still trying to figure out how it works." Kai beamed at him. "That's why I need my favorite Uncle's help."

"Why didn't you ask me that directly?" Moui said with exasperation. "I was beginning to think that you... it doesn't matter. Next time, just tell me if you need help."

That you what? And where would be the fun in that anyway?

"And that's why you're my favorite uncle."

"I'm your *only* uncle."

"One does not exclude the other," Kai said with a cheeky smile.

Moui shook his head in exasperation. "Hurry up."

The hunter increased his pace. Though he wasn't technically running, he might as well have been. Each stride took three of his own to keep up. Kai scampered after him, too proud to run.

You're just taking advantage of my shorter legs.

Climbing up a rocky cliff covered in moss, Kai seriously wondered if the hunter was just leading him through the thickest greenery and mud pits for fun.

A mile back was already enough.

The low mana density told him they were still in the outskirts, but there were no signs anyone passed by here in quite a while. No broken branches, trails, or harvest plants to show the passage of the gatherers. Kai doubted anyone had come this way more than once a year. And they were both able to perceive anyone who came near them anyway.

Pushing a branch out of his face, he hid his relief as Moui finally stopped. The place before him offered enough of a distraction. There were no clearings or meadows in the Veeryd jungle—apart from those people created—though this must be as close as it got.

The high trees gave way to small wet shrubberies as the ground sloped gently toward a pond with a creek feeding into it. An orange frog jumped into the water with a panicked *croak*, its bright form hiding beneath the lily pads.

The pond was no more than six meters across and wouldn't reach his waist at its deepest. The lower vegetation allowed scant rays of sunlight to peek through the green canopies and reflect off the surface.

"You'd never told me about this place," Kai said, admiring the crystal-clear pond. He always had a soft spot for hidden sites. Only a handful of people must have ever been here, and he was one of the lucky few.

A sweep of Mana Sense made sure there were no beasts nearby. The water from the creek had a higher mana density, likely originating from the heart of Veeryd. Several pseudo-mana herbs were growing in the pond, some might even reach Red. Three years ago, he'd already been busy harvesting them, now he cared more about having found such a pretty hidden spot.

I could follow the creek to its source. Who knows where it leads...

"There are a great many things I haven't told you," Moui said. "You're not the only one with secrets."

Kai gave him a long, flat look. "You need to work on your mysterious vibe, Uncle. The stoic hunter look is decent, but you need to add more intrigue to your stony face. If I were anyone else I'd think you were about to murder me."

He really needs a social skill.

His words cut right through Moui's pleased demeanor, a slight flush on his face. "I wasn't trying to do anything like that."

"Don't sulk, Uncle. It's fine, *I* can teach you." Kai patiently patted him on the shoulder.

The hunter's fists clenched at his sides, "I'm not sulking, and I don't need to learn *that*."

For a moment, Kai thought his favorite uncle would throw him in the pond. Unfortunately, Moui pressed his lips in a thin line and slipped away from his pats. No chance to show off his Water Magic today.

"What kind of skill are you interested in?" Moui said, his whole attention on stringing the bow on his back.

I haven't lost my touch yet. There have been few people to practice with since Elijah is gone.

"I think anything will do as long as it uses mana. Try one, I should be able to tell if it works."

"Okay. We can start with the basics. This is Piercing Shot."

As Mui nocked an arrow with one fluid motion, mana swirled around his fingers and latched onto the dart before he released. The shot whistled through the air burying itself into a tree behind him. The low thud made the canopy shake.

“Try slower.” Kai thought he’d gotten something from Mana Echo, but it had been too brief to be sure.

Mui grumbled under his breath how an arrow couldn’t fly slower, though he did take care to carefully perform each step of the draw. With his eyes and senses ready, Kai latched onto the first sign of swirling mana. Mana Echo responded to his command, analyzing what was going on through his senses.

When the arrow flew through the air, the skill stopped.

“Can you try again? And don’t release the shot this time.”

Without complaint, his uncle nocked another shot. “Like this?”

“Yes, perfect.”

Mana Echo followed the shiny threads layering around the dart like woven silk. Kai got the impression the skill didn’t start from where it left off the previous attempt, but it moved slightly faster.

It’s actually working.

His eyes never wavered, but the excitement quickly died down as seconds turned to minutes. Kai became more and more aware of Mui’s stare, and his own growing embarrassment.

“How much longer do I have to keep it? Piercing Shot is not made to be used like this.”

“Almost there. I need just a bit longer,” Kai kept a casual tone despite his face heating.

Please, come on. How damn long does this skill take?

After what felt like an eternity, the echo finally formed in his mind. Kai dismissed the copies of four enchantments from the previous day to make space. “Done!”

The arrow hissed beside him, planting itself deeply into the tree. “Did you actually copy my skill?” Moui asked, stretching his arm muscles and shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Want to test it?” The hunter offered his bow.

“I...” Kai’s eager smile froze on his lips, hand stretched halfway. The last time he had tried archery was years ago. Kai could still remember the shame and Elijah’s taunting glances.

Why does it have to be a bow skill? Couldn’t he show me a knife skill or a throw?

Moui frowned before his eyes flashed in apparent realization. “We can go fetch a lighter bow, this wasn’t made with a child in mind. I know where your sister goes to play with her friends.”

“No, this is fine. It’s just a test to see how it works.” Kai hastily grabbed the wooden grip with both hands. The last thing he needed was Kea asking him to see his archery technique.

The bow was almost as tall as him, made of a dark polished wood line with tiny enchantments. Getting into position, Kai took an arrow from Moui.

“You don’t need to make a full draw.”

“I know.” Nocking the arrow so the fletching wouldn’t brush the bow when he released, Kai soon discovered that no, it wasn’t fine. It was like trying to bend an iron bar, his muscles strained with effort, barely drawing back a palm.

“I told you. We can go ask Kea to lend hers.”

Empower surged through his arms allowing him to draw halfway through. “See. I. Can. Do. it.” Kai gritted teeth.

“You should lower your elbow, keep your back straight, eyes on the target, not on me, you need to draw with your shoulders, not your arms...” Moui fell into teaching mode, correcting his posture.

Nope. Once was enough. I’m happy with my sword.

Letting his profession skill take the lead, mana slowly wrapped around the arrow like layers of tape. The difference with Moui’s Piercing Shot was glaring. Though he couldn’t tell how much exactly since the arrow missed the tree and buried itself deep into the ground.

Lucky you. Want to switch places?

“You need to be firm when you release the arrow, don’t let your finger brush the string. Try again,” Moui gave him another arrow.

“It’s fine, Piercing Shot worked. Don’t you have another skill I can copy?”

“Not many that I can use for twenty minutes straight, and testing needs to be done properly,” Moui patted him on the head. “Don’t worry no one is good the first time they use a bow.”

Great.

With his calm and reasonable words, Moui gave him no excuse to refuse.

“Can you explain how your skill works?” the hunter generously offered. “Profession skills can be tricky to master.”

“It’s called Mana Echo...”

Kai had to admit he wasn’t an expert on the topic. He could probably figure it out by himself, but it’d be much faster with his Uncle’s help and experience. Praying the spirits to be merciful, he resigned himself to his second lesson of archery.

Maybe this time it’ll go better.

The first test was to measure their shots against each other. Moui could draw the bow like him and shoot from the same distance. They just needed to hit the same tree. It took Kai three tries before his arrow planted itself into a trunk—not the one he had been aiming at.

Going second, Moui hit a palm from his. His shot barely penetrated a few fingers into the bark, while the hunter’s was halfway through.

“Perfect, let’s move on to another skill,” Kai smiled brightly. He had never expected a copy to be as good as the original. Especially since he didn’t push Mana Echo beyond the minimum threshold to make a copy.

“Don’t be hasty,” Moui observed the two arrows with a thoughtful look. “We need to see how hard you’d hit without my copied skill.”

“I... fine. One more.”

I guess that’s reasonable. It’ll be useful to see how much a copied skill helped.

If he had to suffer this humiliation, he might as well do it properly. After... *some* tries, his arrow finally hit a trunk, planting itself only half as deep of what he had achieved using the echo.

“Done. Now we know.”

“You said you could improve the quality of your copies,” Moui all-too-reasonably said. “Do you know how much? Piercing Shot is an easy skill to measure the difference.”

There was no smirk on his tanned face, nor amusement in his dark green eyes, but Kai *knew* this wasn’t a coincidence.

I underestimated you. I’m glad my lessons did not fall on deaf ears, young padawan...

By the time they walked outside Veeryd, the sun was kissing the horizon beyond the jungle. His arms and back were strained. Spirits knew how sore he’d be in the morning.

Worse of all, Kai couldn’t really be mad. One reasonable suggestion after another, Moui helped him figure out more of Mana Echo working than he could have managed alone. The three new levels in his status taunted him—level 6, while Gifted Novice went up to 3.

Observing Piercing Shot for longer helped, but the return quickly worsened. While the gap could be shrunk, his echoes would likely always be less effective and cost more mana than the original. There was also good news though.

After looking at several of Moui's skills for hours, he had figured out a fundamental piece of Mana Echoes. Initially, Kai had thought he should have let the profession skill work on its own. How wrong he had been. While spending more time copying Piercing Shot helped, the true key to improving his copies was understanding.

The more he understood what was going on, the faster and more effective his echoes were. When he finally started to wonder how, where and why mana threads wove that way, the copy drastically improved.

"Don't sulk, it was good training." Moui patted him again.

"I'm not—" Kai pressed his lips together.

This isn't over.

Trying to avoid his uncle's eyes, Kai noticed a man watching him. The guy sat in a chair in the middle of his field like with other farmers, scanning each person who walked out of the jungle. The look lasted just a second, but something was off about him. The eyes too sharp for someone at the end of a day of hard work, intently observing the people who walked out of Veeryd.