

Chapter 149 - Gains

The waves crashed against the white limestone cliffs, a slow but inexorable battle between sea and land. Clinging on top like mushrooms on an old log, the little houses of Wildcliff huddled together to resist the harsh winds.

It had been a much more pleasant stop than Old Port. Smaller in size and *far* quieter. Close to the rim, the howling gale that hit the steep rock were often louder than the people who inhabited the town. Tidy pebble streets rolled down the hills between houses with pale walls and burgundy shingled roofs.

The sharp gusts helped relieve the heat of summer, though Ventura hadn't been as appreciative. It was understandable, carrying her wares up the narrow path carved into the cliffs had been a hazardous experience. On the plus side, Kai had greatly expanded his repertoire of curses.

The town was one of the rare settlements that relied on agriculture and cattle over fishing. Not that the locals feared the sea. During his brief stay, he had seen plenty of teenagers jump from the highest cliffside at over forty meters. It was considered a rite of passage for each fourteen-year-old, in honor of the great spirits of the sea, Kahali.

From the sheer number of jumps and screaming laughter, Kai suspected the adrenaline rush had as much to do with it. He wouldn't have minded trying himself, but Ventura had forbidden him before they even touched shore. The wrinkly mayor of the town said the same, he wasn't old enough for it. The best they let him try was the twenty-meter kids drop.

Such nonsensical rules.

Kai scowled at the forbidden cliff, he'd come back for it. A few dashes of red shingles peeked over the steep precipice as the *Ventura* sailed for deeper waters to avoid the low tide.

"Still sour about that dive, little brother?" Flynn flanked him with a teasing smile.

"I'm not sour."

"*Of course* not. You're just honing your glares on the cliff. Those rocks must already regret their life choices."

Kai turned his perfectly cool gaze on him, making Flynn's laughter fill the quarterdeck. A few sailors noticing the commotion shared amused glances. Somehow everyone else on the ship knew too, though that was probably his fault since he had publicly argued with the mayor.

Yeah, I was probably trying to make up for Old Port.

"Come on, you've not missed out on much. It's the same as jumping from the lower cliff, you just spend a second longer being slapped by the wind." Flynn pulled him away from the railing. "We can find plenty of stupid ways to break your neck in Higharbor too."

Kai let himself be dragged away, giving a last *loving* look at his stony archenemy. "It's just annoying that I'm always held back by *that*."

"Everyone takes the same time to grow up. I can't assure you'll be as tall and handsome as me, but you'll get there too."

You didn't have to do it twice.

The first time he'd died at seventeen, just shy of reaching adulthood. Not that it would have made a difference. His fragile health had made him dependent on his family either way.

Then he had to do it all over again from the starting line. During his first years in Whiteshore, it had been fun to have a second childhood without a ticking clock hanging over his head. That illusion broke abruptly when they had been relocated to Greenside. He had been tired of waiting since the day his father was murdered.

Spending time at the estate had made it more bearable. That was now over. While he could ignore his age limitations in Sylspring, traveling to new locations and meeting new people made the weight of those shackles far heavier.

Just two years and a half.

Taking a lungful of the salty air to calm his irritation, Kai marched to their cabin. He was close to completing the eighteenth layer of Virya's cube. If he pushed through, he might work it out before they reached Higharbor.

"Are you going to play with your puzzle again?" Flynn asked, slumping.

"I'm close to solving it." With all the secrets they shared, there had been no point in hiding the cube, though his snooping friend thought it a mundane puzzle. The ship didn't offer much privacy, and Kai couldn't risk a sailor overhearing.

Not that I have any idea what Virya hid inside. 'It's priceless, beyond your wildest imagination. Just finish it within a year or it's lost forever'. Damn witch, she loves her mysterious veil too much.

"You say you're about to solve it every time. I could teach you to play *Brink*."

"Maybe later," Kai said. He had already figured out most of that card game by watching him play. "I'll come as soon as I'm done."

Inside the cramped cabin, his bag was slumped in a corner. Alana's food supplies had found a worthy challenger in Flynn. With a pitying look at the dwindling provision, Kai sat on the short bed and took out the cube. His fingers slid the lacquered pieces of dark wood with practiced ease, while his mind was already at work weaving three threads of mana.

Not knowing how many layers were left to the final prize was by far the worst part of the challenge. An uncertain task with an even more uncertain reward. The temptation to hold back and to cut his losses whispered in his ears.

Too much effort and time staked on a vague promise that he had no way of confirming. It would be crushing if he gave his all and ended up with a fistful of sand. The cube was one of the main reasons why he broke the Second Seal and picked Mana Child. What if that still wasn't enough?

I just need to succeed, problem solved.

Kai crushed his doubts. This wasn't the first challenge of this nature Virya or Elijah had put him through—though it was by far the greatest. He had long learned the lesson, if he began to contemplate failure, he had lost.

I'm training both my mana skills, Inspect and Runes. It's not like it wouldn't be a complete waste anyway.

'The road to failure is paved with brilliant excuses,' Elijah whispered in his ear. Looking for justifications was the same as having doubts.

Shut up, butler! Nobody's perfect.

Flynn had been right on that. Not that he shouldn't aim for perfection, but he had to accept there would be setbacks and mistakes along the way.

A brief session of Attuned Meditation got rid of any stray thoughts, Kai devoted every brain cell to the puzzle in his hands. When he came out of his cabin for his victorious walk, the sun had already set behind the western horizon.

How many hours did I spend in the cabin?

“Did you succeed?” Flynn strolled over with a bowl of fish soup and a slice of hard bread for him.

Kai accepted the lukewarm food with a thank you, a sliver of guilt in his gut. Despite his apparent casual demeanor, he must have been waiting quite a while. “Yes, I solved it.”

“Really?” Flynn raised an eyebrow. “Can you show me?”

I did open one layer, just a thousand more to go.

“I’ll show you when we get to Higharbor, I don’t want to look at it again tonight.”

A hint of suspicion flashed through his green eyes. “I guess that’s fair. Come on, the crew has already started playing.”

“Wait, take this.” Kai took out a silver mesar from his pocket.

“What’s for?” Flynn swiped the coin with an almost automatic gesture, before frowning at him. “I know you must feel deeply in debt, but you can enjoy my charming personality for free.”

Kai raised his eyes halfway to the sky, too tired for a full roll. “It’s for betting, so you can play for me too. If you win, we can split it fifty-fifty.” He had never expected to have to pray Flynn to take his money.

“What if I lose?”

“Then it’s on me. I just want to be part of the game.” Kai added to prevent the argument he saw rising in Flynn’s mouth. “What? Are you afraid to lose?”

Any trace of hesitation was snuffed out by a confident smirk. “I’m just afraid you’ll regret not investing more in me. Let’s go! I can teach you how to play while I wipe their purses.”

Flynn headed for a group of five sailors playing *Brink*. Judging by the pile of copper mesars on the board, they were the wealthiest bunch after the captain’s table. The group’s conscience that stopped them from taking advantage of a kid was quickly put to rest when Flynn showed them the piece of silver.

“Take a seat, but don’t cry when you lose.” A thin man with a shifty look gave them permission to sit on the deck. “There’s no pulling back after the game starts.”

Kai quietly took a seat behind Flynn, eating his cold dinner. If it was his money and he would benefit from a win, shouldn’t his Favor also affect Flynn? And yes, he was also feeling guilty for spending the whole journey in his cabin. One silver wouldn’t be a big loss either way.

When dealing with the seventh attribute there was never a straight answer, and the link between Favor and chance was a matter of scholarly debate. High luck improved the general outcome, but its specific workings remained a mystery.

A stout middle-aged sailor with a graying beard shuffled the deck and dealt the cards.

“We all start with seven cards...” Flynn began to explain the basic rules of *Brink*. Kai was about to tell him he knew already when he noticed the looks of ridicule that crossed the five sailors.

Fine. Have it your way.

“So, you need six yellow swords to win?” Kai asked the dumbest question he could manage, obtusely staring at the cards.

“No...” Flynn smoothed his frown and masked the cunning glint that crossed his face. Facing away from the others to talk to him, no one noticed anything apart from his heavy sigh.

“Remember what I told you? There are only five yellow swords in the deck.”

“Then how do you win?” Improvisation painted his face in puzzlement.

The spark of hope on Flynn's features fell into exasperation. He distractedly drew a card and threw a blue scepter for his turn. Even Kai knew that was a poor play to open a game.

“Let's start from the beginning...” He spoke each word slowly, making frequent pauses for his dimwitted friend to catch up. Flynn gave an apologetic glance at the sailors who could barely hide their snickers. “I should have known it would take a while, I can teach him later if I'm distracting you.”

“Don't worry, kid. We don't mind.” The bearded man said with a greedy smile.

Kai wasn't sure if it was their ploy, his Favor or just a lucky night. By the time the five sailors refused to continue playing, his one silver had multiplied four times.

“Can't we play one more game? I think I almost figured out how this game works.” Kai turned to Flynn, scrunching his brows. “We're winning, right?”

“Yes, little brother. I think we are.”

Gritting his teeth, the thin sailor was about to walk back when he was pulled away by the others. The night filled with curses to unfamiliar deities muttered under their breath.

“Come on, little brother, we can find someone else to play with. I'm proud of you, I'm sure you'll get it in a few more games.”

They had not taken two steps when a looming shadow crossed their path. "I think you two had enough fun for one night," Ventura said, her red lips pressed into a displeased line.

"Why? We won fair and square," Flynn protested.

"Cause I'm the captain of this ship, and you'll do as I say while you are on board." Ventura leaned over, talking in a whisper. "And those same men would have beaten you up fair and square if I didn't stop them. The merfolk paid for your passage, not to upset my crew."

Standing back, she was all smiles again, fondly pinching their cheeks, "Come on boys, it's time to go to sleep."

Flynn didn't look convinced, so Kai grabbed his ear in one hand and stifled a yawn with the other. "Come on, *big brother*. I'm tired." It wasn't the time to be stubborn.

"Let me go, I'm coming."

Once back into their cabin, they pushed their bags to the door and Kai put their winnings in his ring. Rocking in his hammock in the dark, he could still feel a smile on his face. "That was fun."

Before he could hear Flynn's answer, he was already drifting off.

Since his race grade was one step higher, Kai was the first to wake up the next day. With the little light that filtered under the cabin door, their bags were exactly as they left them.

Moving as silently as possible, he made his way outside. The cool morning breeze wiped away the last traces of sleepiness.

Ding

Profession XP, General: 856 – Skills: 1500

Damn. Not bad for my first week, everything considered.

He couldn't pass definitive judgment with a single data point, but that *had to* be at least great. Spirits' mercy, he was almost halfway through his first level.

Kai sent all his gains towards his profession with little hesitation. He could siphon up to 50% of his *General XP* into his race, but he needed to get those stat boosts first.

- Profession: **Mana Child lv 0 – 0 > 2,356 / 5,000 XP**

Boon:

- **Mana Spring**

Profession Skills:

- **Gifted Novice (lv1>8)**
- **Mana Echo (lv1>7)**

The profession skills would slow down the higher they climbed, but the diminishing returns on *General XP* for professions weren't as harsh as those for *Life Experience*. Working on the cube had netted him more than he imagined.

Virya's enchantment is the definition of arcane, and I do need to use both my mana skills for it. It must have also helped level Gifted Novice...

"Morning." Flynn walked up to the railing, covering a yawn. His gaze suddenly focused ahead. "Look, I think we're there."

Kai forgot about his gains, squinting his eyes. The first rays of dawn pierced through the morning fog lighting dozens of ships anchored at a dock of ivory stone. High lavish constructions peeked over them.

The whole coast was covered by majestic ashen buildings. Kai took a moment to realize the marble palaces inland must have been built on a hill, making them tower over the capital.

They had reached their destination, Higharbor.