

Chapter 180 - Calculated Risks

Flynn leaned on the railing near the prow of the ship. The wind blew back his hair and fluttered in his ears, the taste of salt on his lips. The *Silver Edge* cut through the waves so smoothly it seemed to glide.

He had always found being trapped on cramped vessels stifling, now he was beginning to see their appeal. The sea continued endlessly in every direction, a canvas in shades of blue and teal, wrinkled by the white ridges of the waves. A smattering of puffy clouds dotted the sky, while the lively wind filled the silver sails.

There was freedom at sea, a different kind from the maze of alleys of a city, but freedom nonetheless. He might have learned to like it under different circumstances.

He had never been on an enchanted vessel before, the hull and deck shimmered with a web of bright lines. It was a wonder anyone could make sense of it. While the *Silver Edge* wasn't the biggest ship he had boarded, it was certainly the fastest, rapidly advancing to their destination.

At this pace, we might make it in two days.

Soon the pastel houses of Sylspring would emerge from the horizon. The town he grew up in. The town that changed from a prosperous community into a slick tourist attraction. The town that gave him everything and then took it away.

He never thought he'd come back, not for a long time at least. Maybe that was why he had agreed to accompany Kai, to prove to himself he was over the past.

I'm not scared.

Intrusive thoughts of his family kept resurfacing no matter how many times he pushed them down. Were his mother and sister hidden in the cellar of a dingy house in Sylspring? Or in one of the camouflaged shelters throughout Veeryd.

The Republic had employed significant resources to scour the jungle, but he couldn't imagine they had found every buried shack and treehouse. The Voice's network extended from Veeryd and beyond, to the islands where different independence groups were nestled. He had never been told much about them—not intentionally at least.

Last he heard, there were more than ten factions scattered all over the archipelago. His family could be anywhere. His mother and sister wouldn't be welcomed by all of them, but Maela knew how to be convincing.

Or maybe they've been caught by the Republic months ago and are dead. Or rotting in some forgotten cell.

Guilt stabbed him for leaving his sister, his hands tightened on the railing. Familiar conversations replayed in his head. He should have convinced her to leave, or brought her away whether she wanted it or not. Once they were on a ship for the mainland, it didn't matter if she hated him.

It had all happened so fast. He had been stupidly confused about what to do. He didn't know where she was and lacked the resources to escape.

I should have done better.

"What are you doing to my poor ship?"

Flynn turned to see Reishi stroll towards him with his confident gait. The merman had stayed in his cabin for most of the journey and discussed alchemy-mesars-something with Kai.

He could have stayed there a little longer.

The embroidered silk robe flapped in the wind behind him. He could buy a mansion in the upper city with the shining jewels and gems the merchant wore.

"What?" Flynn realized his nails had dug into the railing, leaving thin crescents on the pale wood. He tried to smooth the damage and awkwardly put his hands in his pockets. "Sorry, I didn't realize."

"It's fine. The ship will heal itself." Reishi gave a loving pat to the wood. The merfolk slanted on the railing beside him and stared at the sea with a lazy smile. "You are not looking forward to going back home? You were born there, right?"

As if you don't know that already.

He gave an ambivalent shrug. "Not particularly, I like Higharbor better." Merfolk were hard to read with his skills, but Flynn would never fail to recognize the sly intelligence hidden in the pale blue eyes.

"Really? Nothing you are looking forward to seeing? Maybe the house you grew up in, or your old friends?"

"There's nothing left for me in Sylspring." Flynn pressed his mouth in a line and clenched the hands in his pockets. He was about to walk away when Reishi stopped him.

"Mhmm... You know, my father is also a merchant, like my grandfather and every other Senyu in the last forty generations." Reishi caressed the wood with a sigh. "It took me a while to realize I was modeling this ship after the *Fortuna*. That's his vessel. I've always found him insufferable, but it seems I can't avoid following in his steps."

A thin wrinkle appeared on his scaly brow, his hands gesticulating a difficult concept. “Well, not *exactly* like him. I’m not a hypocrite, but in the same general direction.”

How could I have lived without knowing that?

“Very interesting,” Flynn said with a flat expression. When he tried to leave again, the merfolk grabbed his arm.

“My point being, it’s hard to escape our origins.” There was a sad look on his face that skirted dangerously close to pity. “And we can never really forget where we come from.”

“I’m not you.” Flynn abandoned the pretense of politeness. He was about to yank himself free when the merman let go of his sleeve.

“No, that you certainly aren’t.” Reishi nodded with a thoughtful look. “Enjoy your stay on my ship, let me know if you need anything.” He sauntered away to talk with the sailors.

Did you also take the pretentiousness from your dad, or did that come for free? I shouldn’t have promised not to steal anything, he’s so loaded he’d never notice.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Kai sprouted from the bowels of the ship with a perplexed look. “Did I miss something?”

“Just chatting. Reishi was telling me about himself.”

“Oh, are you making friends with him?”

If you mean snooping around in each other’s backgrounds, then yes. We’ve been friends for a long time.

“Something like that,” Flynn smirked.

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Kai bit his cheek, suspiciously squinting at his friend. There was definitely something Flynn wasn’t telling him.

They were making fun of me, weren’t they?

No, his grin was amused, not teasing. When Flynn turned towards the sea, a shadow covered his face. Kai couldn’t explain what it was, just something he picked up after living with him. But the reason behind it was obvious.

I'm such a fool. I shouldn't have asked him to come.

He had read his mom's letter and organized the trip home without thinking twice. Naturally, Flynn would come too. His friend had been off since they came aboard the *Silver Edge*.

Unable to figure out what to do, Kai spoke up. "What are you thinking?"

"Huh... the future." Flynn continued to gaze into the horizon with a slightly somber air.

"What about it?"

"I'm not sure what I want to do..."

Does he want to leave?

Kai had an unexpected spike of panic. Would he be left in Higharbor alone? Lou and the others were away most of the time. No, that couldn't be it. "Anything I can do to help? I'll share my wisdom if you ask nicely." He smiled brilliantly.

"How generous. Please, forgive the tears in my eyes." Flynn said tersely, his attention on the far seas, his frown smoothed. "Actually, there is something you might help me with."

"What? I'll do my best to help unless it's something boring. In that case, you are on your own."

"Oh, it'll be interesting, trust me. You've studied how to discard a profession, right?"

Kai blinked. Did he mishear something? "Yes... why?"

"Cause I want to change mine." Flynn grinned like it was the best news in the world.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea..."

Flynn pursed his lips. "Weren't you also going to discard Mana Child?"

"I was *considering* it, but it's not the same thing."

"Please, enlighten me. How so?" he said with a skeptical look.

"Well... First, I've a higher grade, and I won't level Mana Child too high." Kai confidently nodded.

"My race is just one enhancement behind. I've also been siphoning the XP into my race, so my profession is level four. How high is yours?" Flynn challenged already knowing the answer.

Shit.

“That’s not the point. Changing profession is an unnecessary risk. You won’t be getting any more skill slots, you’d be lucky if you get half an attribute.” That was the same reason Kai hadn’t made up his mind about Mana Child.

It was likely he could get a profession with higher bonus attributes, but a handful more stats would make little difference in the long run. Especially after he evolved his profession to Orange and advanced his race.

What mattered were skill slots and boons. Those benefits added up each time he evolved his profession. If he had one less skill slot at Red, he would always have less skill than people who had taken a better profession. The question with Mana Child was if he could get better.

He had been offered one with two boons, though that was due to the blessings from the spirits, and came with serious drawbacks. That was a problem for another day.

I’ve never heard of a profession that grants three skills at red, and Flynn already has two.

“You don’t have anything to earn. Just the risk of crippling yourself.”

“I can decide what risks to take for myself,” Flynn snapped in anger. “You do reckless shit all the time, and I don’t tell *you* how to behave. If you don’t want to help, just say so. I’m doing it anyway.”

Kai failed to respond. The words stung him, even more when he couldn’t come up with a counterargument. He might be a bit of a hypocrite indeed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. Of course I’ll help you. It’s just that you might not get offered anything better.” His reasoning didn’t make much difference judging from the boy’s stubborn look.

“It’s not about skills and attributes. I *need* to do this. I took Keen Spotter because my mother told me to. I— I can’t forget it if every time I look at my status it’s there as a reminder.” Flynn took a deep breath, voice quivering slightly. “I need to cut with the past to move on.”

Is that why he didn’t want to tell me what it was called...

“I’ll help you.” Kai exhaled slowly.

“You will?”

“Of course, but we’re going to do this properly.” Kai began to pace on the deck. “While it’s good that Keen Spotter is only level four, it’s not enough. I’ll need to find the correct potions, and a healer to oversee the procedure. We might as well aim for a better profession if you

want to do this. We'll focus on training the skills you prefer, and look for a chance to get you field experience. What kind of profession are you hoping to get?"

Flynn's gaze wandered around. "I'm not really sure."

Excuse me!

"You planned to discard it, and just wing it?"

Flynn had the decency of looking embarrassed. "I made up my mind on the spur of the moment. I would have thought about that next, obviously."

"*Obviously.*" Kai massaged his eyelids. This was going to be harder than he thought.

Is this how people feel when I propose an idea with calculated risks?

"There's no time like the present to start. What would you like to do? You wanna be a potter? A fisherman? A farmer? A sailor?" He leaned closer to whisper. "A *thief?*"

"Stop overreacting, they're watching us." Flynn smiled at the sailors, observing the commotion.

Kai nodded thoughtfully. "So you want to be a thief... That's going to complicate getting field experience, but I've a few id—"

"I don't want to be a thief," Flynn grabbed his shoulders to keep him still. "I want something with combat potential. Apart from the bonus in Dexterity, Keen Spotter doesn't offer much. I don't want to feel useless when the next sea serpents fall on our heads."

"There will be no next time." Kai scowled. He had learned his lesson.

"*Obviously,*" Flynn smirked.

"And you're plenty good already. Apart from Lou, I can't think of a better fighter at our age."

Valela might too, but she doesn't count.

Flynn didn't beam with smugness like expected. "I know that I blind people with my awesomeness, but there are stronger teens in Higharbor if you look around."

"What does it matter? Remember you told me no one can be good at everything? You can do many things better than me, fighting isn't the only thing that matters."

"Maybe not, but I don't want to be a burden. You're so far ahead of me, you might as well be on the mainland. And I can't keep up with my current profession."

“Are you worried I’ll ditch my faithful sidekick for someone stronger?” Kai grinned. Flynn held his gaze, speaking slowly. “No, and we’re never going to talk about this again. Unless you want to wake up naked before the Temple of the Seven Moons, with not a chip to your name.”

That’s oddly specific.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’ll focus on your Knives and sparring. You’ll need to give me a list of your other fighting skills.” Kai tapped his foot. “Do you have any mana skills? Maybe an evolution. You do? What is it?”

Flynn bit his lip, suddenly hesitant. “It’s... a skill...”

Yes, that explains a lot.

“No pressure, but you said you wanted my help. No one is going to hear us over the wind.”

“Fine. It’s Mana Sense.”

I’m going to strangle him.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could have helped you train it.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly why I didn’t say anything. You always go on about how great Mana Sense is. You’d have chained me to a chair and forced me to do boring exercises if I told you.”

“I—”

I mean, probably. Just a couple hours a day for his own good. That also explains how he always finds the cool box with my stash of ice cream...

“I would have respected your wishes,” Kai lied through his teeth. “What level is it and how long did you have it?”

“A little while,” Flynn answered vaguely.

“Land!” A shouting interrupted. “Sylspring’s within sight.”

Kai saw the sailor perched in the crow’s nest over the sails. The woman pointed at the horizon with her spyglass. When he turned his attention back down, Flynn was gone.

Sneaky bastard! This isn’t over.

He scoured the deck with Inspect without success. He debated going on a wild goose chase, but with land approaching, he had a better idea. Kai marched through to their cabin, their bags were all there.

Let him come to me when he gets hungry.

He could faintly see Sylspring through the window. They had made it in time for his birthday. He couldn't wait to see his family's faces when he appeared.

Mom will be mad I didn't give her time to prepare.

A year in High Harbor had flown by. There were just two more till he officially became an adult at fourteen.

It always sounds like a lot till it's gone by.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human ★★★ – 32,414 > 73,800 / 300,000 XP**
- Profession: **Mana Child lv 3>6 – 5,437 / 11,000 XP**

Body stats

- Strength: **20>21**
- Dexterity: **23**
- Constitution: **25**
- Mind: **31>35 (29+6)**
- Spirit: **37.5>41 (32+9)**
- Perception: **24.5>26 (23+3)**
- Favor: **34>37**

Profession Skills:

- **Gifted Novice (lv60>70)**
- **Mana Echo (lv75>79)**

General Skills:

- **Hallowed Intuition (lv8>10)**

- **Mana Sense (lv84>87)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv72>74)**
- **Empower (lv70>73)**
- **Inspect (lv68>72)**
- **Runes (lv55>61)**
- **Water Magic (lv46>54)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv47>52)**
- **Alchemy (lv50)**
- **Nature Magic (lv40>44)**
- **Herbology – Advanced (lv37>41)**
- **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv30>35)**
- **Attuned Meditation (lv19>24)**
- **Improvisation (lv15>21)**

He had made a nice dent towards Yellow, but the goal was still far. He had used his entire profession experience to level Mana Child—except a little to round the numbers.

The higher his stats, the faster he would progress. After he got to level 8, he would siphon them towards his grade. That would increase his pace, though it might not be enough. As his skills grew, they netted more XP, but also advanced slower.

Gifted Novice will help a little...

And he still had to decide what to do with Mana Child. It was a generic mage profession without any obvious strong point, though that also meant he could evolve it in the direction he preferred.

Was it possible to get more than two skills and one boon? And if yes, could he get it?

What would I even take?

He wanted to be a mage, but that could mean a thousand different things. He'd need to make a choice. He always hated picking one thing since it meant closing the door on everything else.

And what about after he gained that power? Like Flynn, he had no idea. Traveling the continent seemed too vague of a goal.

We'll figure it out. First, I need to survive my birthday.