

Chapter 88 - Dealing with Merchants

Outside the *Sage Tree*, a morning breeze greeted them.

“Come, mister. This way.” Flynn began walking without missing a beat.

“Do you even know where to go?” Kai questioned.

“Sure do. Merchants Terla and Revhani, looked them up yesterday.” The boy tapped the same of his head. “I thought you knew by now I’ve got a great memory.”

You’re so full of shit that I don’t know what to think half the time.

“Of course, how could I ever forget.” Kai gestured to him to lead the way.

“Which one do you want to go first, mister?”

“Stop calling me that, or you won’t get a broken chip.”

“Where do you want to go first, my dearest friend *Kai*?”

“Mhmm... let’s do merchant Terla. She got here yesterday and it will probably take less time.” The budget for her order was 12 silvers, less than half the second order. He could take the chance to test if there was some truth to Flynn’s ridiculous boasts.

“Yes, boss.” He said, taking a sharp turn left from the docks.

There weren’t many tourists around, mostly locals taking advantage of the early hour to get their errands done. A woman in her thirties was bragging to two other mothers with strained expressions about how her son passed the selection.

Loud voices filled the air as stands began to appear on both sides of the road. Young and old people shouted the value of their wares. The gravel crunched under their feet as they proceeded down the market.

A small crowd of half a dozen people gathered around a fish seller. Curious, Kai stopped in front of the booth to see.

Taking center stage was a two-meter-long fish with a yellow fin. A thin trickle of blood poured out of the hole near his empty eye, where the harpoon must have dealt the killing blow. Faint traces of mana slowly evaporated in the air, the body unable to maintain the same energy density in death.

High-red grade at least. Killed maybe two hours ago.

The bird of prey he killed had been just as strong. However, the idea of fighting a fish in his home ground added an ulterior layer of difficulty.

“If you want to buy a cut it’s better to pass later. Unless you don’t care to overpay for the best parts.” Flynn interjected from behind.

Kai shook his head. “Just browsing.”

“With all those shops I didn’t think there would also be such a large market.”

What he saw was already on par with Greenside and it kept going. It was almost all foodstuff, about a third of sea creatures plus a larger share of vegetables, fruits and agricultural produce; the remaining portion was made up from the Veeryd jungle. Mostly meats, but also live animals. Small colorful parrots were chirped in cages. A large rodent, like the one he fought—but not awakened—bit at the bars of his enclosure. Its destiny probably was grimmer than the cute birds.

“Shops in poshtown are for tourists and people loaded with coins. We ordinary folk can’t afford them. There is also another market nearer the outskirts if you’re interested. Their goods can’t compete, but they have cheaper prices and ask less questions.”

That didn’t sound shady at all.

Kai nodded along. “Maybe later.”

They left the bustle of the market behind for a quieter street. Flynn hooped a few steps in front of him making a short bow and beckoning him forward with a wide flourish of his arm. “Welcome to the merchant quarter, *Kai*.”

Painted in muted tones, the high building looked plain after the colorful market. Few windows and even fewer embellishments. The louder sounds of life still came from the sellers they left behind.

“Well, it’s just warehouses and a few private residences.” Flynn explained. “They stay uninhabited most of the year since merchants are often away doing *merchant things* at sea or whatever. Not much actual business is done here.”

If Kai’s orientation wasn’t failing him, the shopping district in poshtown was just a few blocks over. It would have probably been faster if they went through there instead of the market. Avoiding the place was probably second nature for Flynn.

“Well, greatest haggler in Yanlun, it’s time to see your legendary skills at work.”

All the other merchants they had dealt with owned establishments around town or set up shop near the docks. These last two were different, Elijah’s list contained no information apart from the names and the highest price he could pay.

Three blocks over they reached a pale green residence. The walls and gate were decorated with intricate geometric motives in darker colors that stood out even more among its discreet neighbors.

“You know, it would be a great motivator if you could spare me a small tip,” Flynn said.

“I’ll think about it after you *actually* do something useful.”

“My five little sisters are very hungry—I”

“You should have told me your mother had twin sisters in the last hour.”

“It was a very sudden childbirth.” Flynn nodded seriously. “No one expected it.”

“Sure... Why don’t we get going, or your sisters won’t be the only one going hungry tonight.”

“Yes, boss.”

A man with a rigid demeanor stood guard by the inner door beyond the gate, his steely gaze fixed on them.

“Hello, friend. This the residence of merchant Terla, right?” Flynn said with a friendly smile.

The man came closer and grunted a nod. His inky hair reflected a green shade against the morning light.

“Kai here has business with your master.” Flynn patted Kai’s shoulder, no hesitation in his voice.

The guard scanned them from top to bottom. The silence stretched. He couldn’t say if it was thanks to Flynn’s confidence or if he had been warned beforehand, but they didn’t get sent away.

“Have you proof of identity?” The man said in a thick accent Kai didn’t recognize.

Taking out his ID, he gave it a brief glance squinting at the paper. “Wait here.”

He disappeared inside, coming back seconds later and opened the gate. “Captain Terla is waiting for you.”

Flynn shared a look with him, and Kai shrugged. There had been enough surprises for his first visit to Sylspring, he didn’t think Elijah would also make him deal with difficult or dangerous people. And if he did, they had seen enforcers patrolling a street over.

Awareness warned him someone was observing him, but whoever they were, they had no hostile intentions. The guard led them through the main entrance. The geometric motifs continued inside together with an herbal smell vaguely reminiscent of incense. Down a corridor, they entered a room.

A middle-aged woman sat behind a mahogany desk and raised her gaze from the letter she was writing. Merchant Terla also had green hair, just a few shades lighter. That wasn't what attracted his attention.

Her eye moved over Flynn to stop upon him. A red leather eyepatch covered her left orbit. Naturally, there was one, and *only* one reason anyone would wear an eyepatch.

Pirate!

"Kai Tylenn, I presume? I was expecting you. Please take a seat." She greeted them with a smile, a barely perceptible accent Kai wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't already looking for it. Her warm voice and poised attitude resembled an affable lady next door than a raider of the sea.

Damn, I wanted a pirate! it would have been so cool.

"That's me, pleased to make your acquaintance." Kai shook her hand, trying to hide his disappointment.

There were two chairs, Kai gestured to Flynn to sit beside him. Knowing the boy, he would have done it anyway. Giving the illusion Flynn was his attendant might help muddy the water.

"Can I offer you something to drink? Or eat?" She offered a tray of sweets.

"I'd love o—" Kai grabbed Flynn's arm to stop him.

"We're fine, thank you." He said while his companion pouted in silence.

The merchant knew more about him than Kai knew about her. He couldn't lower his guard this easily. She might still be a pirate in hiding after all. Scanning her with Mana Sense bore no result, or better, it made no sense. Her mana network looked clouded and bent in strange shapes.

Another cloaking technique. I should have studied the old book Dora gave me more.

There had been no point wasting time on that at the estate, visiting a town changed his priorities. Despite the enforcer he met during the registration process telling him only people with something to hide cloaked their grades, the reality was far different. Ironically the biggest group was among the Republic's officials, around a third had sent back confounding results. A significant share of tourists and many merchants did too.

Kai deactivated his skill. He might be able to pierce the veil given time and attention. However, the more focus he put the easier it was for someone to perceive his touch. Uncovering merchant Terla's grades was to satisfy his curiosity more than anything else. It wasn't worth the risk of offending her.

They had some small talk. There was no condescension in the woman's tone because of his age. Apparently, green hair was a defining feature of the natives of the Shattered Isles. Kai

had a vague idea of what it was. Before he could extract more information, an attendant carried five small wooden boxes and left them on the table between them.

A crafty glint shone in the quiet merchant's eyes. "It wasn't easy, but I managed to find all the goods your master ordered. The pollens of an aqua lotus is extremely hard to source in this season, to not even mention the dried essence of a storm eel or roots of—"

Kai had no idea what any of those materials were, let alone their market price. No doubt it was all part of Elijah's challenge.

Luckily it's not my problem. Here goes the power of delegation!

"Flynn." With a glance, Kai let the boy take over the negotiations. Merchant Terla's eyes shifted between them, quickly switching her pitch to the other boy. All Kai had to do was sit back and watch.

The fact Elijah might want him to gain experience dealing with a merchant had crossed his mind. With no details given, it was up to his interpretation. Completing his tasks in the most efficient way possible was also a reasonable interpretation. He couldn't be good at everything, Kai couldn't imagine Elijah disagreeing with delegating a task to someone more capable.

If Flynn was a tenth as good as he proclaimed, Kai would learn as much from seeing him at work against a merchant, while also getting a better deal. Given he would pay the boy based on how much money he helped him save, Kai was confident Flynn would not hold anything back.

The mask of the friendly lady next door rapidly fell away as the negotiations proceeded. Their voices rose more heated as numbers were thrown around. Kai considered himself a decent haggler, but he never particularly enjoyed the tedious back and forth. Especially when he was outmatched—and few people were worse than a professional merchant.

What he *really* liked the most was saving money. If he could do that without lifting a finger, all the better. Observing from the sidelines was fun too. Flynn seemed determined to save till the last chip. Kai got himself comfortable in his chair.

Is this what it's like having people do all the work for you while you stand back and relax?

Half an hour of a sweaty shouting match later, they walked out of the residence with their goods. The final price had been 9 silver mesars, 21 coppers and 70 chips out of their budget of 12 silvers. Even knowing butler must have given him some wiggle room with the money, Kai felt pretty good about it. Elijah wasn't *that* generous.

Flynn was loudly munching on some sweets he somehow snatched from Terla at some point.

Noticing his gaze, the boy possessively put his hand over the stash in his pocket. "I'm not sharing." His words came out mumbled due to all the candies he stuffed in his mouth.

Kai rolled his eyes. “Good job.”

“Oh... Thanks.” Flynn swallowed the sweets. “I had to uphold my honor as the greatest haggler the world has ever seen!”

Kai smiled at his megalomaniac friend, “Then I guess, I won’t need to pay you. What are some dirty, cold coins compared to the glory?”

“I mean... if it was just for me, but my six little sisters caught a cold last night. I could really use a little change.”

Kai extended an empty hand, hinting at his stolen sweets.

“You could have taken your own,” Flynn grumbled, putting a single pink sugar cube in his hand. Kai gave him a long look, reciprocating with a single copper chip.

“This isn’t what we agreed.”

“We agreed you’d be paid at the end. Still, one merchant to go. This was for the candy.”

“Even that sugar cube was worth more than that.”

“Maybe in a shop, but I have to take into consideration the risk of buying stolen goods.” Kai put the pink cube in his mouth leaving behind a fuming Flynn.

Mhmm. Raspberry. I should have taken a handful too.

After some dramatic protest, and a few tears, the best haggler in the world accepted Kai would not budge and hurried towards their final destination. Merchant Revhani had arrived yesterday night, so they were hoping to find him near the docks.

The two kids made their way through the swarm of people that filled the streets. Asking around they found the *Prospera*—the vessel on which the merchant sailed—and tracked down the owner near a warehouse.

They were discussing with a grouchy sailor to warn their captain when an unexpected voice sounded behind them.

“Long time no see, Kai.”

Turning around, a young merfolk was strolling towards him with a white pointy smile. The passersby spared him a few glances before continuing their way.

“Reishi.”

The merchant's smile widened. "What are you doing here, my friend? You know, competent *apothecaries* are very scarce. Your skills must have grown even more from last time. What do you think about another commission, I promise you won't lose out."

Flynn did mention something about merfolk this morning. With all the nonsense the boy spouted, he had not given it much thought.

Should have known it was him, there must not be many mermen in the archipelago.

"Unfortunately, I have to leave Sylspring soon after I complete my master's tasks. Maybe some other time." Kai meant it. Last time things got a bit wild, but he also made good money. It would be nice to have some coin of his own again.

"Are you sure you can't spare a week or just a few days?"

Kai shook his head. "Sorry."

"That's too bad. I guess it can't be helped. What are you doing in front of my warehouse?"

"Your—"

"Master Reishi," a large man dressed in excessive layers of red silk hurried from the warehouse, his triple chin bouncing with each step.

"Is that kid bothering you? What are you doing just standing there? Help master Reishi!" The man yelled at the grouchy sailor who observed the whole exchange in silence.

"Kai's my guest, Revhani." The merman said with an unexpected authoritative tone, then sighed lowering his voice to a whisper. "You can't imagine how hard it is to find competent people around here."

"My apologies, master Reishi. I—"

"It doesn't matter. Let's go inside. Do you have time for some tea and a chat, Kai?"

"Actually I had business with merchant Revhani."

Guess I might squeeze in a discount with a bit of luck.

"Oh..." Reishi exclaimed in realization. "Should have guessed it was for you. Who else would have ordered a Water sphere in the archipelago."