

Chapter 117 - Shine for Thee

Kai browsed through the pages of his notebook. The golden pearl rested on the bed beside him, shimmering with its charming hue. Dealing with Reishi required preparation if he wanted to come out on top. The mana treasure was the main attraction, but they had more to discuss.

He would be staying in Sylspring for the foreseeable future, so his plans with the merman had to be revised.

~If he doesn't try to sell me on some new partnership in the first thirty seconds, I'll be surprised.

The sneaky fish could be quite persuasive, and Kai revised possible requests and concessions he wrote down. He needed to have a clear goal. Some things were up for debate and others were not. He couldn't let himself get swept up in the excitement to make money and fall for Reishi's bribes.

It was impossible to prepare for every eventuality. That didn't mean he shouldn't try. If the merman had his way, Kai would brew potions from morning till dusk for the next three years. Reishi would make it worth his while, but silver could only bring him so far.

On the Baquaire Archipelago, there wasn't much he was interested in buying. The only luxury goods on sale were vanities for rich tourists and officials. If anyone sold useful items, Kai didn't have the connections to get them.

Perhaps it would be different on the mainland, but he had to get there first. Wealth could be lost in an instant, while no one could touch his status and skills.

Kai put the golden pearl into his spatial bag, donned the dark blue vest and pants he used for poshtown and marched outside. No matter what Reishi offered him, he wouldn't be swayed.

“I’m going out Mom, I’ll come back in a few hours.”

“Okay, sweetie. Remember to stay away from the sailors.”

“I know, Mom.”

The merchant district wasn’t far. The rose marble walls and delicate floral decorations of Reishi’s mansion stood out even among its peers. A reserved opulence that was more luxurious the closer he looked.

His distorted face reflected in the shiny gate made Kai self-conscious. He took out his palm-sized mirror to make sure his hair wasn’t a total mess, close. He smoothed any unruly lock as best he could.

~I need to buy one for the bathroom.

Decent mirrors were an expensive commodity before the Republic began importing them. The natives weren’t used to considering them everyday items, and few purchased one even if they could afford it.

“Master Kai, we were waiting for your arrival.” The butler welcomed him in his spotless maroon uniform. Kai hadn’t realized when the man had made his way to the gate.

“Lead the way,” Kai smiled politely as he followed him inside. A new set of blue polished tiles paved the hallways like a stormy sea.

~Business must be going well.

The butler opened the door to the reception room for him, standing to the side with a short bow. Reishi sat on a plush velvet sofa scribbling on a large book with a red leather cover.

“Oh, Kai, I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon,” the merman closed the tome and stood up to greet him. “How’re you? Did anything interesting happen?”

Kai took a seat while Reishi’s curious eyes peeked at the spatial bag at his feet.

“My master had to sail back to the mainland,” Kai cut straight to the chase.

The merman’s attention snapped on him. “Do they plan to come back?”

“No, I don’t think they will.”

“I’m sorry, Kai. I—” The pity in Reishi’s tone slapped him.

~I’m not a lost puppy.

“It’s fine. I knew they were going to leave,” Kai schooled his tone to not sound too curt. “I’d be grateful if you kept this information to yourself, I don’t want the Republic to think I’m privy to their plans.”

“Of course,” his pointy smile looked unusually sincere. “If there is anything you need, just let me know.”

~Does he mean it? I might be his oldest acquaintance on the archipelago...

Kai could never tell what passed in the merfolk's mind. Did Reishi think of him as a friend, or did he only like him for his skills? Was he being a cynic? They would have never interacted if it weren't for his abilities as an alchemist, though every friendship had to start in some way.

"Thank you, I appreciate it."

~What's this fuzzy feeling? I have many friends.

Reishi did always say that a merchant should never break their word as a matter of credibility—not honesty, to be clear. That meant a lot.

"Actually, there's something I need. I don't want to take advantage of you, but you are the only one who can do it..." Kai leaned forward in his seat with a serious look. "I'd really need a two-story villa, facing the sea. You can do that, right?"

Reishi was speechless. He couldn't find any flaw in his act till Kai burst out laughing.

"You should see your face. You looked like you were about to cry over lost money."

"You've gotten more devious than a damned siren." The merman snorted before joining the laugh.

"You were the one to offer. Did you say that just because you thought I wouldn't ask?" Kai grinned mischievously.

Reishi's scaled features turned serious. "If it's the only way to fend off your *unbearable* sadness, I'll buy you a villa. You say the word."

Something told him the crazy fish was truly going to do it.

“Thank you again for the concern. I’m fine, for now. But what’s the deal with sirens? Is there a rivalry with the merfolk or something?” It hadn’t been the first time Reishi mentioned them.

The finned friends were one of the most elusive races in Virya’s library. Powerful and mysterious, better avoided when possible. They rarely interacted with other races.

Then there were the stories brought by the sailors. Their tales focused on *different* aspects. Beautiful and deadly, sirens charmed the sailors at sea, often growing two legs to deceive them. They usually ended with supernatural sex or drowned people, often both.

“Well, it’s complicated.” Reishi paused when his attendant carried a steaming teapot and some biscuits. He poured two cups of tea and added three sugar cubes to his own, stirring the ruby liquid with his spoon.

Kai accepted his tea, spirits knew how much this one cost. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s simply... *complicated* to explain,” Reishi took a sip. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but to the merfolk, sirens are a bit like elves to humans. At least for the humans on the mainland, I don’t know if in the archipelago—”

“I’ve read a few books on the topic, I understand what you mean.”

Even if those authors weren’t so blatant about it, the inferiority complex against the *higher* races was glaring. A mix of admiration, reverence and deep envy.

“Though sirens have a less honorable reputation, from what I heard,” Kai pointed out.

“It’s deserved,” Reishi snorted. “They are unpredictable and savage like a storm. Hope you never meet one.”

~Yep, there must be a lot to unpack there.

The merman didn't seem eager to delve into the societal and historical events of the deep seas, and Kai didn't pry. It was just idle curiosity.

Reishi crunched on a sugary biscuit. "Let's talk about something more interesting. Have you made any plans now that you're... free to pursue other ventures?"

~Here we go. Took you longer than I thought.

"This is a great chance for you. I told you this is the perfect time to dominate the local market. The alchemists in Higharbor still don't see the opportunity—"

Kai let the merchant gush freely about his selling pitch. And he had to admit, Reishi was a damned good salesman. According to him, Kai would be able to drown himself in gold in just a few years. But they had to act now, time was of the essence.

The merman's ruthless FOMO [Fear Of Missing Out] tactics made his determination waver.

~Don't follow the shiny coins like an idiot.

Keeping his cards close to his chest, Kai cautiously fished for what he really wanted. He tested Reishi's wiggle room. Despite what the merchant proclaimed; the whole plan wasn't a perfect scenario to be followed to the letter. There were only so many hours in a day, and alchemy required tons of time and effort.

No matter what Kai asked, Reishi never lost his unflappable smile. "Yes, I'll provide all the ingredients. *For you*, I can sell the herbs at cost for your private experiments *and* take care of transportation. You'll never have to worry about the logistics."

“What about an alchemy laboratory?” Kai pushed again.

“Just tell me what building you like,” Reishi downed the last sip of his second cup. “You can use it however you want as long as you work for me. I’ll also provide the necessary equipment I can get my hands on.”

Limiting it to a three-year contract was the only instance that took some debate. Reishi quickly conceded after Kai agreed to add an exclusivity clause to the arrangement.

Unfortunately, no matter how tempting, it was all for nothing if they couldn’t decide on the most important point. “I can’t spend fifty hours a week brewing. At least not in the first year.”

It would leave his mana reserves dry for everything else.

“Now’s the most crucial time,” Reishi complained. “What else do you need? I can give you a larger share if that’s what it takes.”

Kai shook his head, “I wish I could say yes, but I need to complete a certain task within a year.”

“That’s a pity. Can I know what this task is about? Maybe I can help.”

“It’s a goal set by my teachers. They forbade me from sharing the details or asking for help.”

“I see,” Reishi called his attendants to refill the teapot. “I can’t go lower than that and promise you all those benefits. I’m making a considerable investment.”

The stubborn negotiations continued. Kai managed to talk him down to the equivalent of thirty-five hours in potions in the first year. If he could manage to brew faster while keeping up the quality, it didn't matter how long he took. The production time would be agreed based on the other local alchemists.

Brewing was a nice training for his mana skills, but it was effective only up to a point. Virya's puzzle took precedence.

~Well, time for my ace.

"I brought something to show you." Kai slowly undid the strap of his backpack. "I think you might find it *interesting*."

"Is it a new potion?" Reishi looked disinterested. No doubt he found it strange that he brought this up in a crucial moment.

"No, it's better. I found it by chance in a hidden cave."

Curiosity began stirring in the merchant's gaze. "What is it? A rare herb or an ancient relic?"

"It's neither." Kai smiled mysteriously, sticking his arm inside the bag. His hand found the box where he put the pearl, but he moved with the grueling slowness of a tv presenter.

He delicately took out the plain wooden container. Judging from Reishi's wide eyes, he could sense the mana treasure hidden inside.

~My precious, shine for thee!

With a final flair of his wrist, Kai flicked the lid open. The room lit with an iridescent spectacle. The merman's palmed hands stretched toward the bewitching pearl, and Kai had to suppress the urge to slap them away.

Like he was holding a baby, Reishi brought the golden pearl an inch from his flat nose.

Do you want me to leave you alone?

"How much for it?" The merman broke the stare without putting the treasure back.

~Worked like a charm.

"I never said I wanted to sell. Who knows how many things I could learn from it if I used it myself."

Reishi gave him a horrified look, clutching it tighter. "You want to melt it into your cauldron!"

"I thought I'd try grinding it into fine powder actually. Do you think melting would work better?"

The merfolk narrowed his eyes, "I know you want to sell it."

With a smirk, Kai dropped the pretense. "Only if you offer the right price."

The charming effect was neat to distract people, but that was about it. He didn't have the faintest idea of how to use an orange-tier mana pearl in either enchanting or alchemy. And there was no Dora to ask, using such a treasure to experiment would be a colossal waste.

“I can give you 30, no— 40 silver mesars.”

It was only thanks to Acting that Kai showed no reaction. It was more than double what that official from the Republic offered him.

~I knew they were shortchanging me.

“Well... I don't know, the Republic also seemed interested in buying.”

“They won't pay you a fair price,” Reishi scoffed. “Just because it's you, I can do 50 silver pieces. You can take them home right now. I swear you won't find a better offer anywhere in the archipelago.”

Such a sum wasn't something he could readily dismiss, it would literally double his current funds in the blink of an eye.

~Stick to the plan.

“I don't really need money right now. And I might get a better price when I go to the mainland from what you said.”

The merman grimaced at his mistake, “You didn't bring it here just to show off, did you? Tell me what you want.”

“Lower the weekly potions quota a little, at least for the first year.”

“For the privilege of purchasing this mana treasure from you?”

“You don’t have to accept it if you don’t want to.”

“Fine, we can agree on twenty-five hours.”

“Twenty for the first year, and then we can discuss the rest.”

Reishi frowned without eyebrows, “You’re asking me to invest a lot in you.”

“Have you ever lost money betting on me?” Kai Acted with the utmost confidence.

The merfolk’s blue lips curved into a smile, “I can’t say I have. Fine, we have a deal.”

With the biggest hurdle out of the way, it was only a matter of bargaining to find a compromise on the fine print. Threatening to keep the shimmering pearl hostage till they reached the final agreement worked wonders to loosen Reishi’s greedy clutches.

“A pleasure as always, Master Kai,” the butler opened the gate for him.

“Oh, the pleasure was mine, Alfred,” Kai left behind the confused butler, whistling a happy tune. Who knows, maybe Mama Clam would make another pearl by the time he went back.

With his fortune reaching a gold mesar, he was properly rich. A notification flashed in the corner of his vision.

Ding

Acting has reached lv100! Requisites for skill evolution met, congratulations!