

Chapter 208 - The List

The frenetic search following the beast attacks gave way to the preparations for the imminent excavation. Soldiers returned to their daily tasks while mana professionals argued over who would take the lead.

Can't wait to find out how bad of an idea this is...

It was odd to go back to the scholars after Kai had a divine revelation that shed light on the mystery. Should he drop subtle hints to lead them to the right conclusions? Or mislead them from the truth?

Under no circumstances could anyone suspect he had struck a bargain with a god. He didn't know half of what was going on with Zervathi and the Hidden Sanctuary realm, and how they fit together. The few clues he got only raised more questions.

He didn't like keeping the truth from Sonya, her head would burst with excitement if she found out about the bargain.

Her reaction would be priceless. Maybe when the Republic finds out...

"Uh, what's this?" Kai raised his eyes from the glyphs he was translating and accepted a stack of papers from Makyn. The first page was blank with a single word in blocky letters: *Restricted*. With his attention piqued, he didn't wait to leaf through the pages, his eyes widening in wonder.

"That's the *Red List* of restricted items as agreed by contract."

"I was beginning to think you had *accidentally* forgotten." It had escaped Kai's memory, though it was a welcome distraction. His attention darted through names and prices. There was an onslaught of rare potions, crafting and skill knowledge, mana ingredients, enchanted weapons and equipment. They ranged from a few silvers to more than one gold.

There was the elixir he bought for the baby. Spirits knew if he would be present for the birth. That was only weeks away now and the Republic wasn't likely to grant him leave. Hopefully, Flynn had found a way to explain his sudden disappearance to his family.

The farther away they stay from this, the better.

He buried the melancholy and scanned the information. There were a few neat items, but nothing that caught his eye—they were still red goods. Makyn had chosen to loom like a statue over him and showed no intention of leaving. "What's the last column of numbers?"

"That's the price in contribution credits, it's the internal currency of the Merian Republic rewarded for extraordinary service. Normally, you'd have to join a branch of the Republic, but you've been granted access so long as you're employed by us. You've earned thirty credits for your work with the beasts and Vastaire writings."

“Hmm... Thank you.” Kai didn’t expect to see a chip from slaying the toad, and he doubted he would if he hadn’t asked Makyn.

The soldier gave him a stiff nod. “The Republic rewards competence. The army is an opportunity to make a career even if you start from nothing.”

Oh, is this another attempt to recruit me? Well, feel free to throw me all the money you want, I won't complain.

Kai chewed his thumbnail to show how *terribly* conflicted he was. “I’ll keep that in mind.” A credit was roughly equivalent to a silver mesar, though certain items could only be purchased with them.

It was more than the fistful of dust he had expected to receive, but not a sum to leave him breathless. He halted on a page where the prices suddenly skyrocketed. He couldn’t recognize half the items listed without the brief description accompanying them. “And these are...”

“That’s a partial version of the orange list. It’s a show of good faith and trust in your capabilities. I’ll need that back when you’re done reading, you can come to me if you want to purchase anything.”

Do they think they can bribe me with their shiny trinkets? I've gotten my fill with a god, no more pact with dubious individuals till that one is solved.

“Hmm...” His eyebrows climbed up his forehead as he continued to read. While the orange list was shorter, every entry cost at least a gold with many in the tens.

There were better versions of the communication cubes Flynn had tracked down, elixirs to help train skills like Mana Sense and Swordsmanship, manuals to learn particular skills, instructions for professions...

They sure keep the good stuff for themselves. Greedy hoarders.

Kai froze on the last page. *Seed of Fire: consumable, grants minor increase to Fire affinity - 5,000 credits.* There was no price listed in mesars, not that he could have afforded to pay 50 golds. If this list was curated for him, they were trying to awe him with goods he could never afford.

I hate you all.

Makyn leaned to see what had caught his attention. “That only works to boost minor affinities and it’s more effective the lower your value is. It’s not worth buying it unless you have money to burn.”

That does make me feel marginally better. You're a terrible salesman.

The higher the affinity, the harder it was to improve. He had to bargain with a god for an elemental boost. If money could get him the same, he'd slam his head in the nearest wall. Thank the spirits, things weren't that easy,

The list continued with consumables that covered the most common elements such as Earth and Water. No Space, mercifully no Space. Kai silently cursed them anyway.

Damned bastards, the Merian Republic is on another level.

While it burned to admit, there was no point denying reality. These were the advantages of joining a large organization rubbed in his face, though only a select few might afford the benefits.

Kai was ready to put down the list when his eyes widened at the very last line. *Distilled Essence (Orange): grants 1000 XP upon first consumption - 1 gold/100 credits.* "You're kidding me! How's that even possible?"

I thought it was a myth.

"You drink it and gain a boost to progress your grade," Makyn unhelpfully provided. "The ingredients, professions and production methods are a state secret, but you might learn them one day if you join the alchemy branch."

Yeah, no thank you. I'd be surprised if they're allowed to see the sky without an army of guards.

One gold coin for 1000 XP was a steep price, even putting together every chip he had ever earned, he wouldn't get more than ten. His hands clutched the paper crumpling the edges. "Does this mean that if someone has 300 gold mesars to burn they could skip Orange ★★★?"

How's that fair? Cheating brats.

"You only gain the full benefits from the first couple of elixirs." Makyn doused the fire of injustice with his impassive tone. "They lose most of their effectiveness after twenty, and stop working after fifty."

It's completely fair then! Woe you for only getting what? Twenty-something thousand free XP? C'mon Kai, take a deep breath.... Together Orange is more than half a million, so it's not too much.

Makyn showed the slightest smile as the world crumbled around Kai, and the soldier wasn't done torturing him. "That is unless you change to a different recipe. There are other similar potions held by a few organizations and old families, though they all suffer from the same problem and are generally more expensive to make."

If only I could get my hands around your necks. I. Hate. You. All. So. Much.

“Is that how you reached yellow so young?” Kai stared daggers at him.

“I’m thirty-eight, there are many younger than me, and no. My family wasn’t that rich. I was born at the last stage of Red and climbed from there.” Makyn lowered his voice. “You should also know that using more than a couple bottles of Distilled Essence will cut the status feats you get from the Guide. Though most people don’t care much about Fate.”

That *did* make a difference for him. Kai chuckled. “You really are the worst salesman on Elydes.”

Makyn pursed his lips. “Stop speaking nonsense and tell me if you want something. I have other duties to attend to.”

“Of course, sir. You showed me these lists with no ulterior motives whatsoever.” Kai reciprocated the honesty.

“You are limited to two purchases on the orange list. And keep in mind it may take some time to receive the items.” Makyn fell into his monotone voice.

“Hmm...” Kai browsed the pages. He wasn’t short for money, but neither was floating in them. There was nothing he *needed* in the red list, his attention moved to the orange pages. Ignoring the half he couldn’t afford, it left about fifty items to consider.

What do I need...? Definitely to fulfill Zervathi’s bargain, nothing else matters if I fail.

There was a lack of manuals on how to access hidden realms and free chained gods—a truly embarrassing oversight. No information on Space Magic or dimensions either.

Two books caught his attention: *The Seven Pillars of Faith: treaty on the gods - 1 gold/100 credits*, and *The Lost Sister: a study of the effects of Fate - 2 golds/200 credits*.

What are the odds that they contain useful information besides religious preaching? I need better odds than that.

Given the steep prices and limited purchases, Kai couldn’t justify going for them. He wasn’t going to find the information he needed on the list of the Republic—at least not on the orange one.

He didn’t need a weapon either, his sea serpent sword was far better than anything on sale. It was too soon to buy the potions to discard his profession, he hadn’t made a decision yet. The alchemy and enchanting materials were also of little use since he wasn’t going to get many chances to craft.

That left a few defensive enchantments and a slew of potential potions with the most disparate effects. Kai gave the papers back to Makyn. “I’ll need some time to think about it.” No more getting pressured into hasty decisions, he could afford to wait a day or two.

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A thin drizzle covered the jungle, slipping over the tree canopies in large drops. A line of mana professions and elite soldiers marched towards the ruins, followed by a small contingent of blue uniforms led by Valela.

Kai walked somewhere in the middle. The other scholars hadn't been invited, leaving him the odd one out. The weather was pleasant to stave off the heat now that he had the elemental reserves to shield himself. For the other mages not so much. A few had water-repellent robes or rigid umbrellas, the others slumped forward, spewing complaints about lacking civilization.

Isn't Water one of the most common affinities, or is it different on the mainland?

Many Earth mages and general mana professionals were soaked like wet cats, a significant blow to their distinguished demeanor. A couple threw him scornful glances, though most didn't notice him.

Maybe they're just incompetent?

He had seen them raise houses from the ground and move boulders with a gesture, but that was all they did. While the mana researchers spent every day arguing about mana theory and occasionally shaped intricate constructs with no application.

Once Kai got beyond his initial awe, these renowned experts were a harsh downgrade from the all-powerful mage ideal in his head. Virya, Dora and Elijah had performed extraordinary feats with casual ease, and they never emptied their bag of tricks.

I know it's not a fair comparison, but they're disappointing.

Beyond the outer ring of the Vastaire site, most trees had fallen under the rampage of the beast or the axes of the laborers. A field of mud and weeds surrounded the ivory spike where the terragon had made its last stance. A rock path had been erected to give direct access to the underground chamber.

Heading into the dark tunnels, Kai couldn't get rid of his somber mood. Hallowed Intuition was silent, probably it was his dislike of destroying one of the few remaining sites. He vividly remembered the timeless towers collapsing on Yatol as a child.

I can't stop this, but I can make it worth it if I get more clues on the spatial anomalies.

He had debated whether to learn Space Magic, though it would be of little use at a low level, and he had absolutely no skill to discard. His improved affinity helped spot elemental motes, but they were still pitifully scarce outside the summoning chambers.

It'd be a slog to train, and the discard will knock me out two days unless...

The mages were setting up their equipment just outside the hall when a young researcher said something that sent them squabbling over their roles. He had seen children with more discipline. Lou walked behind him and poked with his gruff Mana Sense.

Oh, you've gotten sneaky. Though you should really work on that skill. I'll give you a few lessons for old times' sake.

Kai waited a minute before following him into a corridor. The teen led him deeper without exchanging a word till they reached a chamber covered in moss. Valela waited with Ferla at her side, the princess activated an enchanted cube that muffled the sounds and perception around them.

Does everyone have one of these now? Where's my spy gadget?

"You want to talk *now*?"

"What better time than when everyone's attention is on excavation? The mages will argue for another hour at least."

Did she set up that argument?

Valela scrunched her brows. "Are you alright? My offer to get you out still stands."

"I'm fine and dandy." Kai hid his worries behind a grin. "I simply wish we'd be more cautious with the excavation. I thought these mages would be more skilled. What's the point of their silk robes and shiny tools if their solution is to blow things up?"

"If only..." Valela gave him a half-smile. "Do you know what defines a *mage*?"

"Hmm..." Kai scrunched his brow. This sounded like a trick question. "Their ability to use magic?"

"Everyone can use magic, you just need to evolve a skill or a profession enough times. What distinguishes mages is *flexibility*. We can take mana and shape it according to our needs." Valela summoned a flickering light, making it dance between her fingers. "Any true magus needs to master at least one field to earn their title, such as a language of power, rituals, unattuned weaving or elemental magic."

She threw a peeved glance at the mossy wall behind his back. "The earth shapers here are *half-mages*. They've given up flexibility and specialized their skills to do the heavy lifting. They're great at moving and compacting dirt, but if they face any other challenge, they're helpless like a flipped turtle."

That does explain a few things...

Valela blushed. "Please, don't call them that. Half-mage can be taken as an insult by some."

He bobbed his head. "I'll make sure they don't hear me."

“That’s not what I meant.” She ruefully shook her head, pulling a hazel lock behind her ear. “Anyway, do you have new information?”

“A few things.” Kai recounted the scholars’ work on the Vastaire and the speculations on the spatial anomalies.

Valela wrote it all down in a notebook. “That’ll be useful. Is there nothing else?”

“That’s all I got. We’ll learn more today. Or wreck another ruin for nothing and worsen the emergency. Huh... that might happen even if they succeed.” Guilt prickled him, but they didn’t share the blind trust to confess about a divine bargain. The stakes were too high.

Valela peered at him. “You know I’m trying to help the archipelago.”

And the governor’s interests. Either she’s ridiculously perceptive or she’s fishing for information.

“I’ll let you know when we know more. Let’s go find out if those half-mages will blow us up or not.”