

Chapter 157 - Friendly Sparring

Inside a ring drawn in the sand, the twins circled each other like drakes looking for an opening. No provocations or snarky remarks were exchanged, both were entirely focused on their opponent. Each expertly wielded a practice spear a head longer than themselves with eyes serious and unblinking.

The blunt snap of dulled spear points shot in tentative strikes. Two mirror images sought a crack to squeeze through and gain the upper hand. To no one's surprise, Uli and Oli were evenly matched, each exchange of thrust and jabs always returned them to the status quo.

Sitting outside the ring beside Ana, Kai watched the duel in fascinated silence. He had readily agreed to let them go first so he could see how the spar worked. The first to land a hit below the shoulders or force the other out of the circle won. No head strikes or dirty blows, the goal was to train their weapon skills.

With Inspect and Elijah's teachings, Kai considered himself a decent judge. He could usually get a *feel* of where a fight was leaning, and be right more often than not. Though if someone offered Kai a hundred gold mesars to guess the winner, he might as well flip a coin and let Luck decide.

"Who do you think will win?" he asked. Ana must have more experience assessing the skills of the identical twins.

"They've reset the score after they reached Orange ★★. It's eleven to twelve for Uli right now with seven ties." Ana alternated her gaze between the twins with a pensive look.

How can the spar end in a draw? Or did I miss something?

Seeing her intent focus, Kai chose to wait and keep his doubts. From how they explained the rules to him, there would always be a winner and a loser. Unless they both refused to fight, maybe...

“Uli has been training hard to beat Oli to the next enhancement,” Ana bit her thumbnail, a small frown on her brows. “That might make him more determined, but also more rash. Oli won’t let go of his lead, and Uli is one spar down, so he...”

As she went back and forth between the pros and cons for each twin, Uli put a stop to the stalemate and lunged forward. Spear cut through the air like lightning aimed at his brother’s chest.

Sharpened point or not, Kai’s heart skipped a beat. The flimsy leather protections they brought would do little to diffuse a frontal blow. His mind already created images of Oli skewered on his brother’s spear. The twin lowered his body to dodge and used the shaft of his own spear to divert the strike over his shoulder, countering with a jab in the same movement.

Uli narrowly dodged, brushing the attack to the side, and bringing his weapon back in a defensive stance to fend off the flurry of blows that followed. With neither side willing to retreat, the fight devolved into close quarters. Spear points were forgotten, and they started using the shafts like quarterstaves to whack each other.

Kai lost sight of who was who in the wild melee. One of the twins let go of his spear and elbowed his brother in the stomach. His victorious smirk had not yet fully formed when it was smashed by a punch in the face that knocked him down on the ground. As his shoulders hit the sand, he threw a vicious kick on his twin’s knee that brought him down with him.

“Give up, this was my win.”

“Never, you cheating bastard!”

“You broke the rules first!”

Limbs and curses intermingled on the ground. Uli and Oli rolled in the sand, trying to wrestle the other into submission.

Ana sighed audibly, a touch disappointed and not at all worried. "It's another tie. They're only allowed to strike with their spear in a weapon sparring and they can't hit the head. Oli would have won if he didn't respond to the first strike, but he also broke the rules."

"Shouldn't we stop them...?" Kai raised an eyebrow afraid they'd break a limb or choke each other to death.

Ana grabbed his arm to stop him. "They'll jump back on each other the moment you turn away if we intervene," she waved off the angry yells coming from the wriggling pile of limbs. "Better to let them settle it, they'll stop when they get tired."

Even Lou didn't look particularly worried, idly chatting with Flynn as if this was nothing out of the ordinary, and the twins weren't trying to strangle each other five meters from them.

They must know best, right? You can't fight the tide, or stupidity.

"Does this happen often?"

"Sometimes," she shrugged. "This is just their eighth tie."

Wait. Didn't the count start two weeks ago when they upgraded their race?

Kai kept his Mana Sense on them to be safe as Ana told him about what they did in Hawkfield. She hadn't given up on changing his mind on the scholarship yet. And her *casual* mentions about all the wonderful things the Republic offered them weren't particularly subtle.

True to her word, the shouts and curses from the two thick skulls died down after a couple minutes. When they stood up, their faces were barely visible beneath all the sand that stuck to their sweat, but there were no broken bones and fewer bruises than Kai expected. They spluttered on the beach to clean their mouths and shook off the sand like wet dogs.

Though dogs would probably be smarter...

“It’s a tie,” Lou announced before Uli or Oli could speak a word, ignoring their protest of unfairness. The twins plopped down beside him and Ana with an identical scowl on their faces, and acted as if the other didn’t exist.

“Don’t pay them attention, they’ll get over it. What was I saying... oh right, the history lesson. You can’t imagine how vast is the territory the Merian Republic controls on the continent. Hundreds of times the size of the archipelago...”

Two hundred and fifty at most, and the archipelago is made up of islands. So it’s not a fair comparison.

Ana didn’t notice how far from impressed he was by anything she said. Kai was about to step into the ring to escape the spill when Lou and Flynn preceded him. If he insisted on going next, she might get offended.

Yatei have mercy. I know she thinks she’s helping me, but can’t she get the hint?

The beginning of a new spar gave him the chance to close the topic. While Flynn could use a sword without skewering himself, he was far more proficient with daggers and throwing knives. Neither was an ideal weapon for a frontal duel, but he was the only one with a profession.

There wasn’t a perfect match among the training weapons they brought, Flynn made do with two long knives. Uli lent him his chest and arms protections. They weren’t a perfect fit, but that made little difference. Sparring meant getting bruises, Kai hadn’t realized how lucky he had been with Elijah, who could perfectly control his hits.

I was spoiled rotten, and I didn’t even know it. Sorry butler, you were right.

Lou raised his guard, wielding a longsword. “Ready?”

“Yeah, I was born ready.” Flynn’s grin didn’t last when the hulking teenager charged at him with an overhead swing. The air whistled cut by the sword as if he wanted to split his head like a melon, though Lou aimed for the shoulder.

No friendly banter or probing strikes to get an idea of his opponent’s skills, Lou pressed with a chain of impressive blows. While none of them were aimed at a vital point, a bit of leather wouldn’t stop a wooden sword from breaking a bone.

Flynn bent and twisted to deflect. He danced around the ring, making full use of the available space to dodge and evade. He was faster and more agile, but he struggled to match Lou’s raw might using a knife.

Lou was taking full advantage of the superior reach of his weapon to keep him at a distance and leverage his Strength. He never gave Flynn a moment to breathe or reverse the momentum of the fight, relentlessly chasing to pin him down or force him outside the ring.

“Come on, Lou. You got this!” Ana cheered, echoed by the twins.

“Flynn, kick his ass or I’ll kick you out of the house!” Kai yelled, ignoring the glances the others gave him. “You can do it!” Despite Flynn’s confident facade, it’d be a huge blow to his pride if he lost with a profession on his side.

We’ve trained together. Don’t you dare lose to an overgrown teenager!

Shouting encouragement, doubts started to arise. Kai had to admit Lou was pretty fucking good with a sword, and he might have *slightly* underestimated him. While Elijah had never let him forsake his physical training, magic and mana skills were his main focus. Swordsmanship was a secondary skill for him, especially since the butler had left.

He must have some high skills to have reached the second enhancement.

Lou lunged forward with a series of quick jabs. A side slash pushed away Flynn's knife, an instant too late to parry the following blow that scored a hit to his left arm and put an end to the duel. It barely grazed the leather vambrace, but a hit was a hit.

Dammit!

Both teenagers lowered their weapons, catching their breath after the intense exchange. Kai slumped, trying to hide his disappointment.

I'll take him to that exotic restaurant he wanted to try in the upper city.

"You won," Ana ran to congratulate the victor.

Lou shook his head with a thoughtful impression. "It's his win, he struck me first." He bent to pick up the second knife lying in the sand at his feet, hidden behind their bodies. "You're really good."

You sneaky bastard!

Flynn accepted his weapon and shook hands with a humble smile. "It was a close fight. I just got lucky at the end."

"I wouldn't call that luck, you baited me until I overextended," Lou said without any resentment. "You won fair and square, your throw would have caused me a much more serious injury than mine."

"I didn't think you'd notice," a mischievous glint flashed in his eyes.

"Want to go for another?" Lou asked, hopeful.

“No, no. I think I’ve got enough for today, maybe another time. Kai wanted to have a go too.” Flynn strode to him, helping him up. His voice lowered to a whisper. “You thought I’d lost.”

“Not even for a second,” Kai smiled. “Only I can beat you.”

If I use Empower.

Oli went to pick up his spear. “Okay, Kai, show me what you’ve got. I’ll go easy on you.”

“Wait! I want to fight him too!” Uli protested running to fetch his weapon.

“Too late, I’m already in the ring and you’ve got no protections.”

Guess it’s time to put them in their place.

“Don’t be scared, I believe in you,” Flynn ruffled his hair and gave a loud pep talk. “Just remember my lessons and show them what I’ve taught you. You can do this.”

Thinking again, I’m going to go check out that restaurant alone.

Lou whispered something in Oli’s ear that made him go a shade paler and nod his head dutifully. Satisfied, Lou gave the twin a pat on the shoulder and came to offer him his longsword.

“Remember you can stop the spar at any time. You don’t have to entertain them if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep it in mind.” Kai tested a few swings. It was longer than the sword he kept in his ring, made for a grown adult, but it wouldn’t be the first time he used something similar.

The group cleared the ring and redrew the smudged line in the sand while Kai wore Ana’s leather protections and took position in the center.

“Ready when you are, you can have the first strike,” Oli leveled his spear at him. “I’ll do my best not to take advantage of my attributes.”

Same for me.

Reading his stance, Kai dashed toward him. Against a spear, he needed to close the distance to have a shot at victory. Oli intercepted him with three quick jabs and forced him to retreat, though he didn’t press when Kai parried them.

They exchanged more probing strikes. Oli wasn’t putting his whole weight into the strikes either, careful to aim for the protections or his longsword to disarm him. They both avoided a contest of Strength, making it easier to hide his physical attributes.

Kai’s favorite strategy was to overwhelm his opponents by increasing his strength and speed with bursts of Empower. Even against Flynn, he didn’t completely restrain the use of the skill. What would be the point of not using an ability that would always be available to him?

To train Swordsmanship, you moron.

In truth, it wasn’t complete idiocy since training his mana skills was crucial, but maybe he could try something different today. Without pushing his body to his limits or casting spells, his entire focus could go to his Swordsmanship, on how to outsmart his opponent through sheer technique.

This could be more useful than I thought.

It was exciting to measure himself against someone else, who also used a different weapon. The sword in his hand became the only thing that mattered, his whole world, everything else faded in the background, vaguely aware that he was falling into a meditative state. The beach filled with the rhythmic snapping of wood as they exchanged blows, slowly growing in intensity.

Oli's easygoing demeanor turned serious, his jabs fast and precise to keep him at bay. The power and speed behind each blow continued rising until the twin realized he was being pushed on the defensive regardless. Face scrunched up, Oli flexed the muscles in his arms and pushed his entire Strength into a sweeping strike to force him back.

There!

The steps flashed into his mind, and his body moved accordingly. Gripping his sword with both hands, Kai stepped into the blow. The closer to the grip of the spear the weaker the attack. He met the impact head-on and felt it vibrate through his bones. A faint creak of wood from his sword, it was holding.

Surprise painted over Oli's face as the events caught up to him. Kai charged before he could fix the opening or retreat. A single, humorous double tap on his chest closed the spar.

"I win."

He retreated in case the twin reacted like in the first duel. A wide smile grew on his lips, his breath ragged and sweat condensed over his body with Water Magic. It was a perfect technical victory that hadn't required his real attributes. Oli didn't move, he stared in shock and confusion, trying to understand how things had gone so terribly wrong.

"Damn idiot, I can't believe we're related! What the fuck was that strike?" Uli stomped his feet. "You left yourself completely open. Of course you lost." As if a spell was broken, everyone started talking at the same time.

“You did great,” Ana congratulated. “Oli made a mistake, but you did well to take advantage of it.”

“I— I knew you could do this. You just had to believe in yourself,” Flynn looked at him like a proud parent, drying a fake tear from his eye.

“Now’s my turn.” Uli rushed to take his spear, protections already on.

“Calm down.” Lou stopped him. “Kai’s two years younger, you can’t charge at him just to do better than your brother.”

Thanks, it’d be hard to hold back if he went all out from the start.

“He can spar with me,” Lou went to pick up an identical sword and stepped into the ring. “It’ll be interesting to compare sword techniques.”

Where is the no-pressure attitude? It’d be polite to ask.

“Can’t I take a break first?”

“You can rest later, I’ll go easy on you.” Lou’s eyes keenly observed him. “Just show me what you got.”