

## Chapter 160 - Secrets Unveiled

Dodging under Lou's outstretched arm, Kai punched his ribcage without hesitation. Two quick blows fueled by a trickle of Empower, there was no time for a third, he slipped behind him on the sand to create distance. Kai raised his fists, legs half bent to dash for an opening.

*Don't get caught, strike and retreat.*

If six weeks of brawling with the twins had taught him one thing, it was to avoid grappling at any cost. He was light and fast, that was his advantage. Weight and mass would always be against him if the fight ended on the ground.

"Did you have to hit me that hard?" Lou groaned, massaging his side with no apparent desire to pursue him. "Even if you can fix it with a potion, it still hurts."

"*You* said not to hold back," Kai replied, his focus never wavering from his opponent. He knew better than to lower his guard till the fight was officially over. "Go all out, use Empower as much as you want, it makes no difference to me." Kai mimicked the low stiff tone. "I'm invincible now that I've got my profession too."

"I don't talk like that," Lou sulked, too smart to get provoked. "And that's *not* what I said."

"Maybe those aren't the exact words, but the meaning was clear." Kai dared him to deny it. Getting a big head after choosing a profession was a rite of passage, and it was his duty as a mentor to pull Lou back on the ground. They were alone in a small alcove, miles away from Higharbor.

"I've not gained enough XP for a level yet." The big boy grumbled and dashed toward him in the same breath.

Kai made a feint to his right. Counting that Lou would see through his attempt, he turned his bait into a proper dodge. He danced around him with Empower boosting his speed. Elijah

had taught him how to punch and kick without embarrassing himself, but he never had anyone close to his age to spar before now.

The chase continued around the ring of sand. His plan to teach Lou humility had *one* flaw. The teen was irritatingly competent, with better experience and actual skills for hand-to-hand combat.

*I should have used more of Empower.*

As an unofficial rule, Kai chose how much to boost at the beginning of the spar to make it fair. He was using 30% of how he could push Empower without serious consequences.

Lou took a kick he could have dodged and grabbed a hold of his leg, a thin smile on his lips.

*Shit.*

Kai desperately tried to free himself, Lou parried each blow with a grunt and hauled him off his feet. Unable to leverage himself properly, he could only brace as he crashed on the sand.

His back took the brunt of the impact. "I yield." He managed to squeeze the words out in a strangled whisper. His new sparring partners had long bashed out Kai's stubborn pride. Forced into the exact position he wanted to avoid, the fight was as good as over.

While the twins might have feigned not to hear him, the big boy promptly offered him a hand to stand up. As if he hadn't been the one who ruthlessly slammed him on the ground.

"You good? Did I hit you too hard?" He checked for injuries like a worried parent.

Kai studied his face. If Lou was mocking him, he was hiding it well. "I'm fine. I probably hit you harder." He had scored more hits, but the teen could shrug off his punches like water. It was totally unfair.

"I can take it." Lou patted his head, smiling down at him.

*Now he's definitely mocking me.*

Kai slapped his hand away. "Do you want more practice dodging spells? I'm curious to see the difference now that you've got a profession."

Two weeks ago, Lou had broken the Second Seal and officially graduated from the scholarship program. This was the first chance Kai got to use magic without the twins or Ana around. Checking no one else was nearby, Kai condensed three water marbles over his hand, ready to fling them.

"Huh... are you sure you have enough mana?"

"Don't worry," Kai widened his smile. "I've got more than enough."

As Reishi had pointed out, breaking the Second Seal early was hardly considered an advantage. The secret of his profession was a minor secret after he revealed his grade, though he had kept the specific skills for himself. His reserves never run dry thanks to Mana Spring.

*Even if refilling them is a pain.*

"Still, maybe it's better if we practice Swordsmanship first," Lou argued with his reasonable tone. "You'll fight better if you don't have to worry about running out of your boosting skill."

"Fine," Kai conceded, letting the water marbles drip on the sand. "One spar, first to reach three points wins." One point was awarded for every limb hit, two for the torso.

They picked up their practice weapons and wore leather protections. Kai maintained the same trickle of Empower, though the gap in skill with a sword was smaller. With new sparring partners to test his skills, his Swordsmanship had grown again.

### Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv25>30)

*How much higher can his be?*

Alas, he wasn't the only one who had improved. Lou had trained as hard as him and didn't have to juggle his mana skills on top.

Capitalizing on the advantage in strength granted by Empower, Kai pressed with a flurry of slashes. Whether or not the best defense was to attack, he needed an edge. Playing at a disadvantage, a straightforward fight would mean delaying his loss.

The rapid *clank* of wood covered the crashing waves. Blow for blow, his reckless tactic paid off. Kai scored three points on Lou's side and shoulder and received two hits. While it wasn't a strategy he could reliably execute, a win was a win.

"Let's go for another round." Lou scowled, dissatisfied.

"We agreed on one. I don't want to run out of mana for my spells." Kai grinned, another set of water projectiles already condensed over his palm. "Do you need rest?"

"No. But if you score less than ten shots in a hundred, we go for another."

"Deal." He walked out of the ring in the sand while Lou remained inside to dodge.

Unarmed combat was a new venture without any skill, Swordsmanship was a hobby, but mana and spellcraft were his home ground. Circling outside the ring, Kai didn't rush, leisurely

casting more water marbles. Ten tiny orbs revolved around his hand with barely an effort, another side benefit of the time spent working on Virya's puzzle.

*Who knew this level of multitasking could seem easy.*

At the opposite end of the circle—ten meters apart—Lou showed a brief hint of surprise at the number of projectiles. He had become harder to shock since he had learned Kai could cast elemental magic.

*Should I tell him Water isn't my only affinity? That should have an effect...*

Saving his idle musing for later, Kai hurled the volley of shots. The tenth projectile was in the air before the first even landed to cover every direction Lou might dodge. His bulk was no help here, a bigger body meant a bigger target.

The teen performed an acrobatic leap that avoided all shots but one. Not his wisest move. Kai was tempted to adjust the trajectory but let them go wide. The next set of ten water marbles struck before Lou could hit the ground.

He hissed as he was pebbled by strikes. Eight hits. Nine in total. Lou had bet the next shots would take longer to arrive, and lost. The game was as good as over, but neither of them paused, entirely focused on predicting each other's moves.

"You've been holding back." He stated simply.

"I focused on aiming fewer shots. We can use a bigger circle next time." Kai flexed his fingers. "It's not like you never give yourself a handicap with your sword to make it more interesting."

Lou acknowledged him with a grunt. Despite his best effort and creative maneuvers, he was hit by thirty-nine shots by the end. He looked content with the result, which meant he must have gained a few levels in his skills.

*I finally understand why Elijah found this game so fun.*

“Here,” Kai offered him a potion from his satchel.

“I think I can do without today, I’m not that hurt.”

“C’mon, it just costs me chips. I’ll feel bad hitting you if you don’t drink it.” Kai performed his ritual coaxing for a good cause. The raw ingredients were cheap, the true cost was his labor, and he didn’t mind. Reishi sold them for four copper mesars.

*Everything’s inflated in Higharbor.*

Lou reluctantly accepted the green vial. Convincing him to accept them had been another point of contention. Though the thoughtful boy couldn’t argue they made their training much more effective.

Dora had fed him suspicious brews since Kai first stepped into her lab, so he had never stopped to ponder the extent of his advantage. But Alchemy was more than a neat way to earn money. While common citizens had to rest for days if they pushed their bodies beyond the limits, he could just take a sip and be ready to go again in a few hours.

The rich kids likely did the same or had a healer on staff, but they were a tiny percentage. He could have never afforded to drink them daily if he didn’t brew them himself.

Kai downed his tonic, the warmth spread through his body, healing any damage Empower might have caused. “I better go now. I want to finish a project before we go on that trip.”

“Okay, I’ll stay a while longer. Be careful on your way back.”

*Yes, Dad.*

“So, if a man asks to follow him in a dark alley, I should say no?” Kai scrunched his brows in confusion. “And what if they have *really* good candies? It would be rude to refuse.”

Lou raised his eyes in exasperation. “Just don’t do anything *too* stupid.”

“Don’t worry, it’s almost noon. I bet all the shady people are slumbering in their dark lairs.”

“Just take care.” Lou waved goodbye, ignoring him.

“You too. I’ll see you in two days.”

Kai had missed not having a proper workout since coming to Higharbor. His bouts with Lou were a pleasant break from Virya’s tortuous cube.

Unfortunately, no suspicious strangers approached him to offer free sweets on the way back. The paved streets were sparsely populated this close to lunch. There were no friendly waves, hardly anyone looked at him, everyone was busy with their day.

*I still prefer Sylspring.*

Flynn wasn’t at home, busy in one of his odd jobs. He changed them so frequently, Kai had stopped inquiring about them. After a long shower, he heated the leftovers of the previous day and prepared for a migraine-inducing afternoon.

He cleared his desk from his dad’s notes and took out his nemesis. The cube taunted him with its glossy dark surface and delicately carved runes. He had been working on the forty-second layer for five days now. It was a tricky one.

He had delayed their trip to the Vastaire ruins to finish the sixth configuration. He didn't dare hope it would be the last, but it would make him feel much safer to take a break after he finished it. Plenty of time to complete the next seven.

Relaxing with a brief session of Meditation, Kai cracked his fingers and activated Mana Sense. Chains of interlocking runes lit each side of the puzzle. Inspect picked up the four patterns he had already discovered, while he only had clues for the last two.

Hours meshed together. Flynn must have placed a cup of tea beside him, but it was cold by the time Kai noticed. The glowing symbols were all that mattered, each side was connected and flowed into the other altering the whole construct.

The runes always changed their arrangement, but they were the same two hundred and ninety-four symbols. He had learned to recognize each angle and curl better than his own thoughts. Threads of mana dove through them, searching for a path.

The fifth rune lit up for one glorious second before it fizzled out. The layer needed one final solution to be complete. His head pulsed for the protracted use of his skills without break. He was so close. So close.

Another plate with animal-shaped cookies had materialized beside him. Kai bit off the wing of a stylized parrot, his mind couldn't spare the energy to tell how it tasted. Six threads entwined into the labyrinth of runes, looking for an exit.

Five of them knew where to go, while the last hesitated. The sixth adventurer carefully examined the ever-changing walls of the maze, cautiously advancing and more often retreating. A single hasty step could spell the end of their entire expedition, sending them back to the entrance.

By a mix of fate or skill, the passage aligned, revealing a chance for safety. The sixth seeker hobbled to the end, spurred by the cheering of his five companions. When they finally stood before the final gate, all six touched their runes at the same time.



Kai took a second to realize he had succeeded. The puzzle levitated a palm from the table, its lacquered surface lit by a myriad of runes. It always took longer to reset at the end of a configuration since it also had to rearrange the pattern.

This time was different. The chains or arcane symbols raced into a flurry of activity while the sliding pieces moved with furious *clicks*.

The swirl of mana stopped. Seven runes glowed in a circle on each side of the cube, bright enough he didn't require Mana Sense to see them.

Six sides, for a total of forty-two runes. Kai had the urge to slap himself.

*I can't believe I didn't think of that.*

His heartbeat pumped in his ears. The cube gracefully fell on the desk. Was this really it, or was it another dumb level of the puzzle? Kai approached the object that had been his bane for the better part of a year with trembling fingers.

"Did you finally solve it?"

His hands jerked forward, brushing against the inert puzzle. As if gravity had been the only force keeping it together, the cube fell apart along the sliding pieces. They tumbled on the desk like a pile of sticks.

Kai turned to glare at Flynn who sat on *his* bed, a book lying open beside him.

"Sorry, I was waiting for you to wake up so I could cook dinner." His friend gave him a sheepish smile, curiously peering at the pieces on the table.

With more important worries, Kai examined the messy pile. A silver gleam buried within caught his eye. Delicately moving the inert pieces aside, he revealed a silver disk carved with mysterious symbols. If they were runes, they were unlike anything he had been taught. Not simply unknown, but in a completely different style.

“What’s that?” Flynn’s head poked over his shoulder. “It’s shiny. Is it valuable?”

Kai carefully picked it up. It was heavier than he expected, so it couldn’t be silver. The metal had a faint golden hue, or was it green and blue? Depending on how it was hit by the light, the color of the reflection changed, though a hint of gold remained constant.

The symbols ran in concentric circles on both sides, three tiny nubs were disposed at equal distance along the edge. Kai ran his fingers over them, looking for a clue that could reveal its purpose.

*It can't be a glorified paperweight, Virya said it was priceless.*

With the barest pressure, the top nob rotated with a *click*. The silvery sound echoed through the room. Kai shared a perplexed glance with Flynn when a loud crash came from outside.