

## Chapter 158 - The Duel

Expectant gazes burrowed into his back. Flynn's eyes carried a silent question, ready to make up some random excuse to offer him a way out.

Kai shook his head with the tiniest movement. Beneath his fake sweat and heavy breathing, the fight with Oli had been little more than a warm-up. Swordsmanship had gone up a level, even if he had already been close before the fight, it meant he was on the right track.

*Just another friendly sparring. What could go wrong? Sometimes I wonder if I enjoy challenging my Luck...*

Putting on a bright smile, Kai gripped the hilt of his wooden blade and marched back into the ring. Lou was already in position, practice sword casually resting on the sand. Kai wasn't about to trust that laid-back pose, the memory of Lou's berserker ferocity against Flynn was still fresh in his mind.

*Is he a battle maniac behind the quiet persona? There must be a reason or motivation why he advanced so much...*

"Attack when you're ready." Lou took a textbook stance: squared shoulders, wide legs, muscles taut but not stiff, hands firmly wielding his longsword with his guard up. His expression was relaxed, but it was impossible to avoid a tinge of tension when he looked ready to charge at a moment's notice.

*It might just be me, but he doesn't look very friendly. Anyway, here we go.*

Letting go of his distractions, Kai swung two probing strikes, careful not to unbalance himself to receive the retaliation. Lou easily parried him—as expected—, but the fierce response didn't come. The looming tower of muscles limited to defending any slash and lounge he threw at him. Calm and controlled.

“C’mon Kai, you need to focus. Is this all you got?” Lou stared at him like a disappointed teacher. “You were fighting better than this against Oli.”

It was so unlike anything Kai expected from his childhood friend, his mind took a second to realize Lou was taunting him. That was odd from him. Then again, it had been close to seven years, he had been arrogant to presume he knew everything about the grown teenager.

In the back of his mind, a tiny voice whispered to stop there and lose. That was the most prudent choice. The boot of his pride squashed the voice like a bug, he couldn’t give up so easily.

Pressing his lips in a thin line, Kai swung his sword with renewed vigor, inching closer to his real power. He sent a rain of meticulous strikes to find an opening in his opponent’s defenses.

Fending off the barrage of attacks, Lou began to press him with strikes of his own. He wasn’t anywhere close to his full Strength, but it was enough to force Kai into a difficult position.

Frustration at his restricted attributes mounted with each swing he blocked. Not only was he fighting an uphill battle, but limiting his stats took another chunk of concentration from the duel.

All he had to do was reveal more of his attributes, a tiny bit. The Strength and Dexterity in his arms begged to be used. Perhaps his caution with his friends was overblown. It wasn’t like he had done anything illegal.

*If the Republic discovers there’s an eleven-year-old kid who has reached Orange ★★★, they’re definitely coming to bother me. The governor is too greedy to leave a silver mine lying in his backyard. And the twins suck at keeping their mouths shut.*

The more people knew a secret, the higher the chances it would leak, be it on purpose or by accident. Gritting his teeth, Kai retreated, palm up in surrender to stop Lou from pursuing.

“I. Need. A break,” Kai improvised a ragged breath, though the sweat on his brows and back wasn’t faked. The sun was rising over the sea. The temptation to throw all caution to the wind would be too great if he didn’t stop now.

Lou’s impassive eyes studied him as he lowered his longsword. “We can keep going, you are doing good. The only way to improve is to push yourself, and you can’t learn without losing.”

*I’m not planning on losing. I should have told him I was just a mage.*

Improvisation offered him half a dozen excuses to get out. He just needed to pick one and swallow his pointless pride. Why was it so hard?

*It’d be a waste to refuse this opportunity, wouldn’t it? That’s the reason.*

He hadn’t found a decent training partner since Elijah had left, and he yearned for it. Flynn was capable, but he was no swordsman. Fighting him was like chasing a slippery eel, it didn’t push his technique higher.

Against Lou, Kai could *feel* his Swordsmanship progress after months of near-stagnation. When would he get another chance like this? A glimmer of an idea flashed through his mind, and his decision was as well as made. The plan was too clever not to be used.

“I’ve got a skill that boosts my strength temporarily.” Kai pushed back his hair slick with sweat, they needed a cut. “I know this is a weapon sparring, but can I use it? You can also stop holding back.”

“How many useful skills do you have?” Uli huffed. “It’s so unfair.

Oli swatted his brother. “Who cares about that. Kai, you can teach me that skill, right?”

“You can ask him about that later.” Lou silenced them with a glance, his attention back on him with a frown. “Are you sure you can match me? Those skills usually come with drawbacks if you abuse them.”

“I know my limits, I can do it,” Kai nodded with conviction. “I have enough mana to last for a duel.”

“It’s a mana skill?” Ana blushed when she realized she had spoken out loud, and mumbled her next words. “You can tell me about it later.”

“If you are sure,” Lou hesitated. “But warn me if you’re about to run out of mana, and don’t try to overdo it. I’m ready when you are.”

*Now’s my turn to have fun.*

After stretching his arms, Kai charged with a powerful swing. Not a drop of Empower flowed through his muscles, but the full weight of his attributes gave his sword more than enough power.

The wooden blade whistled through the air. Honestly, he had been an idiot not to think about it sooner. He had the perfect skill to hide the physical attributes of his grade.

Lou parried his blow with a grunt and a flash of surprise. His eyes narrowed. If he didn’t believe him before, he did now. In a snap, he burst forward with the ferocity he showed fighting against Flynn.

Kai was forced to focus on defending alone. Each blow reverberated through his body like the hammering of a blacksmith on an anvil. As he *so smartly* predicted, Lou’s physique and muscles more than made up for the difference in grade.

*Damn. Overgrown. Teenagers.*

If Lou's swings weren't aimed at his sword, Kai might have thought his childhood friend was trying to kill him. He tightened knuckles on the hilt till they whitened, getting disarmed would be an embarrassing way to lose.

Lou's technique was blunt but flawless with no weaknesses to leverage. The relentless assault forced Kai on the defensive without any opportunity to reverse the momentum. If he didn't do something soon, his dear friend would drive him out of the ring.

*Fuck no!*

No risk, no reward. Kai feinted an opening to bait Lou closer and twisted his shoulder to slip past his defenses. It was a reckless blow that left his head and chest exposed. In a real fight, he would receive a wound far worse than the one he inflicted, but with this spar rules, the winner was the one who scored the first hit.

Lou awkwardly parried the blow and took a step back to dodge the follow-up. Before the chance slipped by, Kai charged on the offensive with a chain of quick strikes. He might not have the Strength advantage, but he still had a slight edge in Dexterity and flexibility.

*Spirits, I missed this.*

It was exhilarating to let go of any restriction and push his body to its very limit. Blood and adrenaline pumped in his veins, his muscles quick to follow his commands. If Lou's swings were like a thunderstrike of a storm, he was like the raindrops incessantly tapping.

Kai was on top of the world, he could taste victory. His furious flurry of strikes forced Lou back into the center of the ring. A soft murmur whispered in the back of his head, Kai had no time to listen to the obscure message Hallowed Intuition bore, but he didn't need to.

Lou's next strike shot up his arms, carrying enough strength to make his bones rattle. Already strained by the battle, Kai felt his hands going numb. The following swing came quick like lightning, barely giving him the time to raise his guard. The impact crashed into him with the same overwhelming power and frightening knowledge.

*You were holding back.*

Either that, or Lou also possessed a boosting skill. It wasn't just the strength behind each strike that grew, his already immaculate Swordsmanship became more complex and refined. Instead of simply rushing forward like a bull, Lou wove feints and light jabs into the strikes.

Each blow could hit like a thunderclap or the brush of a feather. With hardly any clue to distinguish them, a single misjudgment would spell the end, forcing Kai to needlessly brace and slow his momentum. His arms and shoulders burned with protests from the harsh treatment, a worry for later.

Kai forced his body to swing and deflect faster than ever before. His feet danced and dashed around the ring to not get pinned down, making full use of his size and flexibility to dodge.

It was all useless.

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks, making Kai almost lose grip on his sword. He couldn't win. That was the simple truth. He could grit his teeth and keep holding on. Learning under Elijah made him a *grandmaster* at prolonging fights against stronger opponents. But that same knowledge also made him aware of the truth.

He couldn't win.

He was completely outmatched, and there was no clever trick to lead him to victory. Lou was stronger, faster and—spirits be damned—better than him with a sword. Unless the older teenager made a colossal blunder, Kai stood no chance of winning. And Lou had yet to commit even a minor mistake.

*Fuck me.*

There was a solution. If he activated Empower for real, he could use the surprise burst of power to score a hit. He had already told them about the skill, it wouldn't even be weird to flare the ability for a single strike.

Under the barrage of attacks, Kai couldn't spare the time to ponder for long. Empower was right there, he needed but a thought to reach for it and victory would be his.

*What's the point?*

It wouldn't help grow his skills or make him a better fighter. There would be nothing to be gained except a cheap victory to safeguard his pride, using Empower for what was effectively cheating.

Kai fought till his body screamed at him to stop, and then some more. There was never any opening. Even when it became crystal clear to everyone that Lou had won, his swings never slacked. Methodical and inexorable, the hulking teenager whittled him down like a block of marble under a sculptor's chisel.

With sweat burning in his eyes, Kai missed the exact moment his sword flew out of his numb hands, but he saw it tumble on the sand. His knees hit the sand as his limbs refused to listen to him any longer. Lou loomed over him like the shadow of death, hiding the sun, longsword still firmly in hand, breath barely ragged.

*I'm going to die.*

Kai reached for his Water Mana on instinct, halfway through casting a spell to defend himself when the teenager dropped his weapon and crouched beside him with eyes full of worry.

"Are you okay? Did you overdraw your skill?" His rough hands patted him down looking for injuries. There were no cuts, though Kai had more than one strained muscle.

"I'm so sorry, I got carried away," Lou rambled with guilt, the sweat running down his face showed he was still mortal. "Blessed gods, you're a tough nut to crack that was made of adamantium. I thought I had you half a dozen times, but you always managed to hold on. I'm *truly* sorry, Kai, I shouldn't have pushed you so hard. Do you feel pain anywhere?"

The rest of the group was upon them. Ana and Flynn fussed over him too while the twins buzzed around like overhyped children who had too many candies.

“Where the fuck did you learn to fight like that? That was awesome!”

“I don’t remember the last time someone held out against Lou that long. You absolutely have to spar with me now.”

Kai put on his best reassuring smile. “I’m fine.” He slowly flexed his hands and arms, hiding a wince. Nothing a potion couldn’t fix. “Just a little sore, but I’ll be fine. I think I’ve got enough sparring for one day.”

Lou let out an awkward chuckle and dragged the twins away. “Give him some space.”

Kai waited till he was confident his legs wouldn’t fail him. Standing up, the movement sent jolts of pain through his back and limbs, there was hardly any part of his body that didn’t hurt. Even his jaw ached for having clenched his teeth too hard. He closed his eyes as they were getting moist.

*It had been a while since I pushed myself so far past my limits. Spirits, I’d pay silver for one of Dora’s suspicious concoctions.*

Flynn helped him stand up and slowly take off the leather protections. Kai was especially grateful when he fended off the barrage of questions from the twins—even if he used old stories about him to bribe them. He wasn’t in the mood to talk.

They sat outside the ring, and the buzz of the duel gradually quietened down. The twins fought to another tie. Ana, Lou and even Flynn alternated in much tamer sparrings with pauses to rest between them.

Kai wasn’t paying them enough attention to which twins ended up on top, absently nodding whenever Ana spoke to him. He had managed to sneak a potion out of the ring into Flynn’s



satchel to drink it without suspicion. His body was slowly recovering, not that he paid his condition much attention.

While Attuned Meditation helped him ease his mind, the loss still seared his pride. Sure, Lou was older than him, but he had the advantage of reincarnation and awareness since birth.

*'You can't be the best at everything, dummy.' Fucking Flynn, he'll never let me hear the end of it.*

The logical part of his brain knew he was being unreasonable, but the emotional side struggled to accept he had been bested by one of his little friends. Swordsmanship wasn't one of his main skills, and it was normal for Lou to beat him if that was his primary focus.

Like the proverbial fish in a small pond, who believed himself mighty without ever having seen the ocean, he had spent so long in his isolated bubble that he became convinced of his own invincibility.

There would be people who could best him in the Archipelago, and thousands more on the mainland. He was brilliant, but not unique. Somewhere on Elydes, there would always be a better duelist, a better alchemist and a better spellcaster.

*I guess it was good that I lost. Maybe next time I'll—*

His musings were rudely interrupted when two pairs of hands grabbed him. He didn't need to hear the twins' wild cackles to know it was them.

"Put me down right now, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what...?" Oli challenged, stopping his arms from squirming away.

"What are you gonna do?" Uli chuckled, firmly clutching his legs.

When Kai looked for help, there was no one to save him from the two blockheads. Lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't realized everyone else had gone into the sea. Ana was swimming while Lou and Flynn idly chatted in the waves.

Any threat would only spur them on. He needed to change tactics. "Put me down, I'm hurt, I can't swim."

"He looks fine to me, doesn't he? That potion Flynn gave you must have been really good."

"Yes," Uli nodded sagely. "He looks perfectly healthy to me."

The healing potion had restored him to almost prime conditions, but Kai couldn't fight both when they had already secured his limbs. "Lou will be really mad if I'm hurt further." Kai tried to dissuade them.

"Don't worry, we won't let you drown," Oli said with a dumb giggle that was far from reassuring.

Uli could barely contain the laughter. "Yes, we'll take *extremely* good care of you. Trust us."

After he had kept Empower hidden in the spar, Kai wasn't going to reveal the true power of the skill to deal with two fools.

*I should have drowned you for good when I had the opportunity.*

He could only accept his unjust fate as the sea grew nearer. His pleas to let him take off his clothes had fallen on deaf ears too. Flynn merrily waved at him from the sea while Lou watched him, stoic.

*Weren't you feeling guilty? Here's your chance to help!*

"Ready for your healing bath?" Uli and Oli cackled madly, swinging him with his limbs and throwing him like a ragdoll into the sea. Kai flew in a long arc over the waves and crashed into the cold waters with a loud splash, coming close to hitting the seafloor.

*I'm so going to murder them.*

If they thought being two against one protected them, they had committed their last mistake. With Blessed Swimmer, Kai swam to shore looking for vengeance, aiming for the two figures rolling in the sand amidst laughter.

He emerged from the sea clenching his fists, clothes dripping with water on the sand. A hand gripped his shoulder.

"It's better if you leave your shirt before you go after them," Lou had somehow materialized behind him. "It looks expensive, and you don't want to ruin it."

Kai glared at him. Why did he wait till *now* to appear? Despite all, his advice cooled his anger. His shirt was enchanted to hide his profession and cost more than a few silver mesars.

The twins jumped into the sea arms around their bellies laughing and taunting him to follow.

*Fine. Vengeance is best served cold.*

"Don't mind them," Lou dragged him to where they'd left their bags closer to the palm trees. "You're a pretty fast swimmer, your skill must be quite good."

Kai took a deep breath to calm himself. "It's pretty decent. Can you let my arm go now?"

Lou didn't respond, tightening his grip instead.

"What's up with you?" The twins were enough without the supposedly thoughtful boy acting up.

Fifty meters from the shore where the greenery began, Lou finally let him go and watched him with icy eyes. "Why did you lie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Kai dusted himself off, but there was no hint of humor in Lou's gaze.

"*Kai*, I'm not an idiot." His apathetic tone erased any chance that it was a joke. "You've mentioned Running and five other skills while we trained earlier. You also said you had Mana Sense, Mana Manipulation and an observation skill in your stories at the dormitory. Alchemy requires two or three more *at the very minimum*, and Flynn told me you can draw runes."

*Damn, Flynn. Why couldn't you keep your mouth shut?*

"Don't blame him," Lou towered over him. "It was just a hunch from his stories until you confirmed it with your reaction."

*Fuck!*

"I've also seen you Meditate earlier by the ring. Adding Swordsmanship, the boosting skill and Swimming, which you *also* just confirmed, that makes sixteen or more skills. And it would be strange if you'd already mentioned every skill in your status." Lou inched even closer and grabbed the amulet on his neck. The necklace must have fallen outside his shirt during his impromptu bath.

"What's this, is the pendant enchanted?" The metal wouldn't reveal any secret, but its effect would become apparent if he took it off.

“I—” Kai grasped for Improvisation but was silenced with a warning glance.

“I thought your Swordsmanship was weirdly high for a mage apprentice. Certainly higher than someone at the beginning of Orange should have.” Lou looked at him with a silent threat. “I hope there is an explanation for all of this, I *really* do. Why did you lie? Did you get involved with dangerous people?”

Kai had always known there was a brain behind those observant green eyes, but he underestimated Lou by a lot.

*I think I'm fucked.*