

Chapter 121 - Starting a Business

“I can’t focus on the brewing process standing on a chair,” Kai anticipated the objection. “And putting the cauldron on the floor would be too low.”

Alchemy required careful and precise movements. Manipulating his mana over such a large cauldron would already cause a lot of headaches, if he couldn’t even maneuver around it, this was never going to work.

“I think we can cut the table legs to make it your height,” Reishi said after a minute of contemplation.

“Do you have a saw and the expertise? An alchemy worktable needs to be perfectly even.” He tapped his fingers on the polished stone layer protecting the wood. “We might as well buy another one or make an expert modify this one.”

It wouldn’t have been a problem if you warned me.

Kai fought hard not to say that out loud. It couldn’t be a coincidence the merman hadn’t mentioned this metal monstrosity. Now Reishi could only blame himself.

“Well, you can familiarize yourself with the recipes using the smaller one,” the merchant relented. “I didn’t expect you to immediately start production with this one anyway.”

“Huh... I—” Indeed, that made sense. Even Improvisation couldn’t give him any *reasonable* objection. “I’ll need time to get used to the new equipment.”

“Perfect, I was thinking we could begin with this...” Reishi took out a notebook to show him a recipe. The deal had moved so rapidly that they had only agreed on the general idea.

Kai skimmed through the herbs and processing required, the actual brewing seemed easy enough. It was a simple red hemostatic balm to stop bleeding wounds. It didn't get more basic than this. If they were aiming to sell to the lower share of the market, cheap common goods would be the go-to.

I shouldn't cheer before knowing how big the batches are. If he expects me to brew two dozen at once, it won't be as easy.

"I can do this," he nodded.

Reishi gave a glance, expecting him to say more, but Kai kept his thoughts to himself. The hours of work would be counted based on an estimate of their competitors in Higharbor. He would have to rely on Reishi's honesty since his experience was limited to himself and Dora.

Until the specifics were decided, Kai preferred not to hype or downplay his Alchemy to avoid influencing him.

Business is business. I'll verify his claims later.

"What else did you have in mind?"

Accepting his silence, Reishi showed him ten different recipes. They had common and useful effects for the most part.

"Do I really need to make a perfume and a skin moisturizer?"

"It's a de-aging serum, actually."

"Yeah, right." Looking at the ingredient list, that was unlikely to be an accurate description.

“It sells well with tourists, and it’s a new untapped market on the archipelago. Can you brew it?”

“It isn’t really my expertise,” Kai perused the papers. “But yes, I should be able to.”

The grand art of alchemy reduced to create low-tier beauty products. Such disgrace.

Discussing the quantities, he would have to produce took till noon. How much did higher quality end product matter? What about testing time and experimenting?

Reishi’s demands were somewhat reasonable. Kai got the impression the merman thought he would struggle to keep up with the other professional alchemists, forcing him to work more than twenty-four hours.

Kai was confident in his abilities to be on par, though he couldn’t be certain before trying. Mass production wasn’t something he ever attempted in these quantities.

Worst case scenario it will be decent training. It’s a win-win.

He might change his mind if he was forced to work for whole days back-to-back, but he wanted to keep a positive outlook. When Reishi agreed to divide his week into three days of eight hours, the task ahead looked reasonable.

Yeah, that’s what they’ll write on my tombstone: ‘he thought it was reasonable’.

With the specifics settled, Reishi said goodbye and Kai took an awaited lunch break. He bought an overpriced Sandwich in one of the nearby shops. He couldn’t tell what the juicy meat and purple veggie were, but they tasted *almost* good enough to justify the copper mesar he paid.

After a short visit to commission a table for his *unusual requirements*, he let the muscled twins deal with it and hurried back to his lab. The heating enchantment to the shower was done in two more hours, and he could finally move his attention to his new toys.

How many knives did an alchemist need? He usually made do with no more than three, now he found a box containing twenty-three with blades of different shapes and sharpness. And that was just a single set, there were enough for five of him. Right now, the room looked more like a shop than a lab.

How does this even work?

Kai fiddled with a strange metal contraption. He was reasonably sure it was a grind of some kind. There were dozens of tools to slice, mince and mash he had never used. He couldn't even guess how half of them worked.

No need to panic. You've been brewing potions for years. Mortar and pestle have always worked just fine.

Kai tried not to be bothered by the chaotic pile of tools around him, organizing everything properly would take time he didn't have. To not get overwhelmed, he picked some gear he was familiar with and disregarded the rest. He didn't need to figure everything out today.

Well, except for the shiny testing cauldron. That was pretty important. He cleared a workbench and placed it on top, activating the fire enchantment.

Is this how my grandpa felt using a smartphone for the first time?

With a notebook and his dad's pen ready, Kai began to tinker with the levers and buttons. Using distilled water and pseudo-mana herbs, he closely observed how every enchantment influenced the materials.

One by one, he wrote down and confirmed his hypothesis. Most of the runes influenced the temperature of the solution in different ways, one knob on top altered the mana conductivity of the cauldron, and another prevented the fumes from rising over the edge.

It was going to take weeks to get used to the new functions and integrate them into his brewing process. But he should be able to prepare basic potions without embarrassing himself.

Good enough for a non-workday.

Kai cleaned the cauldron, dinner would be ready soon.

“What are you doing here? Is the new table already done?” Improvisation took over as one of the twins surprised him outside his lab. His green hair looked almost black in the falling light, but Kai recognized the thin scar on his chin.

“No, I’m just guarding the place.”

I guess they weren’t just hired laborers after all. That would explain the yellow profession.

He didn’t need a babysitter, alas the man didn’t work for him. And he was probably guarding the alchemy equipment and mana herbs as much as him. His words were ‘*guarding the place*’, not him.

The building and most of what was inside belonged to the Reishi. Since the twins respected his boundaries, Kai couldn’t really fault the merman for safeguarding his investment.

“How long have you been standing here?”

The guy shrugged. “Six or seven hours.”

“You could have come inside.”

“I didn’t want to bother your work.”

Kai suppressed a sigh, was this a cultural thing? Something told him this wasn’t the last time he would see him. “What’s your name? You must already know mine.”

Something akin to surprise but not quite flashed in his eyes. “Jiro.”

“Well, Jiro, next time you can knock. Are you going to stay the night too?”

“My brother is going to take over in a few hours.”

“You can both guard from inside.” Kai threw his keys into the air forcing him to catch them.

“This isn’t appropriate.”

“Why, are you going to steal something?” Kai raised an eyebrow.

Jiro managed to look both appalled and offended, “I would never—”

“Then you can sit on my couch. Not like the lab could get any messier, and poshtown is as safe as it gets.” Before Jiro could say anything, Kai slipped away.

I should talk to Reishi about open communication. That fish is too fond of surprises.

Jiro opened the door of his lab with the first knock. He put the keys into his hand without a word.

“Please, don’t do that again.”

“Shouldn’t you have the key to the place you guard?”

“I— Those aren’t my orders.”

“I’ll talk with Reishi and get you a copy,” Kai shook his head and walked past him. “Hmm... did you tidy up the place?”

All the empty boxes and crates had been arranged in the corner of the room, while every type of tool and glassware had been neatly disposed on the tables. Even the floors looked unusually lustrous.

“You said it was messy,” he awkwardly looked at his feet. “I apologize if I overstep my boundaries. I can swear on my name, I didn’t touch the caldrons.”

This guy needs to relax.

Kai would have joked about how he was *terribly* offended that Jiro had the gall to clean up his mess. From the deeply worried look of the man, that would be poorly received.

“It’s fine. I appreciate the gesture.” He still needed to find a place for every glass tube and knife but it was a start. The tidier place immediately improved his mood.

“What are these books?”

Two small volumes with a black cover rested beside his testing cauldron. He didn't remember Reishi showing him these yesterday.

“I believe those are the instruction manuals for the two cauldrons. I found them in their boxes.”

“Oh, I see.” Kai prayed the man didn't notice his ears heating up. “Who reads those anyway, am I right? Does Reishi have a preferred recipe to start with in particular?”

I need to level Improvisation faster.

Jiro helpfully presented him with a long list of recipes. Part of the contract stated he couldn't share them with anyone else without the merman's express permission. Naturally, the potion Reishi wanted him to brew first was the *de-aging serum*.

Might as well get it out of the way.

“Can you bring the necessary herbs?” When Kai offered him the page with the ingredients, the man looked hesitant. “You are going to observe what I do and report it to Reishi, might as well make yourself useful.”

Jiro didn't deny it. Without uttering a word, he grabbed the paper and disappeared into the backroom used for storage.

About what I expected.

Mixing trust and friendship with money was often a recipe for disaster. He was more comfortable with the freedom of no boundaries when it came to business. He wouldn't take

well if Reishi tried to outright rip him off, but he expected the merman to try milking him of everything he was worth.

His newly promoted attendant came back carrying a chest of various herbs. Taking out a large hourglass to keep track of the time, Kai snapped his finger and got to work. They had agreed to only compare his daily output with the competition after he learned the recipes. It would be nearly impossible to set an average for testing time.

He started slowly for his hands to find their way around the foreign tools, speeding up as his confidence grew. These potions were high red at best. The only challenge would be to scale up production. If he performed well, he might convince Reishi to widen their repertoire to include orange products.

Kai checked the first de-aging serum against the light. It had a golden hue and the viscosity of honey. With Mana Sense and Inspect, he could detect almost no imperfections. If it wasn't peak quality, it was a step from it.

I could have been more delicate with the temperature change during the filtering. I'm still getting used to the new cauldron.

After the third attempt, the serum was as pure as he could get, so Kai moved to the next concoctions. The hours blurred together as he methodically worked through the list. At some point Jiro's brother—Jomei— had come to take over the guard duty.

Kai easily completed all ten potions before the last grain of white sand fell into the hourglass. There were about fifteen minutes left. He was wondering if he should try a batch of two when a double knock announced Reishi's arrival.

"How did it go? Any problems?"

"Does explaining to you count toward my time?" Kai moved the hourglass in front of him.

“You know we agreed to share the profits of your potions equally. The more you do, the more we both earn.”

“So... is that a yes?” Kai wiggled his eyebrows and stood in the way of his finished products.

The merman glanced at the sparse grains of sand remaining. “Sure. How many recipes did you manage to go through?”

With a grin, Kai revealed neat lines of colorful vials and flasks. Every single one of them had a bright pastel color and sweet scent. It couldn't be a coincidence they were all so pretty and inviting. It went against the philosophy of maximum effectiveness Dora taught him, but he couldn't deny its appeal.

“I did three of each type, I didn't have any problem.”

Kai began explaining each process while Reishi analyzed and tested each prototype. His eyes sparkled with greed and excitement that worried him.

“I knew betting on you was the right decision.” A wide pointy smile split his face. “I'll show my father who's the better merchant.”

Should I tell him this was nothing much...? Nah. Spirits only know how he would react, he already looks slightly unhinged.

Kai could already imagine waking up to find himself chained in a basement. Luckily, they were friends, or he would start worrying for real.

“What about increasing our deal to another day? I can offer an additional 5% of the profits. I'd take care of everything else, you just have to come here and brew.”

“Maybe next year. And an eight-hour shift is already pushing my limit.”

My limit of boredom for sure.

“What about 6%?” Reishi said with a supplicant expression.

“I won’t change my mind no matter how much you offer.”

The merman looked about to argue when he took a step back and lost the crazy glint in his eye. “You’re right. I apologize for insisting.”

“It’s fine.”

As long as this doesn’t repeat every time.

“Well, you better get back to work. I think you still have ten minutes in the hourglass.” Making the prototypes disappear into a bag, Reishi waved him goodbye. “I’ll see you tomorrow, nice work!”

Kai rolled his eyes.

I wonder who’s the most shameless.

The first batch of two was a success, though he definitely spent more mana than necessary.

I even gained a level in Alchemy. The first milestone doesn’t feel so unreachable anymore.

Work proceeded smoothly the next day. Increasing the quantities presented new hurdles, but he wasn't a newbie. Dealing with the unexpected was the cornerstone of alchemy. And after completing batches of five or six, the reactions were just more of the same.

It was on the morning of the third day when something unforeseen happened. He had a weird feeling.

Did I overwork myself?

He walked down the main street to his lab when Captain Zerith appeared in his way. His usual sunny air was absent.

"Did your master leave the archipelago?"