

## Chapter 156 - A Day on the Beach

Salty droplets tickled his face. The crystal sea on his right was quite lively this morning. Stirred by the winds in the early sunlight, the wave crests sparkled like diamonds against a background of aquamarine waters. The shades of blue and beryl grew darker further off the coast.

Streams of people were already pouring into the promenade along the shore of Higharbor. The end of summer had little impact on the numbers filling the streets. With Autumn approaching, the worst of the heat had subsided, making crowds much more tolerable.

Kai dried his face with a hand. "Is this a bad idea?"

"Maybe. Does it matter?" Flynn raised an eyebrow. "You've already decided you're gonna do it, so why worry about it?"

*Yeah, thanks. If there is a switch to turn it off, I haven't found it.*

It was impossible not to feel a tinge of envy. Kai had spent *three* days thinking about what to do, and he wasn't any closer to an answer. How could Flynn always be so confident and unflappable?

Delaying the meeting any longer would be rude, or worse, suspicious. The twins were dying to show him their progress and skills, Ana and Lou too, albeit not so overtly. They had been all too eager to invite him to train together. Their motives couldn't have been more transparent, to flex on their poor ol' mentor.

He could come up with excuses not to go or watch from the sidelines, though that would only postpone the problem. The more he tried to avoid it, the more attentive and curious they'd be about him.

“You’ll get old and wrinkly if you keep worrying.” Flynn flicked his ear, making him jolt away. “It will be fine, or we’ll know better after today.”

Kai glared at him, hands defending the sides of his head. “Remind me why I’m bringing you along.”

He calculated his chances of throwing him off the pier. There were no dangerous rocks nearby and the water was deep enough to cushion the fall, though Flynn would likely drag him along into the sea.

“For my charming looks and personality.” He put on his most slappable grin. “Also, for my inscrutable wisdom.”

*Right... I must have hit my head pretty hard last night. How did this ever sound like a good idea?*

His irritating friend had gone through the Republic brainwashing program too. That made him the closest thing to an expert that Kai could get his hands on. It was always good to have a second set of eyes and perspective—even if the value of his judgment was dubious at best.

“I’ve only talked to him once, but Lou seemed pretty alright.” Flynn held his chin in a pensive pose as he imparted his wisdom. “A bit stiff, but he managed to string three sentences without mentioning what a gift and honor it was to be accepted into the Republic scholarship program. *Trust me*, that’s not something to take for granted.”

The stone pier turned to wood and then sand. They took off their shoes before proceeding. The sun hadn’t risen long enough to warm the ground, leaving it pleasantly chill under their bare feet.

A vast flat expanse dotted with people spread before them. Nothing special as far as scenic beaches went, except for its artificially enlarged size, an attempt of the governor to distinguish the capital.

From what Kai heard, the project had never reached any level of popularity with mainlanders apart from when the governor organized an event or festival. Without another use, it was left for the locals for most of the year.

Many were jogging in groups, sparring or otherwise training. They passed an old woman with leathery skin yelling at a group of kids swimming in the water. There were few open spaces to train inside the city unless you were willing to pay the Republic for their facilities. Kai came here once or twice a week to train with Flynn, he recognized about one in ten faces and no one he ever talked to. Anonymity in a sea of people.

“Hey! You’ve come,” Ana raced towards them with a beaming smile, stopping in front of them to catch her breath, hands resting on her knees. No signs of the other three anywhere close.

“You must be Flynn. Lou told me Kai would bring a friend,” she greeted politely with an assessing look. “Have I seen you somewhere?” A small frown scrunched her brows.

“You must be Ana, Kai told me a lot about you,” Flynn offered to shake her hand, all charm and openness. “I remember you from Hawkfield, you were pretty memorable.”

“You are part of the scholarship?” She took a second look at him, her demeanor already more friendly.

“I graduated earlier this year. I remember you were always so busy that we never got the chance to chat. You followed the mana classes, right? Best in your year.”

“Well...” Ana played with her hair, blushing. “I wouldn’t say *the* best. Sevila and Celui are pretty good, maybe *one* of the better ones.”

“And you’re humble too.” Flynn smiled again, poking Kai in the ribs. “Any chance you can teach him that?”

*Very funny, especially coming from you. Why did I ever agree to this plan?*

There were a few things Flynn did as well as being the center of attention. And if they were looking at him, they weren't paying attention to Kai.

Ana giggled at his expense. "I'll try, but it might be hard if he's like I remember."

In a blink, the two were already in deep conversation about common acquaintances at Hawkfield and sharing stories. Names and references flew over his head, if Kai didn't know better, he'd think they had been friends for a lifetime.

"No way..." Ana laughed at a story about a certain professor Tenner.

Flynn nodded, solemnly placing a hand over his heart. "I swear, that's exactly what he said, word for word. He can't see a palm from his face without his glasses."

*Why do I feel like a third wheel?*

When it became clear they had no intention of stopping anytime soon, Kai loudly cleared his throat. "Shouldn't we get going? Where are the others?"

"Oh, sorry." Ana's head snapped to him, remembering why she was there. "They're waiting ahead where it's less crowded. Come, I'll show you."

She grabbed his hand to lead the way along the beach as if he had been the one wasting time. The blessed silence was cut short as Flynn got the conversation started again.

"Come on, you have to tell me all Kai's embarrassing stories as a child. Was he always so..."

"*Peculiar?*" Ana helpfully offered. They both glanced at him and shared a knowing look. "I remember one of the first times I met him. He couldn't have been much older than three years, but he had this way of looking at people that made even adults snap to attention..."

*Spirits have mercy, this was a terrible idea.*

Kai considered stepping between them to make them shut up, but this was exactly why Flynn was here. Turning a bend in the coast, the beach shrank in size, palm trees and shrubs thrived about fifty meters from the shore.

When Hallowed Intuition whispered to him, he was ready to listen. He rolled to the side with a swift motion, a hand brushing his back. Two figures crashed into the spot where he had been standing with a loud groan.

*One time was more than enough.*

The twins earned a mouthful of sand for their effort. Kai had to give it to them, they had committed to their ambush, going as far as hiding under the marbled sand. It could have worked if he wasn't expecting it.

"How did you dodge that?" Oli protested in a tangle of limbs. "Did Ana tip you off?" Uli stepped over his brother to stand up but was pulled back to the ground, swiftly devolving into an all-out wrestle.

To distinguish one another, they had different leather bracelets woven with shells on their wrist, though Kai trusted their mana veins more. Using Inspect, a series of minor channels didn't quite align perfectly.

"She didn't need to. I've also got Mana Sense and you are quite predictable," Kai didn't hide his smirk from them. Skill and experience could bridge the gap even if he restrained his physical attributes to a stage lower.

The brothers' eyes narrowed to slits, measuring him up like a slippery fish in the shallows. They weren't going to give up easily.

"Stop playing and get up," Lou walked over to them with an exasperated look. "You can't complain he didn't come earlier if this is how you greet him."

"He said we'd meet the next day and then stood us up for an eternity." Uli sulked.

"Yeah, he owes us for breaking his oath."

Pointing out that he had made no such promise and that he had been busy brewing potions was likely pointless, they already knew that. Kai put Lou between them before they got any ideas. "Tell me you wouldn't have tried to tackle me if I came the first day?"

"Of course not." The answer took an instant too long to come. "Your betrayal was the *only* reason." They nodded in unison.

"Anyway, who's that guy?" The twins finally noticed Flynn. "I think I've met him before..." His friend had remained on the sidelines watching the scene with Ana like some kind of live show.

Another exchange of greetings followed while they studied the newcomer. Their suspicion quickly melted away when they discovered he was a fellow from Hawkfield. Apparently, let Flynn pass their friendship test, not that Kai needed their approval.

*If only they knew...*

"You should convince Kai to join too, he's not too old."

Uli agreed with his brother, for once. "It's a great opportunity. You can work for the Republic if you do well."

"I told you I can't." Kai made it clear he wasn't interested, but it wasn't getting through to any of them. They only wanted what they thought was best, though good intentions could be blind.

To avoid an argument, he used his contract with Reishi as an obstacle. He bent the truth a bit to make it sound more restrictive than it really was. He just had to ensure they never met with the merman.

*I promise I'll make it up to you.*

"Listen up," Lou called the group to attention like a drill sergeant. Kai jolted, surprised to hear him raise his voice for what was probably the first time in his life. "We can chat later, training first. Flynn, do you want to join? It's a similar routine to what we did at the camp."

"I'm in. I'm just not sure if Kai can keep up." He patted his shoulder with concern.

*You're committing a lot to the act...*

"He can run with Ana. Her biggest focus is on mana and knowledge skills, their level should be similar."

"You're with me then." She puffed her chest. "It can be hard if you're not used to it."

"Huh." Lou wasn't the only one treating him like a little kid, and she had a single year over him. "I told you I've trained with my teacher."

*Okay... just don't be stubborn if you can't keep up.*

While Kai had decided to undersell himself a little for now, he wasn't planning to be a total slouch, far from it. He considered faking being at Orange ★★, but Ana could read his grade. If he told them he wore a cloaking enchantment they'd ask him to take off and check Virya's amulet. Orange ★★★ wasn't something people in the archipelago achieved before fourteen, let alone at his age.

"Thank you, I'll keep that in mind," Kai said. "You can do the same."

Without much fanfare, the group started running to warm up. Flynn easily took the lead with his profession, a shiny new unknown to soak up their attention. Lou wasn't far behind with the twins straining to keep up.

*What did they say? Actions speak louder than words.*

Little by little Ana lost her overconfidence. She tried to stay a step ahead of him, but Kai easily matched and surpassed her. Her breath became more and more ragged as she pushed beyond her limits.

It was cute how his little friends wanted to show off to their old mentor. Maybe it was time they remembered he had been the boss for a reason. Thankfully, Ana had more common sense than Kea and slowed down before collapsing.

"You're pretty good," Oli said, as the twins circled him. Not a drop of sweat on them. "How high is your Running skill?"

*Well, that works. Thanks for the idea.*

"I evolved it to Orange years ago, one of my highest skills. Remember I taught you how to get it."



Oli nodded with a thoughtful look while Uli gave a low whistle. “You’re not lying, are you?”

“Nope.” Kai increased the pace till their lazy smiles turned serious. They were in excellent shape, making full use of their attributes with some kind of variant of a running skill. He was tempted to activate Empower and double his speed, their expression would be priceless.

*One day I will, I can be patient.*

The session ended too soon, it was supposed to be a simple warm-up. Kai avoided any suspicions with the excuse of a powerful movement skill. They continued with a variety of squats, pushups and stretches. It made him nostalgic for his time at the estate, though it was nice to train with other people instead of alone.

Kai played oblivious to the eyes observing him, waiting to see him falter and fail. A number of skills—half of which he improvised on the spot—were used to justify how he kept up with the twins.

“Are we done already?” He had condensed an artistic trickle of water on his forehead to hide the fact he had barely broken a sweat. The twins also looked far from pleased that their plans to overwhelm him and gloat had been thwarted.

“Didn’t you say you focused on mana skills?” Ana asked, any trace of cockiness scrubbed away from her.

“I do, but my mentor insisted that I train a broad mix.” His mysterious teacher was his other excuse, that walked far closer to the truth.

“How high is your Mana Sense and Manipulation?” Ana bit her lip. “You don’t have to answer, but mine are level 37 and 32.”

*Oh dear, I’m not sure you really want to know.*

“Oh, I’m about the same.” Kai put his index and thumb a little apart. “Just a tiny bit higher.”

**General Skills:**

- **Mana Sense (lv76>80)**
  - **Mana Manipulation (lv64>70)**
  - **Empower (lv64>66)**
  - **Inspect (lv53>59)**
  - **Blessed Swimmer (lv44>45)**
  - **Water Magic (lv44>46)**
  - **Alchemy (lv44>46)**
  - **Runes (lv40>44)**
  - **Nature Magic (lv38>39)**
  - **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv24>25)**
  - **Herbology – Advanced (lv34>36)**
  - **Attuned Meditation (lv15>17)**
  - **Improvisation (lv9>12)**
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- **Hallowed Intuition (lv4>5)**

*Wracking my brains on the cube paid off. 80 and 70 are such great round numbers.*

“Okay, time for some weapon training,” Lou stood up, ending their break. “Kai, did you learn to wield a weapon?”

“My mentor taught me a little Swordsmanship.”