

Chapter 245 - Trust

“Of course I trust you.” Kai looked at the scaly features of the merman, taken aback by his sudden seriousness. Despite never having spent much time together, Reishi was one of his oldest friends and had always done right by him.

The merfolk leaned back in his chair, covering his face with a webbed hand. “You’re unbelievable,” he mumbled with a reluctant smile.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Do you have any idea how much all of this is worth?” Reishi waved at the bounty of mana treasures. “Without mentioning the stuff still in your *spatial ring*.”

“I don’t know,” Kai shrugged. “Probably a lot of money?” Enough that even a trip to the gilded villas in the capital’s upper city wouldn’t change his mind.

Reishi grabbed onto the edge of the mahogany desk—he might have slammed his head on the lacquered surface if a pink gem wasn’t occupying that space. “It’s not just a lot, Kai. I could double my fortune overnight. I’ve only seen most of these items in dusty old tomes.”

Hmm... Guess I'm proper rich then.

Even if he only sold a part of his hoard, money wouldn’t be an issue for a *long* while. “I really appreciate you helping me to sell them.” The merman would undoubtedly make more if he bought them directly; it wasn’t as if Kai could go to anyone else. “You know I can still give you forty percent?”

“I don’t want more mesars!” Reishi glowered at him, then took a sharp breath. “*Kai*.” He uttered the word like a curse, lacing his fingers to keep his hands still. “This is the type of money most people kill for. Depths! I could hire a fourth-layer assassin and be spoiled for choice. The Republic wouldn’t even come looking for me since you’re officially dead!”

You really thought this through, huh? Though if you had any nefarious intentions, you wouldn't be telling me this.

He wished Hobbes still sat in his lap for a distraction. Alas, the furball had blinked away after receiving his daily dose of belly rubs. “I guess it’s good that I came to you first, uh?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty damn *excellent*!” Reishi’s elbow hit the armrest of his seat. Swallowing a pained curse, he pointed a sharp finger at his nose. “I forbid you from speaking about this! The Republic will be the least of your problems if anyone else gets a whiff of how much wealth you’re carrying.”

“I can take care of myself.” Kai pursed his lips. “And I’m no fool. I’ll know the moment anyone thinks of harming me.”

The merman held his gaze, the fire gradually replaced by worried patience. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say you're stupid. But you *are* ignorant. You have no idea what the world is like outside the archipelago. I've seen bandits murder for a fistful of silvers. For this much gold? Even honest people will be tempted to push aside their morals."

The anguished honesty in Reishi's pale blue eyes doused Kai's mood. "*Please*, trust me. No matter what skills you have, there will always be someone out there with a counter that you won't be able to predict."

Well... he knows more of the world than me.

"I won't let anyone suspect a thing."

"Good. Now we need to decide what to do with your goods."

Kai scratched his earlobe. "Can't you hold on to them till you find a buyer and pay me back?"

"Haven't you been listening to me?" The merman said, clearly exasperated. "I will have to look deep into the mainland to find appropriate buyers, and that will take time. You can't just *give* them to me."

"Hmm... It's not that I don't follow. But why not, *exactly*?"

Reishi slumped in his armchair, his colorful crest wobbling. "Because you don't just give a barrel of gold to someone and trust them to bring it back."

"I assumed there would be a contract."

"Yes, with someone who's officially dead. How do you think that will go over in front of a judge? Contracts are worthless without laws to uphold them."

Hmm... being dead will be a bigger problem than I imagined.

"Well, Reishi." Kai nailed the merman with his gaze, channeling the intensity Moui and Flynn had made fun of him for. "Are you going to rob me?"

Reishi gulped, wide-eyed. "No, but—"

"Do you pinky swear?" He extended his little finger like a dagger. The merfolk looked baffled by the request, but still shook it mutely after some prodding.

Kai fought to keep his face in a stoic composure. "See, I have little to worry about then." Without Improvisation, the corner of his mouth curved upward the slightest amount. Reishi didn't seem to notice. He stared on blankly, looking like he wasn't even breathing.

Ehm... Did I break him? How do I restart a merman? A splash of seawater or a cup of tea?

"I said that I trust you. What else is there to add?"

Reishi finally blinked. "I see..." He took out ink and paper from a drawer, drafting a contract with mechanical movements. "The Republic holds a monopoly on soul paper and gems, but we can sign this in the name of House Tajira, to which my family belongs. I'll be disowned and banned from returning to Kesyu if I dishonor the name."

"Okay..." Kai bobbed his head, though he only understood half of what the merman had said. If this helped Reishi rest easy, he was more than happy to go along. "Where do I need to sign? After *carefully* reading each word, of course." His grin received a pointy scowl.

"Blessed Waters, please don't joke about that. I can feel my scales turning gray and craggy, I've already lost a decade from this conversation. I should charge you for that."

"Please do."

The merman gritted his pointy teeth. "I hate you."

"Then you should rob me."

Reishi flared a deeper shade of blue, holding his quill as if he were ready to stab him. "I'll need a few minutes to add up the items and their estimated price." He furiously scribbled in the only free corner of the table.

If I knew it were so easy, I would have teased him more. Wait... am I a bad person...?

Kai cheerfully waited for the merchant to finish. Hallowed Intuition had been silent since entering the cabin, there hadn't been the slightest bit of harm contemplated.

Before coming here, he had considered that the merman might rip him off, but there wasn't anyone else who could buy his bounty. He had wanted to test the merchant's response with the first three treasures. Now guilt jabbed him for his doubts, only beaten by his elation. Despite the years without seeing each other, Reishi had proved their friendship was stronger than adamant or money.

"Here." Reishi thrust two copies of the contract on a wooden clipboard.

"Thank you." Kai made a show of attentively reading each line of text. His brows climbed higher and higher; he went through the last clause three times.

Did I misunderstand something? One. Zero. Zero. Zero. And zero.

"This says you owe me ten thousand gold mesars in case of breach of contract or loss of the entrusted goods." Kai gaped. "That can't be right. It's ridiculous."

Reishi remained poised in his armchair, unruffled and almost amused. “That’s a conservative estimate for the entire lot, though it doesn’t take into consideration my cut if I sell. Were you not listening when I appraised every item?”

“I— Yes, but...” The numbers thrown around had been *hypothetical*, and he hadn’t done the necessary math to add them together. Perhaps he understood why Reishi had been so peeved. “I appreciate your help and honesty.”

What else could he say?

The pale blue scales blazed into a new shade. “Just sign at the bottom if you agree. I feel anxious each second that these treasures remain in your hands.”

Yessir!

Kai added his full name and handed back one of the copies.

After meticulously studying the document, Reishi nodded to himself. “All right. Now we need to store this stuff. I don’t trust my crew enough for this, and there are a few new faces.” He walked to the painting of a verdant meadow and tapped the carved wooden frame in seven different points.

Iridescent motes fluttered over the canvas as wooden boards clicked open on an invisible seam. The magical mechanism revealed a long and narrow room that shouldn’t have existed; it ran along the wall of the cabin, brimming with cloaking and protection enchantments. The entrance was just wide enough for a single person to walk comfortably inside, housing rows of shelves with all kinds of curious goods.

“You don’t seem surprised.” The merman glanced over his shoulder with a disappointed sulk. “How did you know?”

“Hmm, I’ve dabbled in Space Magic.”

“That damn artificer promised me even Space warpers wouldn’t notice a thing.” He scowled. “Just wait there.”

A metallic clank echoed from inside, and Reishi reappeared with a heavy chest in his arms. Without a free surface, he heaved it on his chair and opened the lid to reveal rows upon rows of gleaming gold arranged inside.

“That’s...” A smaller compartment caught Kai’s attention in the top right corner. Thirteen strange coins lay on a red velvet compartment, each glowed with dense mana he had only seen in beasts.

Another type of mesar?

The glossy metal came in shades of orange and yellow. Both types of coins carried the soaring hawk of the Merian Republic, though he had never heard of any denomination more valuable than gold. “What are they?”

“Six hundred mesars, ten orange chromium and three yellow. That’s all I can afford to pay you as an advance per the agreement you *just* signed.”

“*Chromium?*”

“Yes, the most commonly used currency for trade between landbound kingdoms. It’s peculiar because the metal can be found at each grade and reflects the humans’ color system.” Reishi offered him two chromium coins. “The red variety isn’t minted since it has about the same value as gold, while orange and yellows are worth ten and one hundred golds respectively. I’m not surprised you haven’t seen them in the archipelago. They aren’t practical to use for most transactions.”

Kai scrunched his brows at the metal coins; he could feel the essence thrumming under his fingers. The orange one was slightly larger, probably to account for its actual market price. He was holding a hundred and ten gold mesars in his hands. The absurd amount of wealth didn’t compute in his brain.

What would you even buy with that much money? A villa in the upper city?

“Chromium is used for a myriad of crafting purposes since it’s naturally mana dense and self-replenishing in the right conditions. That’s part of its value and why it’s so widely accepted throughout the Talthen continent.” Reishi explained with a toothy grin, looking pleased to have left Kai speechless. “Naturally, it’s best you don’t use it if you can avoid it. Flashing it around will attract the wrong type of attention.”

Kai numbly nodded.

Spirits, I’m loaded! Flynn and Ele will have a heart attack when they see this.

“Why don’t you store your advance and help me lock away this gorgeous mess.” Reishi snapped his fingers to the lacquered desk overflowing with mana treasures.

“I— yes.” Kai made the coins disappear into his ring. “What do you need me to do?”

“Hmm...” Reishi looked at the spatial artifact with a pinch of envy. “Did you also obtain that during your *disappearance?*”

“This? It was a parting gift from Elijah.”

“That man? He didn’t look very sentimental. My father was terrified of him.”

“You met him?”

“Only once.” Reishi brushed the matter aside. “Anyway, I have yet to buy a spatial artifact, and some of these herbs require proper storage to not spoil. Like the old fish always said, time is money and our wealth is depreciating.”

The next few hours flew by as they scoured the cabin and spatial closet for suitable containers. The merman wasn’t amused by the variety of hides, stone jars and coconuts Kai had used.

They worked just fine with a pinch of Nature Magic.

“You’re just envious your fancy enchanted bottles can’t compete. And why do you even need a glass jar to store a rock?”

“That’s an Air-attuned quartz, and they’re incredibly delicate,” Reishi grumbled. “It’s a mystery how you didn’t shatter it with your crude manners.” He deposited his flashy box inside the vault. The meadow painting *clicked* back into place, sealing any trace of the passage.

“Everything is finally safe.” Reishi slumped back in his armchair and massaged his temples. “Remember, I’ll need time to find appropriate buyers or a reputable auction house.”

My wealth is in safe hands.

Kai flattened his cheek with his palms, jaw hanging open in a dramatic display of shock. “How am I supposed to survive with *only* a thousand gold? Do you want me to starve? I will only be able to afford ten villas. And I wanted twelve!”

“Don’t be an ass.” Reishi shot him a dirty look. “This is a serious matter. I’ll stay in the archipelago for a couple of months to look after my affairs as planned. Your goods may attract attention, and I don’t want to leave a trail of pink shells back to you.”

“See, why do I need to be serious when I have you to take care of everything?” He smiled at the grumpy merman. “You know I appreciate your efforts in keeping me alive. And for not robbing me blind and dumping my body in the ocean.”

“I’m already regretting that decision,” he said dryly.

“Hmm... it’s gotten late, I think I should go. It was nice seeing you again.”

“Wait, I’ll see you out.” Reishi halted by the door, turning to him with his scaly brow furrowed. “Kai, I’m *truly* grateful for your trust. I don’t think you understand how much this deal means to me. Your treasures will allow me to earn a foothold on the mainland and save years of work.”

“That’s what friends are for.” He pulled the merman in for a hug without holding back since they were the same grade. “You help me, and I help you without keeping tabs. Those are the best kinds of deals.”

“I guess you’re right.” The merman stood rigid in his embrace, then awkwardly patted his back. “Mhmm... Kai, can you let me go now?”

Not a hugger, duly noted.

“Yeah, sorry.” He stepped back, too embarrassed to ask if it was a merfolk thing or a Reishi thing. “I should probably leave before your crew thinks I murdered you and barges in.”

“That’s not an issue.” Reishi straightened his embroidered silk robe. “The wards in this room would attack you and alert them if I was seriously harmed.”

How does that work? Possible rune combinations swirled in his head. Next time I should ask him if I can take a peek.

“That must have cost you a fortune.”

“It did.” Reishi put his hand on the knob. “And I’m sorry that I can’t help you obtain an ID. I’ll ask around, but it’s outside my area of expertise. If you manage to create a legitimate identity, I can organize passage to the continent and help you settle there. Flynn will know how to contact me.”

“The mesars you gave me are more than enough help. I’ll find a solution.”

Someone must know how to, if I throw enough gold at the problem.

Outside the cabin, the sun was close to its zenith. A few sailors glanced at Kai, but his unusual entrance appeared to have already been forgotten.

“It was a pleasure seeing your vessel.” Kai gave a formal goodbye and accepted a ride back to shore in a dinghy rowed by two burly men.

Flynn waited for him on the pier. “I was about to sneak on the ship, looking for you,” he said as soon as the sailors were out of earshot. “What took so long? Your mom was getting worried. Wait! Tell me you didn’t sign any deals with that greedy fish.”

“I— Do you have any idea how to get an official ID?” Kai marked the question with an arched brow to underline the implications. “One that will work on the mainland.”

His friend was successfully sidetracked. “Oh, that... I thought it might be a problem...”

Kai felt his hope rise. “So... you have a solution?”

“Nope. The paper is easy to obtain if you know the right people, the issue is with the internal records of the Republic. I’ve worked in an archive for a while, and let me tell you, they *love* to track the most useless details in double copy.”

Damn bureaucracy.

“So there is no way?”

“I didn’t say that.” Flynn gave him a crooked grin. “I can’t do it, but I know someone who might. Actually, you know her too.”