

## Chapter 154 - Reunion

Kai craned his neck to get a better look at Lou. Two pairs of eyes examined each other with disbelief and faint recognition. If he randomly saw him in a crowd, he would never suspect the teenager before him was the same quiet kid of his memories.

Now that he purposely searched for it, the hulking boy's observant gaze carried a trace of his little friend. Kai was stunned by the drastic transformation.

Lou was the first to react, pulling him into a hug.

*Oh, shit. Not again!*

To his great relief, Lou was much more gentle than the twins—or even Ana. The bulging muscles beneath the blue uniform wrapped around him like steel wires, tight but not crushing. The giant boy was aware of his own strength and didn't try to squeeze him till his eyeball popped out of their sockets.

*He was always the thoughtful one and the easiest to manage.*

It hardly surprised him that Lou had reached Orange ★★ after seeing the twins. He was the oldest of the group, probably just shy of getting his profession. Even with a higher grade, Kai wouldn't bet on himself in a contest of Strength.

*To think there was a time they followed me like dutiful little ducklings.*

“Let the little shrimp go, he needs to answer our questions.” One of the twins protested not ten seconds later, echoed by his brother. “Yeah, give us at least a couple hours with him to make him spill what happened. We'll help you suffocate him later and hide the body.”

*And I thought they'd get better with age. I'm such a fool.*

"Huh, sorry," Lou released him, embarrassed and concerned. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

While Kai was just beginning to hit puberty, Lou must have sprouted early. He had a low rumbling voice and patches of beard on his chin—natives didn't grow much facial hair to begin with.

*What did they feed him?*

"No, you're good," he patted him on the shoulder. After the two blockheads tackled and crushed him for *several* minutes, his hug was like the touch of a feather.

Standing proud, Kai squared off with the three of them. He needed to act before things got out of hand. "Who do you take me for? Don't you think just because you've grown a little I can't drown you anymore."

The twins burst out laughing, while Ana covered her mouth with a hand.

"Yeah, it's really you," Lou said. A toothy grin split his face as they sat on the bench around the table.

*What's that supposed to mean?*

Ana giggled a beaming smile and slapped Oli on the arm. "See? Lou immediately recognized him too."

"He must have overheard us speaking." Oli squinted at him and gave a curt nod. "But I should have realized it was him from the ominous stare he gave us. He always did that when he got mad."

Uli energetically agreed. “Yeah, like a creepy vengeful spirit planning your death. I was just confused because I remembered him being bigger.”

*You know I'm right here... Yatei's mercy, their education went down the drain without their mentor.*

Kai sighed, holding his head between his hands. All four looked to be doing fine, more than fine actually. He'd prefer that they didn't have anything to do with the Republic, but they had benefited from the training, no doubt.

Lou and Ana even recognized him, and there wasn't a moment of awkward silence with the twins around. Though they had clearly forgotten the respect due to their first teacher.

*A few drowning sessions should fix their characters...*

“Come on, little shrimp. You need to tell us everything that has happened since you left.” Oli said, impatiently fidgeting in his seat.

Kai met his gaze, trying on the eerie stare that apparently he was famous for. “If you call me *little shrimp* one more time, I'm going to find a field of critterbane and throw you inside.” How many times did the twins play pranks with the urticant vine as children? It might be time to even the scales.

Oli gulped as if recalling some scary memory. “I was joking, don't take it personally.” Unfortunately, it always took a few lessons to drive the concept home with him, and the impertinent grin was right back. “I'm sure you'll grow too, *someday*.”

“We've grown up. Don't think you can beat us that easily.” Uli glanced at Ana as if for confirmation.

Kai could feel her attention on him, a shiver ran down his back. He wasn't the only one with Mana Sense at the table, though her touch wasn't delicate and quick like his.

"Huh, it's weird." Her brows scrunched in focus or confusion, maybe both. "He's at the beginning of Orange like me. I hope you don't mind me saying it, I was so curious I didn't think to ask."

"Don't worry, it's fine." The knot of tension melted away, both his cloaking enchantments were working correctly. He'd rather avoid having to explain why he had a profession since they knew he was younger than them.

A chorus of *ohs* crossed the table, followed by their congratulations.

"Still not as good as me." Oli tapped a fist to his chest. "Don't worry, I'll share some advice for free. If you work hard, you might reach my level one day."

Ana slapped his arm again and ignored his pained indignation. "Get off your cloud. You've been acting dumber than usual since you got your enhancement *two* weeks ago. Kai has plenty of time to beat you, as do I. At most he might ask *Lou* for advice, not you."

"I'm sure Kai doesn't need it," the hulking boy said, looking at him with serious eyes. "But I'm happy to help if you need something."

Oli grumbled something about being unappreciated under his breath. "Even if Kai beats my time, I won't ever be the last." He directed a smirk at his brother.

"It was just *one day and sixteen hours*, that doesn't count," Uli glowered at his twin with gritted teeth. "I'd have beaten you if I didn't hurt my arm."

"But you did lose. And it was sixteen hours and a *quarter*."

“Ten minutes *at most*. Enjoy while it lasts, we’ll see who reaches the next enhancement first.”

“I’ll still have won this one—”

Lou watched their bickering amused, while Ana pulled her hair back in exasperation. From the look on her face, she was contemplating whether to slap them both. Ultimately, she recognized a failed cause and opted to ignore them.

“So, you also got a scholarship from the Republic?” The question quickly got the attention of the table. “We didn’t see you in Hawkfield, did you get accepted late or were you placed in one of their *mysterious* locations?”

*What’s that about?*

“I’m not in the program,” Kai answered truthfully, causing looks of puzzlement across the table.

“You didn’t get accepted?” Ana spoke up. “With your grade, you should have more than made the cut. I don’t believe your skills can be that bad.”

*Trust me, it’s better if you don’t know.*

Kai remembered the first selection in Sylspring when he had met that strange girl. “I passed the tests but I refused, I wasn’t interested in joining.”

*Should I tell them that I’d rather stab my leg than work for the Republic? Or is that too drastic of a statement? Maybe it’s better to test the waters first.*

They were in the government district, and he didn't want to sound like he was judging them. They didn't have as many opportunities as him. They must be doing their best with what they had, even if they joined the people who destroyed their homes.

"How did you reach Orange so fast by yourself?" Uli asked, skeptical.

"I had a mentor who lived near Greenside who tutored me. He left for the mainland a few months ago."

"I see." Ana nodded slowly like she was trying to make sense of a difficult puzzle. "You could try to get in now since your teacher left. You're a bit old, but I'm sure you can pass with your grade. We can help you train the skills they value the most."

"Thank you, I'll think about it. I'm doing fine on my own." Kai dodged the question and changed the topic. "What was that piece about mysterious locations you mentioned earlier?"

"You mean the hidden class for special lads," Uli answered, dramatically weaving his hands. "No one knows much about it, except that it exists. You should ask Lou about that, maybe he'll tell you. He's the one who got accepted into it but *refuses* to share anything with us."

The twins both turned to scowl disapprovingly at the hulking teenager, silently mouthing traitor.

"You know I can't talk about that, people aren't even supposed to know I got in." Lou crossed his arms defensively. "Ask me literally anything else."

"Fine." Uli and Oli opened their mouths at the same time. "Who's your favorite twin?"

"It's me, right?"

“Maybe in your dreams. Everyone knows I’ve always been his favorite, right Lou?”

Ana came to the rescue, saving the boy from the corner he dug himself into. “Kai, why don’t you tell us about what happened after we left Whiteshore? How was Greenside? I heard it’s close to the Veeryd jungle. My class took a trip there last year, but we didn’t see much.”

*Greenside...*

Kai took a moment to realize they had no idea of what had happened. Even without his father's murder, he could hardly pull any happy memories from that humid hell hole.

“Greenside was okay. The beaches were rocky and the sea cold, but I spent a lot of time at my teacher’s place further up the coast. My family moved to Sylspring about one year ago, I think. So it’s actually been a while since I was there.”

“Isn’t Sylspring where that *accident* happened?” Uli whispered to his brother.

“You mean the town that was—”

“We were raided by a crew of pirates a few months back.” Some rumors must have escaped the net of the Republic. “Don’t worry, it’s fine. I don’t mind talking about it.” Kai raised a hand to placate Ana who was glaring at the twins.

“I’ve heard a pirate ship slipped through, but it was a small thing,” she said as Lou nodded along.

“The enforcers managed to repel the attack before the pirates could do any actual damage to the town. The governor had already taken precautions to ensure nothing like that will happen again.”

*Or maybe the Republic spread those rumors...*

“If you consider many shops were pillaged and burned before the raid was repelled, and *hundreds* of people dead not much damage.” Kai forced himself to take a deep breath.

Silence befell the table, the four teenagers shared awkward glances. Oli, unsurprisingly, was the first to break it. “Are you sure there were so many deaths, I heard that—”

“I don’t know what *you* heard,” Kai interrupted, some of the heat bleeding into his voice. “But *I* was there, and I saw the bodies lying in the streets. Remember I taught you how to count, I know how many graves there were.”

Perhaps his feelings on the matter weren’t as cold as he imagined. He unclenched his fist below the table. “I’m sorry. I know what I saw. It’s true it could have been much worse, but I wouldn’t call it small.”

“Is your family alright?” Lou asked, looking at him with worried eyes. “I remember you had two sisters, Eleni and... Keandra?”

“My sisters are doing fine, my mom too. They escaped before things got bad.”

“What about your dad?”

Kai knew it was coming, but his heart still skipped a beat at the mention of his father. It happened when he was five, it shouldn’t matter, yet it did. Rellan’s lifeless body over a pool of crimson was forever seared into his mind.

“He’s dead,” he stated simply, his voice flat like talking about the weather. He could see a wave of condolences, worry and pity surge through the table, he anticipated them. “He died in Greenside the same year we moved there. It’s been years, I barely remember it. It’s fine. I’m fine.”



A rain of apologies and concern fell on him all the same. Kai waited it out and steered the conversation towards different topics.

“You need to tell me about yourself too. I arrived in Higharbor about two months ago, but you’ve been here for years. How was it after we were forced to leave Whiteshore?”

His question opened the floodgate, Uli and Oli raced to explain their impressions of the capital coming from their small rural village. The mind-boggling size of the buildings and roads coupled with the bizarre people and customs.

“The awakened fish was at least this big. They gave me a whole silver mesar for...”

“That’s not how I remember it,” Ana repeated for the umpteenth time as Uli and Oli took excessive creative liberties in their retelling. The twins couldn’t go a minute without straying into random tangents about people they met and pranks they pulled years ago.

Lou periodically added a few details, mostly happy to let the others lead the conversation. He was the unquestionable final judge when the other three couldn’t reach a consensus on what truly happened.

The houses they relocated to in Higharbor were slightly better off than the thin wooden boxes they got in Greenside—at least in appearance. The capital had an image to uphold after all. Yet the first year had been hard, with their lives uprooted and left in such a foreign environment.

There was however a glaring difference: there had been no famine here. Many were hungry, but no one died. Their families easily found jobs in the growing city. Their story focused on the goods and wonders they could get in Higharbor, things they could have only dreamed of in Whiteshore.

The fact they had been forced to leave their homes and their possessions behind was entirely forgotten through the pages of their childhood. They had better lives now; they had

trained hard and earned the honor of a scholarship. The Republic promised them even better and brighter things in the future.

*They drew the long straw and were too young to remember what they lost, or who wasn't as lucky. That and years spent eating bullshit propaganda.*

Kai didn't force the topic, too content to catch up with them. His stories about Veeryd elicited a particular fascination. The jungle was a rite of passage for the kids at Hawkfield, but they hadn't spent nearly as much time there as him.

For a moment it was like old times, the five of them chatting on the beach. Waves crashed on shore, sand still warm with the setting sun. Not a single worry in the world. Kai'd never thought they'd meet again or that talking could be so easy.

They only knew him as the weird kid who taught them facts about the Guide and appeared to know every answer. Lest he ever forgot, they teased him endlessly about the quirks or strange phrases he used to say. Mostly habits from Earth he lost over time.

*How do they even remember those...*

Hours later they were the last people left in the small park, every other kid had long disappeared into the dormitories. With the lowest grade, Ana's eyelids were drooping low. When her head crashed to the table straddling her awake, Lou declared it was time for bed.

"Five more minutes. I need to know about the drakes, I've never seen one," Oli protested, backed by his brother. "Did your teacher truly make you run through the jungle carrying a chair?"

"I'm sure Kai can tell you about them next time we meet," Lou said, placing a hand on both their shoulders with finality. "He also needs to sleep and he's not going to disappear if you look away, right Kai?"

*Looks like someone had to step up with me gone.*

“Yeah,” he yawned, though he wasn’t that sleepy yet. “Whenever you want.”

The twins accepted the decision with surprisingly little protest, lightly grumbling as they helped a dozing Ana not trip in the roots of the trees.

“We should meet by the beach tomorrow,” Oli said. “We can train together and compare our skills.”

Uli shared a complicit look with his twin. “That’d be great. You must absolutely come and tell us more. We could also go see the ruins on the western coast of Yanlun one day. Just like we did when we were kids.”