

Chapter 153 - Forgotten Childhood

Hi, I'm Kai. You know, the kid that you ran around with ages ago. The one who said he was going to visit you soon but never showed up. Well, here I am. Better late than never, right?

“You don’t have to go see them right this moment,” Flynn said, not for the first time. “We can wait another day or two or three, I don’t think they’re going to mind.”

Twilight tinged the cloud in the distance with streaks of reds and oranges. With summer now over, the temperature was pleasant, some may say chilly. The women strolling the streets had taken the chance to pull out colorful shawls, with pearls jingling on their fringes.

Kai dried his hands on his shirt, willing and failing to slow down his heart. He forced a smile. “It’s fine. We’re halfway there anyway.” If he walked away now, spirits knew if he’d ever muster the courage again.

Startled by the sudden news, he had run out of his house, almost forgetting to wear his enchanted clothes. His childhood friends were within walking distance after seven years, how could he wait?

Excitement quickly gave way to nervousness. He was about to meet four teenagers who would hardly remember him. Even if he had a thousand Favor—and he didn’t—, there was no way to avoid the awkwardness.

What if they are angry that I broke my promise? Or worse, they don’t remember me at all and watch me with blank looks?

He had done harder and dangerous things, but this was a piece of his childhood. A perfect carefree memory, idealized by nostalgia and time. Would he be able to look back at them in the same way after today?

“Are you sure it was them? All four of them together?” Kai asked, already knowing the answer.

“I am,” Flynn showed no frustration. “I’ve talked with three different people who were at Hawkfield. They all said the same. The Republic *offers* the students communal lodgings while they’re in Higharbor. Something about extra classes, fostering a team spirit and getting the *generous* chance to work for the Republic for free. Those four will be there.”

“Right. Thank you for finding them.”

“Don’t mention it.” Flynn casually waved him off, though his grin grew wider. “I told you I would do it, and when did I ever lie to you?”

Probably this morning when you said you didn’t eat the blueberry pie I was saving for dinner.

“I don’t know. It’s been so long I can’t remember the last time. Maybe never?” Kai said instead, thankful for the distraction.

“Exactly!” Flynn puffed his chest. “My flawless reputation was on the line, of course I had to find them.”

Kai rolled his eyes.

They were crossing the *Ring Road* around the hills of the upper city. Tourists and locals alike filled the streets lit by glowing orbs. The area extending from the port in the south was the beating heart of activity and business.

The crowd became sparser once they reached the northern district. Aside for the strip close to the shore, this side of Higharbor was quieter. It was a relatively recent addition to house the growing population. It extended in straight grid-like streets with fewer shops and more residential buildings.

His wandering had rarely brought him here. Fewer people on the streets meant fewer skills and enchantments to copy with Mana Echo, making it a terrible hunting ground.

Kai vaguely remembered the Republic reserved a vast area extending till the edge of the city for their less essential infrastructure and personnel. Another reason not to come. Less flattering rumors said it was where they carried out their secret and shady tasks, though Kai hadn't found proof of that, *yet*.

Citizens were free to cross through most of the government district with no restrictions. He had observed it once from four blocks away and judged it was enough. The farther he stayed from the Republic the better, not even his curiosity could tempt him closer.

Why did they have to be here? No, it's not a good excuse to go back. I can do this.

Kai glanced at his friend. "Are you sure you want to come?" They had sailed to Higharbor exactly to avoid the eyes of the Republic, *Flynn* especially.

Flynn shrugged without any sign of worry. "Remember I'm also one of the scholarship brats. I've spent most of the last four years around places like this. It'd be strange if I didn't come, I've got nothing to hide."

I guess we're safe. It's been months and no one came to ask for us. They might have already closed their investigation in Sylspring.

His family told him everything was 'fine' in their letters. He wasn't going to ask for more explicit information on traceable paper. The Republic handled most of the mailing service and one could never be too safe.

They crossed into the government district without a break in stride. There was no gate or fence, Kai took a moment to realize they were inside. No one stopped to ask for their IDs, or what they were doing there, no one so much as glanced at them.

The streets were sparkly clean, and every building followed a similar style, shaping three or four stories of lifeless white plaster. A dozen too many banners with a soaring hawk closed the deal.

They were now in enemy territory.

“Quite dull, isn’t it? They copy the same buildings everywhere.” Flynn said, not showing any worry that someone might overhear. “Most of it is cheap housing for the Republic’s personnel and their families.”

Honestly, I’m a bit disappointed.

“Yeah, I thought it would be... *more?*” Where were the pits of screaming people? The claw marks of those being dragged away? Or the dark chambers of the inquisition?

“I think the dormitory is up there.” Flynn pointed to a couple of monotonous white buildings facing each other. A small green space grew between them. Seven high trees in a circle with benches and ornamental bushes below. “I’m not sure where they live exactly, but we can ask around.”

Reminded of the reason why they came here, Kai found his throat was suddenly dry. He could spot a few dozen kids chatting and playing on the grass, though it was too far to distinguish their faces in the low light. “I think I’ll manage it from here, you don’t need to come with me.”

“Are you sure?” Flynn peered down at him with an eyebrow raised. “There should be a few people I can introduce you to.”

“Yes. You can go back home, I’ve already made you skip dinner. I’ll ask someone to point me in the right direction.” Kai couldn’t feel any hunger himself, glad his stomach was empty.

Flynn looked to be silently debating, “Okay, I’ll take a walk around to see if they built anything more interesting. We can meet here in half an hour or so. Just leave a trail if you get kidnapped.”

Ha. Ha. Ha.

“I’ll try to remember.”

Kai watched Flynn’s back disappear behind the buildings, in equal parts relieved and anxious. If this went poorly, there would be no one he knew to witness his embarrassment.

I’m going to remember this for the rest of my life if they don’t recognize me. With earth magic I won’t need a shovel to dig myself a hole.

The sun had gone down in the time they took to cross Higharbor, and a cloak of clouds covered the moons. The only sources of light were the shining globes hanging from fixtures in the building that painted the world with their cold light.

Come on, waiting won’t make this any better.

Reason and logic were of little help. His legs were made of lead, Kai forced them to move with excruciating effort. His back was drenched in sweat despite his short sleeves as if he was truly dragging an unholy weight.

Damn, I should have paid for the cooling enchantment on the shirt.

It had seemed a pointless extravagance at the time. He couldn’t stand to pay the ludicrous price that slimy tailor asked for such a simple set of runes. The cloaking enchantment was the one he truly needed; he could learn to make the others himself to save the silvers.

Reproducing them from an echo hadn't been hard. The problem was working with the fabric, weaving enchantments into clothes was completely different than drawing them on a flat surface. It required a set of instruments and skills he didn't have.

Stop stalling and move your ass.

Closing his eyes, Kai counted to ten, when he reopened them, he was ready. He marched to the small green area, shadowed by the trees.

Some of the kids had their blue uniform with the hawk pin, but most wore casual clothes. No one paid him any mind when they realized he was just another kid around their age.

Who should I ask?

Kai inspected the different bands of young boys and girls, looking for someone alone he could approach. Everyone sat in a group. He took half a step toward a girl before she waved to her friends and went to join.

Maybe it would have been better to wait and come with the daylight. Leaping out of the shadows to introduce himself wasn't going to help his case.

I thought there'd be more loners. Wait a second.

Kai squinted his eyes, putting his extra points in Perception to good use. Three people were sitting on a bench around a table, two with their backs to him. One of the boys turned to the girl beside him, revealing the profile of his face.

He was not seeing double, there were two of them.

Each step closer made him more certain. Two suspiciously similar boys and a girl were chatting together, wavy brown hair and tanned skin typical of the natives of the islands.

“...mad, they ran to Mr. Renner shouting that I—” the boy stopped telling his story when he noticed him. “Do you need something?”

Kai hadn't even realized he was standing so close to them. His mind struggled to reconcile the round face of his memory with the teenager before him. The voice was breaking into adulthood, the hair was also shorter and neatly combed, completely unlike the wild mane he remembered.

The age was about right. The twins were a couple years older than him, a few short months away from getting their profession.

“Do you need something, *kid*?” The boy repeated, standing up to loom over him. He was a head taller. Arms crossed, his face scrunched up in an expression that Kai supposed wanted to be intimidating.

“If you don't need anything, get lost. We are having a private conversation, and you were not invited.”

Such a brat. That checks out.

“Stop it, don't be so rude,” the girl spoke for the first time, turning to look at the newcomer. “You can sit with us if you want. What's you—”

Ana froze. The moment their eyes crossed, Kai knew it was her. The same cascade of hair. Those large green eyes wide with shock, looking just slightly smaller in her grown face.

Kai could see her incredulity melting as she scanned him from head to toe. “Is it truly y—?” She almost tripped on the bench to take a closer look at him.

He hurried to help her, but she quickly regained her balance. Her hands tightly gripped his afraid he'd disappear like in a dream if she let go for a single moment.

“It’s me.” Kai felt his mouth curving upward whether he wanted it or not, his eyes itching and moist. He was pulled into a rib-crushing hug with a strength that defied her lithe body.

At least one of them recognizes me.

“Hey! You didn’t tell me you had another boyfriend.” The last boy protested, with dramatic indignation. “I thought we were a thing. How could you betray me with this little shrimp?”

“Shut up, idiot.” The other one said and pointed at himself. “No one’d ever pick you. Everyone knows Ana’s with *me*.”

Kai tuned out the twins’ bickering. Ana’s arms were still tightly wrapped around him, with no intention of letting go.

Luckily, I don’t need to breathe for a while. Damn, why is she also taller than me, we just have a one-year difference. We were about the same height as children.

“But seriously, who the hell is this guy?” One of the twins said, Kai wasn’t sure which. “Look, I don’t judge your taste, but you could aim *higher* than this.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Yeah, isn’t he a bit *short* for you?” The other agreed.

I’m so going to strangle them.

Ana finally let him go and turned to them. “How can you not recognize him? Gray eyes, light hair, *shorter* than us.” She poked at him like he was an anatomical model in a classroom.

Tu quoque, Ana! I thought I taught you better manners.

“How many people like that do you know?” she tapped her foot exasperated. Adding another hint, she lowered her hand to his ribs. “Think smaller and odd.”

What am I, invisible? After all I did for you, is this how to repay me? You can't even recognize your wise teacher.

Kai nursed his wounded pride in dignified silence, standing up straighter as he waited for the realization to dawn on the two blackheads. The twins looked at him from different angles with thick confusion. Slow and inevitable recognition flashed in their eyes.

“No way,” they both uttered, words echoing at the same time. “Kai? Is that really you?”

He threw his hands up in exasperation. “Who else? You were—”

Kai didn't get to finish his sentence as he was tackled to the ground, his breath stolen from him. He groaned beneath the two larger bodies crushing him.

I should have drowned you as children and done this world a favor.

By the grace of some misguided and blind spirits, the twins had managed to reach Orange ★★ and put on enough muscles to make up for their thick skulls. Caught in an awkward position beneath both their weights, Kai failed to disentangle his limbs.

Bar using Empower or magic, he was stuck under them. Straining his muscles, he pushed them off just enough to speak. “I can't breathe, get off me. Now!”

A long minute later, which severely tested his patience and resolve not to use offensive spells, Ana dragged Uli off him. With one weight lifted, Kai managed to knee the other in the crotch.

“Why me?” Oli slumped to the ground, holding himself in pain.

“You were too slow,” Kai dusted off his clothes, checking for any tears. If they damaged the enchantments in the fabric, he was going to do far worse than that after what he paid for them.

Apart from the wrinkles, grass and sweat, there was no damage. “Stop whining, I didn’t even hit you that hard.” He offered him a hand to stand up, feeling just a tinge of guilt.

Ana dragged them to the table, vibrating in excitement. “You have to tell us everything. How are you here? Did you also get the scholarship? How was Greenside? When did you—”

Oh, boy.

Feeling a shadow loom over him, Kai almost jumped out of his seat to avoid another tackle, but the twins both sat within his sight.

A large boy towered over him. A head yet taller than Uli and Oli, and wider and bulkier than any teenager should have a right to be.

What the fuck?

The stranger cocked his head, puzzled, “Kai? Is that really you?”

It took Kai an embarrassingly long time to reconcile the image of a skinny and timid boy with the half-giant before him. “Lou?”