

## Chapter 159 - Trust and Honesty

Kai tried to make space between them, but the string of his amulet was still in Lou's hand. "It's not what you think," he squeaked.

*Really brain, couldn't you think of anything better?*

Lou let go of the pendant. "No? What's your explanation then? Why did you lie to my face? You get *one* chance to tell the truth," he emphasized with his index.

*Damn me, I should have counted my skills. He's not going to give up now, is he?*

Different possibilities ran through his head. There would be no lying his way out of this, that much was clear. Kai could refuse to talk, though that would mean cutting ties with his childhood friends *at best*. If Lou chose to dig or involve the enforcers, the situation could escalate in unpredictable ways. It wasn't a bet Kai was willing to make, and it had taken far too long to reunite with them.

Then the question was how much to reveal. Lou had already proved himself capable of connecting clues most people overlooked. If facts didn't fit perfectly, he'd notice and deduce more than Kai intended to say.

*Fuck.*

There wasn't enough time to think this over. The hulking teen studied his every move with a steely gaze as if he expected Kai would try to run or fight him.

*Spirits, I didn't even get the fun of breaking the law and he treats me like a criminal.*

As the shock faded, irritation rose to take its place. Lou's reaction was excessive.

*He could have asked like a normal person instead of being so dramatic.*

"So...?" Lou tapped the fingers on his crossed arms. There was no crack in his visage, face hard as stone like he was looking at a stranger. "Who recruited you?"

"What do you mean?" Kai rose to match him. Surrounded by adults, he'd learned how not to make his stature matter. "Do you think I'm what...? Some sort of spy or something?" He let out a humorless laugh.

*He's being ridiculous.*

"I don't know what to think or who *you* are." A crack in the ice let through a sliver of emotion, too thin to identify. "I've met you three days ago, and half the things you told us were lies. Were any of your stories even real? Was there a mysterious teacher or did you make him up too?"

"Of course he is." Kai clenched his fists at his sides, a string of irate accusations ready to erupt. Lou didn't retreat, but his body tensed like he did back in the ring.

*Guess we are strangers...*

They couldn't just go back to Whiteshore with the snap of a finger, no matter how friendly they acted. Seven years meant more than half their life, likely the most meaningful part. It wasn't a gap that could be mended in two meetings. The fairytale reunion had come to an end.

Kai's proud posture slumped down. Trust required time and honesty, there hadn't been much of either, and he couldn't deny his own faults. Lou was looking out for his friends, and he wasn't part of them anymore.

Yes, he could have been nicer about it, but the teen had asked him directly for an explanation instead of going behind his back. That was *something*, though Kai wasn't sure what.

For once, he ignored his mind and went with his gut. He pulled Virya's pendant over his neck and offered it to Lou. A tingling crossed his skin as the enchantment turned off. "Here, take it."

Lou hesitated for an instant before holding it with two careful fingers. "What's this?"

"Just a cloaking enchantment to hide my grade. Don't worry, it doesn't *usually* bite."

Lou scrunched his brows, examining the unremarkable piece of metal. "I can't see anything, are its runes hidden? That's not something you can just buy in a shop." The question was soon forgotten when his gaze moved on him. Lou blinked several times, eyes widening and mouth ajar. "You are Orange ★★ ★!"

"Yeah..." Kai rolled his eyes. "I thought you'd have already deduced that by now, Sherlock. You also didn't tell me you've learned mana skills."

"Sher— what?" He shook his head, mumbling. "I've only got Mana Sense." His wary demeanor was overwhelmed by incredulity, Lou gawked at him as if he had turned into a unicorn. "How? How is this possible? You're *eleven*," his voice rose an octave higher.

*Impossible is my middle name, boy. I'm about to rewrite your reality.*

Kai dismissed the cringe lines, though he couldn't stop the wave of smugness that swept through him. A mysterious smirk on his face. "Three amazing teachers and years of grueling work. I gave you your first lessons about the Guide, did you think I would sit around without you? The only lie in my stories was to downplay my training to make it sound more realistic."

*Okay, that's a bit boastful, but also kinda true...*

Lou closed his mouth, chaos and confusion swirled in his eyes. "Where are your teachers now? What kind of contract did you sign? Does the Republic know about this?"

"Why don't we take a walk as I answer your questions?" Kai took his pendant back and gestured to the shore away from Highharbor. Carefree as ever, their friends were still swimming among the waves. Well, Ana did most of the Swimming while the twins tried to drown Flynn.

*Should have helped me when you had the chance. Good luck to you.* Kai waved at him as he strolled into the sparse vegetation growing by the beach.

Mana Sense scanned for anyone who might have come near. Distant voices were muffled in the sea breeze, but he could never be too safe. Lou followed a step behind, gaze burrowing into his back.

*Where do I start? His mind sure does go to the worst scenarios too.*

"First, I didn't sign any contract with my teachers," Kai began talking before he could regret his decision. "I know it's weird, but I doubt I had anything to offer that was of value to anyone at Green, especially since they planned to leave the archipelago. Not that I knew that in the beginning. I was probably like a pet project for them. 'Let's take this random kid and see what a commoner can achieve.'"

Lou interrupted his mindless rambles with a strangled sound. "Your teacher is green grade?"

"*Teachers*, there were three of them." Kai dismissed his reaction and gave him a reproachful look. "Try to pay attention, you were so attentive as a child."

*At least green grade, Virya might have been higher. They gave me that 'if I tell you then I'd have to kill you' look whenever I hinted at the topic.*

“As I was saying, my mom was looking for a tutor for my Mana Sense and we heard of this place on the road to Sylspring...” The story was quite jumbled since he hadn't prepared what to say, maybe it was better this way. It was too easy to slip false details with Improvisation.

Once Kai had given him a general overview of his years at the estate, Lou regained his impassive poise and asked questions to poke holes in his story. There were none.

*That's the advantage of the truth. It's relaxing to not worry that I might screw myself over.*

He had omitted some details about the estate that were best kept confidential. Lou couldn't expect him to reveal everything his teachers told him. They had stopped by a rocky beach, Higharbor was hidden by a bend in the coast. Only the tops of the upper city poked over the palm trees.

“It's a pretty unbelievable story...” Lou muttered in the end, thoughtful.

Kai couldn't disagree. It was already good the suspicious teen didn't dismiss it outright. “It is, *which* is why I don't go around showing my grade. I'm sorry I lied to you. My teachers have left, and I don't want any attention.”

*Maybe he has a lying detection skill?*

Lou absently nodded, the fire and ice gone from him. “I'm sorry if I tried to intimidate you.” He stared at his feet, like an awkward teenager, switching the weight between his legs. “It was already weird how you reappeared out of the blue, and then you had such high skills. That's not something that just *happens*.”

“Guess not. But I was never a normal child, was I?”

“No, you were not.” Lou met his gaze, amused, still a hint of guilt in his smile.

Kai patted his arm. "Don't worry, big boy, I was never scared by you."

*Okay, perhaps a teeny-weeny bit during the sparring, but it was due to exhaustion. My brain wasn't thinking properly.*

"No...?"

It sounded like a genuine question. Kai looked at the overgrown teenager from head to toe and gave an unimpressed shrug. "Nope, you're just a harmless teddy bear."

Lou managed to look both relieved and offended with a small frown. "Aren't bears dangerous beasts from the mainland?"

"I've never been there, it's just a saying my teachers used."

*I'm not sure who thought making cute stuffed replicas of big killing machines was a good idea.*

Lou accepted it readily. "You used to say such weird stuff all the time when we were kids."

*I'm not sure that's a compliment.*

"So you believe me?"

"Honestly?" Lou turned serious. "It's obvious you're still hiding some things, but yes. Your story explains how you're free to be here. And you truly have a contract with a merfolk merchant—yes, I've checked. I believe your story is *mostly* true."

*I can take that for now.*

“And... Can you promise to keep this to yourself?” It had been freeing to share his story, but now his fate lay in the hands of another person. “I’d rather not find an officer outside my door.”

*The truth isn’t anxiety-free either, or is that the fear of betrayal?*

Lou didn’t deny the possibility, meeting his gaze with equal intensity. “Can you promise whatever you’re hiding won’t endanger me or the others? And I don’t mean just the stuff about your teachers, also whatever *else* you’ve been hiding since we met each other.”

*Shouldn’t teenagers be, I don’t know, dumber? I must have taught you too well.*

Kai solemnly put a hand over his heart. “I swear on the Great Spirits that, to my knowledge, my secrets won’t affect anyone but me.”

Lou nodded, satisfied. “Then I swear not to share any information you privately reveal to me without your consent. May the ancestors spurn my spirit, and the Seven Moons curse my soul if I break this oath.”

*You had to outdo me, didn’t you?*

A weight lifted off Kai’s shoulder, he hadn’t made a mistake to trust him.

“I’m *really* sorry I jumped to conclusions, it’s just...” Lou smiled sheepishly. “I’ve never heard of anyone reaching the peak of Orange at your age in the archipelago. Or getting a scholarship from such powerful teachers.”

"I told you it's fine." Kai waved him off. "I was simply lucky and a genius to boot, someone was bound to notice."

"You mean you were born with a Favor higher than zero?"

Kai groaned, thumping his feet to head back. "Stop deducing facts I don't mean to share. And this falls under the oath too."

"I don't think I'm smart enough for that." Lou gave him a smug smile. "You're the genius after all."

*I'm so going to drown him.*

With the truth out, the mood on the way back was far more relaxed. They walked at the edge of the greenery doing idle chat, occasionally interrupted by other individuals looking for privacy away from the city.

"So, what's the deal about the special class in the scholarship program?" Kai poked. "I've already told you about me, it's only fair you share something too."

Lou scrunched his brows. "I can't talk about that. Ask me something else..."

"Wait, did *you* sign some kind of shady contract?" Kai pulled his hair back. People always accused others of what they did themselves. "Is that why you were all riled up?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about." Lou scowled.

"Sure... You're not the only one who can make deductions."

The big boy sighed audibly. “Just don’t tell anyone else about it, *please*. It’s not what you think.”

Now Kai was definitely intrigued, but hearing Lou’s grave tone, he reluctantly gave up his plans to tease him. “Don’t worry, I think I can keep a secret.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” It was the only weakness he uncovered, and he couldn’t use it. “Do you think I should tell the others about my grade?” He’d rather not, but he was open to discussing it.

Lou thought about it a *whole* second before shaking his head. “No.”

“No?”

“Unless you want to. The twins are trustworthy, but they aren’t always the most dependable. And Ana’s confused, it’s better not.”

“*Confused?*” Kai repeated the word. “You mean she might go tell her teacher or an enforcer?”

“She just does what she thinks is right, and best for you.”

“And you don’t agree with her?” Kai prodded. “Don’t tell me you think the governor isn’t our selfless savior?” He couldn’t keep a mocking tone out of his voice.

“I’m not blind, but it’s not that easy,” Lou glowered.

“It rarely is,” he agreed. “But when they abandoned us to starve in Greenside, it was pretty fucking clear to me. And ours wasn’t the only town to suffer.”

Kai struggled to keep his anger at bay, despite the years the rage was always fresh and ready to answer. Not like he could go see a therapist. He had taken a step forward with Lou, but it was still early to open that argument. “Anyway, we’re almost there.”

Recognizing the familiar stretch of beach, he ran ahead. Ana was working on a mana construct under the shadows of the palm trees, while Flynn was taking a nap a little closer.

“You’re back,” he opened a lazy eye when he stepped closer. “Did you have a nice chat?”

“Yes, where are the twi—” His senses warned him of two figures dashing out of the vegetation, arms wide open to tackle him.

*Do they ever give up?*

Kai didn’t panic. His body aimed to dodge at the last second, so they’d have no chance to adjust their trajectory. They were almost upon him, and his muscles were tense and ready to respond.

*Now.*

Pushing against the sand to dash, Hallowed Intuition whispered something was wrong. His leg met resistance where there should have been none, unbalancing him. Eyes darted to the culprit. Flynn had sneaked closer and gotten into the way of his retreat to trip him.

There was no time to recover. “Why—”

Uli and Oli were upon him. The impact forced the air out of his lungs as his shoulder crashed on the sand.

*Damn traitor!*

“Sorry, this was the price of my freedom.” Flynn apologized, no trace of regret in his tone. “It was you or me, and I didn’t feel like drowning. You shouldn’t have left me alone with them.”

Kai vainly tried to fight back the bodies weighing on him. Unarmed combat wasn’t one of his strong suits, grappling even less. One of the few flaws in his education.

Given their hobbies, the twins must have more than enough experience. Kai got no chance to slip away or fight back and was hauled by his limbs towards the sea.

*You’re all going to pay!*

This time the twins opted to drag him around amidst the waves. Kai patiently waited for them to get bored. They couldn’t keep a hold of him forever, as they lowered their guard, he struck.

Two against one was a hard matchup, but Blessed Swimmer made him unrivaled in the sea. With Empower as a pretense to use his whole stats and a sprinkle of Water Magic, Kai was assured they drank as much seawater as him, *each*.

He accepted a tentative truce when they offered to teach him how to grapple. From their toothy grins, their intentions to have fun at his expense were obvious, but he accepted nonetheless. It was a weakness he needed to shore up, and their smug expressions would be a great source of motivation.

“You can forget about me paying for any restaurant.” Kai glared at Flynn on their way back to Higharbor.

“I was just trying to give you more opportunities to bond with your friends.”

“Not. A. Single. Chip.” He repeated with deep satisfaction.

“I’m sorry.” Flynn tried with his beaten puppy look, but he had abused his acting skill one time too many.

Kai gave him his best evil smirk, “No, you’re not *yet*. But, don’t worry, you’ll be sorry soon.”

“Maybe we should talk about this after we’ve *all* had the time to calm down and think this over.”

“I’m perfectly calm.”

Flynn ignored him, switching to another topic. “What do you think about visiting these ruins? The twins couldn’t shut up about it.”