

Chapter 125 - Compromises

“No, not *her*,” Kai couldn’t believe his ears. After moving to Sylspring, he swore not to sell her even the scraps of his cauldron. And yet, here she was, stalking out of the shadows to steal his wealth.

“Why not?” Reishi took another sip of his tea. He sat in his armchair with a patient look. “We need a shop in Sylspring, and she has an established business on the main street. She would also offer to supply herbs at a convenient price.”

“Didn’t you want to sell them yourself?”

I should have known that inviting me to his house for tea couldn’t be just a social visit.

“Merchants must be flexible,” the merman waved his objections away. “Partnering with her will save us months of work, maybe years. And we need to move fast, the alchemists in Higharbor are growing restless. It won’t be long before they will turn their eyes elsewhere. Sylspring is the jewel of the archipelago.”

Kai slumped on the couch. “I get that, but does it have to be Sylpie’s Herbs? Isn’t there anyone else?”

If he wasn’t blessed by the spirits, he’d think they were conspiring against him.

“Not anyone that can offer us a better deal or benefits. What do you have against the owner? She’s a pleasant old lady.”

“She’s a sly snake hiding behind the mask of a gentle granny.”

Reishi gestured with a sugar-coated biscuit, “*Exactly!* That’s the best kind of human merchant.”

Kai gave him a flat look. Of course, he’d say that.

“Come on, don’t look at me like that. We don’t run a charity,” the merman crunched the sweet pastry. “And I know how to handle their kind. It’s easier to work with competent people even if you have to look at your back.”

Defeated, Kai passed a hand over his face. “Fine, but I don’t want to deal with her.”

Opposing his decision was pointless. The merman was informing him to be polite, but distribution and sales were his field.

You can’t fight the tide.

Reishi broke into a smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything. You won’t have to meet her again after today.”

“Wait, what do you mean—”

As if she had been waiting for her cue, a knock came from the door.

“You invited her here without telling me?” Kai whispered with gritted teeth.

“She wanted to discuss the terms of the deal in person,” Reishi gave him an apologetic shrug before raising his voice. “Come on in.”

An attendant opened the door and Old Selly marched inside wrapped in a shawl of green silk. She leaned against a cane, her back slightly hunched, but Kai didn't get fooled by her frail appearance. Her eyes were as spirited as the last time he met her.

Telu followed behind her, staring at the richly decorated room with wide eyes. The chubby kid had grown taller and leaner since the last time they met, but he still sported the same bowl haircut.

"Welcome, please take a seat," Reishi stood up to exchange greetings with them.

Kai wondered if he should try to sneak away with shadow magic. His moment of hesitation robbed him of the choice.

"Oh, if it isn't little Kai. Look how much you've grown." The old hag gave him a grandmotherly smile. "It's been a while since you visited my shop. I almost thought you'd forgotten about me."

"How could I forget our time in Greenside." Kai put on a fake smile. "You short-changed me at every opportunity you got."

"I was just trying to teach you the ways of the world, dear. I'm sorry if I was a fierce haggler, I just wanted to prepare you," Old Sally coughed in her sleeve. "Oh, forgive me, this old body is falling to pieces."

Kai barely avoided the hand that shot to pinch his cheek. That was a surprising amount of nimbleness for a sickly old lady.

Failing her strike, Selly opted to pat him on the back with exaggerated familiarity. "And look where you are now. It has worked wonders! I knew I saw something special in you, isn't that right Telu?"

The hag pushed forward the boy.

“Yes, grandma. You did always say that.” Telu stood awkwardly at the center of attention, hesitantly speaking. “It’s nice to see you again. You don’t stop by to say hi anymore.”

Yatei help me. This is not fair!

Pitying the poor child, Kai decided to not make the negotiation any harder. To work with the hag who took advantage of him would be annoying, but it was an old matter, he could bury his pride.

“Great, it’s so nice to see you catch up,” Reishi invited them to sit as an attendant brought more refreshments. “Kai often talks fondly of his time in Greenside. I’m sure we’ll do wonderful work together.”

I don’t think I’ve mentioned it once in the last three years. I’d forget that hell hole if I could.

With a temporary truce established, it was time to talk business. Sypie’s Herbs mainly dealt with the sale of raw materials, but the jump to finished potions wouldn’t be stark. Old Selly had been trying to expand in new avenues for a while.

Kai let Reishi take the lead in the negotiations, listening from the sidelines to spot any pitfall. He had to admit it *sounded* like a good deal. Selly agreed to only sell their goods in her shop and didn’t demand an unreasonable margin. In exchange, she would be their main supplier of mana herbs.

“There is one more thing,” the old woman said, putting a hand on her nephew. “Telu was hoping you could take him as an assistant. It would fill my heart with joy if you could accept. He’s such a smart boy, I’m sure he would be a great help.”

Is this why she agreed to this deal?

Reishi stayed silent, leaving the decision to him, though Kai wouldn't be surprised if the idea had been his. The merman had been pestering him to hire an assistant for weeks. If he couldn't make him more hours, he would find other ways to increase the production speed.

Kai wasn't eager to have another person in the way and the twins worked just fine.

All eyes were on him, it wasn't really a choice, was it?

Does she hope I'll take him as an apprentice, or does she hope to steal my secrets?

Telu was a good kid, but they were little more than acquaintances.

Too bad for her, Alchemy is not so easy to learn.

Even if Telu had Mana Sense, he wouldn't be able to grasp much without proper instructions. The only risk would be if he copied recipes, but they were only red-tier. Even if someone else stole them, it would make little difference. The sale profit of low-grade potions was in the number he could brew.

I'm sure Reishi thought of something anyway.

"Do you want to work with me?"

Telu jolted in his seat, surprised to have been asked a question. "Yes. I mean, I'd be honored to learn from you."

Maybe I'm overthinking things. He was curious about me since we met during the ceremony for our seventh birthday.

“I look forward to having you as my assistant too.”

The boy brightened up. Even Old Selly looked genuinely happy, though you could never tell with her. “We’ll do wonderful work together.”

Kai chatted about casual topics for a while longer to not seem rude before excusing himself.

“I’ll count this as working hours,” he whispered as he passed by the merfolk.

Life in Sylspring was finally settling down. Some days he wished for the quiet of the estate, but life in a rich town wasn’t too bad—when you had silver to spend. Kai found his balance between work, training and family.

Ele was absorbed pearling to test the limits of her Orange profession, and Kea was doing okay too. His sister drowned her frustrations in her training. Each time she insisted on following his routine in the mornings, she exhausted herself to try to keep up with him.

Drop by drop, the reality of her limits was seeping through her thick skull. The road ahead was long, but she saw the truth. Moui assured him he wouldn’t let her do anything too reckless.

Kai put down the pen that once belonged to his father and admired the schematics for the condensation array. It wasn’t going to get better than this. Tomorrow he’d ask Reishi to procure the best ingredients for the ink.

Satisfied with the result, he took out his true nemesis from his ring. Progress with the cube was slow but steady. He had finally unlocked the third layer, which required him to find three codes of runes for each configuration.

At this point, he would have hit a roadblock if he hadn't enhanced his grade. With time and patience, he could figure out the correct combinations, but to weave three mana threads through the wooden cube at once, grit wasn't enough. He needed raw attributes and skill levels in Mana Manipulation.

A bead of sweat ran down his forehead. Kai sat perfectly still on his bed, his family would wonder if he was breathing if they came in now. The interlocking network of runes that made up the cube in his hands was the only thing that existed.

He slowly slid the wood an inch to fold two mana strands around each other. His lips curve imperceptibly up. He was so close.

Entirely focused on that task, he let loose the grip on the final thread a second too early. The mana of the third filament brushed against the second. With a pulse of energy, the cube erased half an hour of struggles.

"Dammit!"

This is just cruel. Now I have to play Tetris with the solutions on top of everything else.

Not only did he have to move the threads at the same time, but he also had to ensure they didn't touch as he linked them in the correct sequence. Any mistake, no matter how small, would throw him back to the starting line.

Failure was acceptable, giving up was not. He'd try as many times as necessary till he succeeded.

Virya wouldn't give me an impossible task. Unless that was the point of the test... No, it doesn't make sense.

Elijah had once asked him to lift a boulder higher than him without using magic. Kai scraped his hand raw against the stone, trying from dawn till dusk, for two days. Then the butler smacked him on the ear and imparted his wisdom.

'Even if you try your hardest there are limits you can't overcome. Bashing your head against an impossible task doesn't show determination, just stupidity.'

They can't even watch me struggle vainly, so it wouldn't be much of a joke.

Taking a minute to massage his stiff neck, Kai went for another try. The cube wasn't impossible, just incredibly hard.

It took two more tries before Kai solved the second puzzle of the third layer. The clicking of the cube as it rearranged itself was both a dream and a nightmare. He was one step closer to the final solution, and back at the start with no idea how many more were to go.

Each layer was made up of seven sets before the difficulty increased, so it most likely was a multiple of that number.

Certainly not twenty-one, maybe twenty-eight... Spirits, I hope it's not thirty-five.

Without complete information, he could only plan for the worst-case scenario. Though there wasn't much he could do differently.

Working on the cube from dawn till dusk couldn't be the solution. Monotonous tasks would slow down his progression. And Alchemy was excellent training for both his mana skills and Inspect.

Laying down on the bed, Kai noticed a notification that had been dismissed to not break his concentration.

Ding

Mana Sense has reached lv75, requisite for the second milestone met, congratulations!

Some good news for once. I thought it would never move the last step.

With some trepidation, Kai gave the go-ahead.

Mana Sense (lv75) →

As you reach the second milestone, you are presented with four choices to continue your journey:

- **Stay the course on your current path. You won't gain considerable new benefits, but you'll greatly deepen your insight into the current capabilities.**
- **Among the sea of elements, the flowing water will shine brighter to guide your way to deeper truths.**
- **Among the forests of elements, the growing might of nature will light brighter to guide your way to boundless mysteries.**
- **The stars hold many secrets, but wise men know they don't have to look so far. Peer into the swirling energies in front of you to untangle their deeper mysteries.**

Kai read the floating text written in elegant letters three times. Apart from staying the course, he could continue to go down the elemental route, either choosing Water or Nature.

Yeah, probably not.

It wouldn't help with his current problem and brighter lights might also cover the other motes of mana. Picking a single element was too restrictive. He didn't want to abandon any of his other major affinities—not even Space.

The final option took more consideration. With Alchemy, Enchanting and his latest efforts with the cube, it wasn't hard to imagine why he got it. It was the path of a mage craftsman or researcher. All he needed to see were the creations before him.

That might be useful, especially with his brewing, though it would only marginally help with Virya's puzzles. Better sight never hurt, but that wasn't the hurdle stopping him from proceeding faster.

If that was it, he might have considered taking it. From the wording, there was another problem. Farther sight would be sacrificed for greater accuracy up close. Specializations didn't regress a skill, but he wouldn't be surprised if his maximum range never increased again after he chose this.

Mana Sense was one of the cornerstones to practice spellcraft. He couldn't cut off his future progress for short-term benefits.

Well, that wasn't too bad.

Ding

You chose to stay the course, Mana Sense (lv75) can now reach lv100.

The flowing movements of motes became crisper and his range slightly increased. Even his capacity to focus on a specific area came more naturally.

There was no drastic or wild new ability, but Kai could immediately feel the skill improving in a hundred tiny ways. The foundations were supposed to be broad to build a palace.

Next stop at level 100, then is up to Yellow.

The unreachable peak had been cloaked in the clouds for so long, now he could see a path. And he would gain 600 XP each step of the way, just a bit less than Hallowed Intuition.

I'm on the right track, I'll find a way.

Heading for his lab the following day, an unexpected figure waited for him in an alley, retreating in the shadows after waving him to come closer.

Is a normal hi too much to ask? Not a word for all this time and now he wants to play hide and seek.

Kai followed him down two streets. He had the hint of a bad hunch, but they were still close to poshtown when the boy stopped, and Mana Sense couldn't detect anyone suspicious. "I'd thought you were either dead or sailed away on a ship."

Flynn's eyes warily darted around as if he was afraid someone had followed them. "Something happened, keep your voice down."