

Chapter 98 - Competition

The price on the bulk of his potions was quickly settled. Their common effects gave them a clear market value in the archipelago.

Contrary to most other merchants, Reishi wore no enchantments to mask his mana veins. His profession proudly showed as red, while his race had climbed up to Orange ★★★. No doubt another ploy to draw people into a false sense of complacency. The merman made most higher-tier merchants look like clumsy children when negotiating a deal.

“Forty-six silvers and nine coppers. I can’t go any higher, and I’m buying at a loss,” Reishi said with a pained expression.

Kai could tell the merman wasn’t lying—on his willingness to go higher at least. He was certainly not going to lose any money.

“That’s less than last time,” Kai frowned. Even if the price wouldn’t budge, he didn’t want to let the merfolk think he had gone soft.

A few years back, he’d have considered forty-six silvers an absurd amount of money. Almost half a gold! That was before spending time in Sylspring. Even outside poshtown—which was a different world in itself—prices were rapidly rising.

That amount of silver was more than he had ever earned before, the result of almost half a year of work. There was also the price of the crafting materials to consider. If Dora didn’t let him use the plants they cultivated in the garden, the cost would be much steeper. Even then, Dora also needed those herbs for her work, and not every plant was present in the garden in sufficient quantities. Some he foraged in the jungle, others he had to buy.

“I remember last time all the prices were at least 10% higher. And they had already dropped from the time before.” Kai complained. He had made sure to check a few shops before coming here. Alchemical products seemed to have taken another hit, especially the basic potions.

“Sorry, Kai, this is just how the market goes. Healing remedies prices have fallen a lot recently,” Reishi lay back on the couch with a tired sigh. “You aren’t the only alchemist on the archipelago anymore. Just in the last couple of months, three more have arrived in Higharbor, I heard. None produces anywhere near Drof’s output, but there are quite a lot of them.”

Kai cursed under his breath. First, this Drof appeared out of nowhere two years ago and began to crank out industrial quantities of cheap potions. And now these newcomers started sprouting up like poisonous mushrooms after a rainy day.

He still remembered fondly when the only alchemists on Yanlun were those contracted to the Republic. They sold little on the open market and only expensive high-grade potions. They disdained the low-end market where Kai made most of his money.

Spirits help me, it's an infestation! They have the whole continent for themselves, why do they have to come here?

Reishi sipped from a cup of tea with a quiet calm. “It was only a matter of time before someone from the mainland would catch on the void in the market and jump to fill it.”

“I know,” Kai pouted.

I just didn't think it would happen so soon. I thought I'd have a few good years.

His fingers fiddled with an empty glass vial. The gravy train was coming to an end. There was nothing he could do about it.

“Come now, it’s not as bad as you think,” Reishi waved away his worries. “The prices will stabilize soon. With the margins getting thinner, they can’t go much lower. And trust me, none of the new alchemists can afford to sell at a loss to undercut the competition. Apart from Dorf maybe, but we have an understanding.”

Kai narrowed his eyes suspiciously, “Is *Dorf* supplying you too?”

Reishi shrugged, “I like you, Kai. But while the quality of your potions is excellent, your quantities can’t keep up with the demand. I need to turn a profit to pay my employees.”

Betrayal stabbed his heart. Kai pressed his lips shut before he said something he would regret. Reishi was right, of course. He ran a mercantile enterprise, not a charity. He couldn’t abandon a market just to avoid hurting Kai’s feelings. And yet, it still burned.

“Does it *really* have to be *Dorf*?” That man had been the bane of his existence. The harbinger who signed the beginning of the end, cutting into his profits. Some of his products had even reached Sylspring. Despite never having met him, Kai had grown a personal dislike for the man.

“He’s the one with the best quality and quantities,” Reishi gave him an apologetic smile.

Of course, he is... Damned Dorf. What kind of name is that?

With only the scraps of time left from his training and no profession, Kai would never be able to compete. Swallowing his annoyance, he nodded to Reishi. “Don’t worry. I understand.”

“If you want some advice,” the merchant began tentatively, waiting for his tacit approval before continuing.

“For now, the foreign alchemists all stay in Higharbor. It’s not a surprise really. The city alone makes up about a third of the economy of the archipelago. It’s the biggest market by far, and the easiest place to find raw materials.”

Kai didn’t let his surprise show, curious about where Reishi was going with this. The merman made it seem like those facts were common knowledge. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sylspring didn’t even have a newspaper, and the only source of information was word of mouth and hearsay.

“Moving goods around the Archipelago isn’t easy, for most people that is,” Reishi continued with a proud smirk. “By staying holed up in Higharbor, where there is an excess of supply, their potions lose value. You have a great advantage in Sylspring by cutting travel costs.” The merman leaned forward, Kai could almost see mesar signs in his eyes.

“Sure, someone will connect the dots sooner or later and try to move out. But if you establish your presence here now, customers tend to stick with what they know.”

Reishi reined the excitement back in. “At least that’s what I do.”

I think I can see why you became a merchant...

Kai nodded thoughtfully. He couldn’t find any fault with Reishi’s reasoning, there were just a few logistical problems. “I’ll think about it. But if I were to sell locally, wouldn’t it make more sense to cut you out?”

The merman laughed, “Yeah, you’re right. Guess I let my mouth run faster than my brain. I let myself get carried away.”

Kai gave him a long look. “To follow your plan, I would need to brew enough potions to satisfy Sylspring’s market and get into local distribution.” He looked into the merman’s pale eyes observing his reaction. “I don’t have the time or connections to do that.”

“I guess we’re stuck with each other, then. It must be fate.” The hint of a smile appeared on the merchant’s thin blue lips.

Yeah, as if you hadn’t thought of that already. Should have known it. You never make such blunders.

“Do we have a deal for the forty-six silvers?” The merchant said, hinting at the price they had been discussing.

“And nine coppers,” Kai specified before accepting his cold hand.

“Naturally, that’s what I meant.”

“Sure you did.”

Two servants were summoned to take away the boxes containing the results of months of work. Kai listened to the jiggle of silver coins falling into his bag with great satisfaction. Despite the fall in prices, he had still earned more money than some people saw in their lifetime.

But most islanders don’t live in such an expensive town or plan to travel to the mainland, a small voice in his head reminded.

“We can get to the fun stuff now,” Reishi wasted no time, eager to get his palmed and scaly hands on the remaining potions.

Less than a tenth was left from the original pile. An assortment of the most rare and peculiar concoctions. Elixirs that affected the mind and mana, the highest-grade salves and poisons he could brew, and one-of-a-kind experiments.

They were the most costly in terms of both raw ingredients and time. They also sported the biggest number of failed tries before he managed to produce a functioning product without severe side effects.

The haggling resumed. There were no local market prices to use as a basepoint for most of the potions, which meant he could make a killing or lose a ton of money. Treading into uncharted waters, it soon became clear Kai wasn’t the predator but the prey.

He had gotten his fair share of experience negotiating, but he couldn't delude himself. There was no chance he would beat an experienced merchant with a profession. At best, he would recoup the costs for the ingredients and his time.

Despite their supposed friendship, Reishi showed him no mercy in the continuous back and forth. Mana Sense caught strange pulses in the ambient essence, probably the trace of an unknown skill. He had no idea what it did or how to counter it, but Danger Sense showed no reaction.

The merman weaved together dramatical and reasonable claims until Kai had no idea what to believe. Even when the merman reluctantly conceded, Kai suspected it was all a way to dupe him.

"So that's sixteen silvers and thirty-eight coppers," Reishi shook his hand with a radiant smile. "Wasn't that fun? Have you ever considered trying as a merchant? You are a natural."

Kai responded with a strained smile. That had not been fun, at all. It was like fighting an uphill battle with only one certainty: you couldn't win, just minimize your losses.

Spirits' mercy, this was exhausting.

"You couldn't have gone easier on me?" Kai complained.

"Nah, what would be the fun in that? You should take it as a compliment. Not many can go toe to toe with a merfolk merchant and not lose terribly."

"Thanks..."

Toe to toe. Sure.

The words echoed through his thoughts with a simple and clear implication. His exhausted mind couldn't help but replay the negotiations thinking what he could have done differently.

Nope, I'm done! Next time I'll call Flynn to deal with this.

The sparkling silver coins helped raise his mood a little.

I brewed those potions to improve my Alchemy, everything I get on top is just a bonus.

Reframing the events helped somewhat. It would have been much easier to hang on to the idea if Reishi didn't look so radiant.

"Do you want to stay for lunch?"

"Thank you, I'm fine."

"Your loss, I wouldn't even have charged you for the meal."

How generous of you.

"Maybe next time, I need to get some air."

"I look forward to the potions you'll bring next time," Reishi waved him goodbye.

Out on the streets with a bag full of silver, Kai felt marginally better. His stomach grumbled demanding to be fed.

Conscious of the small fortune he was carrying, Kai kept to the main streets, a healthy dose of paranoia kicking in. Danger Sense reassured him people weren't staring longer than usual, even if it felt like it. The presence of patrolling enforcers reassured him and made him feel ashamed a moment later.

His eyes darted over the passersby. All his senses tensed to notice anything out of the ordinary. When a presence tried to sneak on him, he reacted without a second thought. Water mana was already condensing when he recognized the face.

"Ahi! That was uncalled for!" Flynn massaged his arm. "You've gotten even more violent since the last time we met. Is this how you greet your dearest friend?"

"Why did you try to sneak up on me? I'm just— Nevermind," Kai said. "I'm sorry if I overreacted. How have you been?"

The little thief wasn't so little anymore. Flynn was in the middle of a growth spurt, towering a head and a half over him with his lanky frame. Casual clothes hid his wiry frame. The cunning green eyes remained the same he remembered, as did the messy brown hair. Just a tad less disheveled than he remembered.

"I'm a merciful friend, so I'll forgive you this time," Flynn said, right as he punched him in the shoulder. "See, now we're even."

Kai took the hit without a sound and a good quick flare of Empower. Thankfully the last specialization focused on improving his endurance.

A trace of disappointment at his lack of reaction flashed through Flynn's eyes.

"Did you get your profession?" Kai asked. That punch carried much more strength than it should have.

A wide smile appeared on Flynn's face. "Of course, I did. My little sister was extremely impressed with what I got. Suffering through all those boring lessons was worth something after all."

Under Kai's Mana Sense, bright mana channels revealed the undeniable proof of a red profession and an Orange ★ race. He could see Flynn's ego already blowing up to obscure the sun, eagerly waiting for his questions and envy.

Kai turned around, "We can catch up later. Now I'm busy."

"What are you carrying in that bag to make you so tense?" he inquired, staring at it curiously.

"Just the usual supplies."

"You got a payday, didn't you?"

Dammit.

"Keep your voice down," Kai hissed, throwing suspicious looks over his shoulder.

"Wow, it must have been a big one." Flynn's eyes sparkled. "Bigger than last time?"

Kai grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him down the street. "Be quiet."

"Fine, but you're buying me dinner."

"Deal. Just shut up. And I expect you to share some information too."