

## Chapter 266 - The Hall of Seekers

Used to the pristine squares, pastel houses and blooming promenades, Kai found Varsea quite gray and dusty. By the look of it, the only one sweeping the streets outside the wealthy district was the rain—and from the dry mud, it hadn't clocked in for some time.

*Well, they aren't trying to sell the idyllic tourist destination...*

Rumors and stories had made his expectations of the mainland balloon. He read about castles soaring among the clouds, shrouded elven forests and sprawling metropolis of glass and magic. If the books hadn't lied, those sights all waited out there.

*They also say the Talthen continent is unreasonably vast...*

"This should be it." Flynn's veiled excitement caught his attention as they stopped in front of their destination.

The Hall of Seekers was located just outside the center of town, a towering building of bricks and plaster marred by the dirt of years. Despite the poor presentation, Kai was thrilled to see where *actual* adventurers gathered. This was the perfect place to find information about the contract Kea took and find a way to reach Limgrell.

"So this is where *land hunters* gather." Rain strode forward with the fascinated smile he reserved for human curiosities.

"Yup." Flynn hurried after him. "I've always wanted to see it for myself."

Moving last, Kai almost crashed into a bearded man with a scar over his left eye. Instead of starting an argument as stereotypes demanded, the guy apologized and went on his way.

*Hmm... I almost wished he had challenged me to a duel.*

One of his childhood's biggest disappointments was discovering adventurers weren't a thing in the archipelago. His journey to the mainland had been more *troubled* than he foresaw; it was time to get things back on track.

Inside the Hall of Seekers, Kai craned his neck to gawk at the warm atmosphere. It was an actual hall, the ceiling over twice the height of a normal building. Tables filled with chattering adventurers on one side while more lined before a counter manned by three clerks on the other.

*Yeah, this is more like it.*

"I didn't think you'd like it this much." Flynn looked at him amused.

“I’ve wanted to visit this place for a *long* time.” He crossed his arms—too embarrassed to explain Earth’s fantasy tropes.

“I see…” Flynn pointed to the rowdy crowd and what looked like a bar. “I’ll go check if anyone knows anything interesting. Can you handle the information desk? We’ll spare time by splitting up.”

“Sure.” He readily agreed to divide tasks. Making quick friendships and extracting information had never been his forte; he’d much rather deal with a professional clerk. “What do you want to do, Rain?”

“Hmm…” The siren observed the hall like a kid on his first outing at the zoo. “I’ll come with you.”

Kai raised an eyebrow, quickly containing his surprise not to be rude. He hadn’t expected to get picked, though he didn’t mind his company.

“Great. The first to finish can check on the other.” Flynn clapped their backs and headed toward the group of boisterous adventurers.

The two joined the line at the service desk. The clamor of the bar became muffled when they crossed an invisible array.

*No way.* Kai gaped at another sight.

There was an actual quest board affixed to the wall. It took all his self-control to not dash over and check it.

“Rookie,” someone sniggered behind him.

Kai couldn’t care less and squinted to read. The wall was covered in square sheets of paper, detailing several quests. Catching a red seagull that had been stealing food at the market, exterminating a nest of flesh-eating slugs in the cemetery, gathering ten leaves of sylphian kelp from the edge of the bay. There was even a notice for sweeping the main streets—from the yellowing paper, it wasn’t a popular task though.

If he had been born here, he might have spent his childhood doing those chores. Among the hundred or so quests, most involved the management of the town, taking care of pests, finding mana ingredients or scouting. There was no mention of any beasts higher than the peak of red.

*Spirits! Boards must have tiers too. Where are the others?*

He stood on the tip of his toes, looking for a flight of stairs or a door. Considering the size of the building, there should be at least another floor, if not two.

“Mat, it’s our turn.” Rain pulled him out of his thoughts, approaching the desk. A second ward cut off the sounds of the hall to an indistinguishable murmur.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before. And I wouldn’t forget your face.” A young brunette woman smiled behind the counter—to Rain in particular. Her red blouse seemed to be missing a few buttons. “Is this your first time at the Hall of Seekers?”

“Yes.” The siren gave a smile that could light a room up. “Is it that obvious?”

“Just a little bit.” She giggled. “You can call me Melisa. What can I do for you? You don’t look like the type who comes personally to post a task.” She gave Kai a once-over as if he were some sort of servant or lackey who should have taken care of such chores.

*Uh, I could have done it without being dismissed.*

“We’re looking for information about a case of missing people in Limgrell.” Kai rested his hands on the counter. “Anything you can tell us would be extremely helpful.”

Melisa pursed her lips at the interruption. “Limgrell? I don’t think I’ve heard of it.”

“Is there nothing you can do?” Rain raked a hand through his pale hair and slumped in obvious disappointment.

“I... I could check our internal registry. Cases of missing people are shared inside the same province.”

*How do you know Limgrell is in the same province if you’ve never heard of it?*

“That’d be great, thank you,” the siren beamed.

“Yeah, I— I’ll be back in a minute.” The clerk disappeared into the backroom.

Kai gave him a side eye. “You’re doing it on purpose, right?” He couldn’t tell where the friendly teen ended and the cunning siren began. His fascination for life on land was undoubtedly real, but that didn’t make him naive.

“What do you mean? I just asked her to help us.”

“Forget it.”

“Just let me do the talking. I don’t need charms to deal with sapients.”

*Damn siren.*

Kai hadn’t had the chance to respond when Melisa came back carrying a folder in her arms. She placed it down on the counter but didn’t let them take a look.

“You’ve found it.” Rain brightened up. “That was very quick.”

“Yes.” She bit her lip, putting both her hands on the folder. “But I’m afraid I can’t share this. Contracts above Red ★★★ are only for seekers of the appropriate rank.”

“Oh, I see. Can we sign up?”

From how Melisa promptly placed two forms on the counter, she had already expected the question. “Please add your information.”

“Okay.” Rain grimaced, already scarred by the horrors of human bureaucracy.

There were two pages of personal details such as name, age, place of birth and general talents. The only noteworthy addition was the grade of his race and profession, though that was a given for an adventurer.

“So we just need to fill this paper to join?” Kai said. “There isn’t a... test or something?”

In a little corner of his mind, he had been hoping for an exam where he could shatter the expectations of the other trainees and receive the praise of an old grouchy veteran.

*I’ve spent too much time thinking about this...*

“Just the form. And a fee of five silver to be renewed yearly.” Melisa answered, still looking at Rain. “Naturally, this is only for a Red-1 license. You’ll need to complete some tasks to upgrade it to Orange. It shouldn’t be a problem with your grades.”

*Guess I’ll take convenience over fun.*

Kai almost wrote his real name before hastily turning it into a splotch of ink and changing it to *Matthew*. He was glad Lou had grilled him about every detail of his alias’ life.

Quickly taking care of the formalities, Melisa offered them two iron badges depicting a quill over a map, their name and an identification number engraved on the back.

“Congratulations, you’re now officially seekers.”

“Thank you, can we see the contract now?” Kai leaned on the counter.

The clerk kept the folder out of his reach. “Unfortunately, the case you’re seeking is rated Yellow. You can only check contracts one rank higher than your badge.”

*Are you fucking kidding me?* His heart pulsed in his ears, his fingers digging into the wood of the counter. *Couldn’t you tell us earlier?*

Rain pulled him back before he could act on his impulses to strangle her. “Can’t you make an exception? My sister took this contract without our parents’ knowing. I’m *really* worried about her.”

“There are rules for a reason...” She drummed her nails on the folder. “The Hall doesn’t want to encourage reckless behavior. And I couldn’t reveal the rank of this case before you became a member.”

Despite her words, Melisa hadn’t said *no*.

Rain also picked up on it, speaking with enviable patience. “Is there nothing I can do? Given our grade, we clearly don’t fall into that category...”

The back and forth continued for ten more minutes before the siren coaxed Melisa to read them the file out loud. So she didn’t *technically* break any rules.

The contract had been put forth by a group of families to find their loved ones—or recover their bodies. As of a week ago, fourteen people had been reported missing, and the rank of the case had been raised to Yellow-1. There were no clues or leads about what was happening on the field, though that wasn’t unusual. Seekers rarely shared information unless they gave up on the task.

“Trust me. With a five-gold reward, it’s only a matter of time before someone solves the case. I’m surprised the guards haven’t already intervened,” Melisa mused. “I hope to see you again, Rain.”

*I don’t.*

Despite not receiving much new information, they had confirmed that more people had gone missing since Valela had checked.

“Thank you for taking over,” Kai turned to the siren. “I would have only gotten angry by myself.”

“It’s nothing.” Rain winked in a very Flynn-like way. “I’m sure your sister is fine.”

“Yeah...” The hurry of rushing to find his sister bit at him again. They still had to buy more supplies for the journey, and figure how they’d get there.

*Soon.*

Back in the clamor of the hall, they found Flynn sharing stories and beers at a table. The teen clapped the back of another young man and excused himself when he saw them coming. “See you around, Thomil. Next drink on me.” He slammed a few coppers on the table with a cheer.

They took one of the few free benches in the corner of the hall. Kai quickly summarized what they had learned. "Did you find anything useful?"

"A few rumors." Flynn rubbed his neck. "Almost no one has been to Limgrell or has heard of it, but Thomil has a cousin who stopped there a month ago. Apparently, your sister's team wasn't the first to take the contract..."

"And what happened to them?"

"That's what Thomil found strange. They officially quit the task, but no one has talked to them since."

*Spirits, what kind of trouble did Kea get into?*

"They're dead?"

"Not necessarily." Flynn shook his head. "It's possible they simply took a caravan further north or disbanded. But the strangeness doesn't end there. After so many people went missing without a clue, the contract should have been raised to Yellow-3 according to Thomil."

*As if things couldn't get any shadier.*

"Do they have any idea what's going on?" Rain asked.

Flynn shrugged. "Everyone had a different opinion. If the culprit was a yellow beast, someone should have found the signs of a fight or the remains of its meal. So it's either other humans, or something far too dangerous for anyone below Green."

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It was the people strolling the streets of Varsea that made Kai finally grasp he wasn't in the archipelago anymore. Not only for the tanned faces being sand instead of amber, but also because the average grade for adults was at the peak of Orange, with every fifth person at Yellow.

He had climbed to the summit of a mountain, only to be shoved back down. His only consolation was that he had yet to see anyone of his own age with the same grade. The youngest one he'd spotted was a woman around twenty dressed in a heavily enchanted silk dress.

From her sudden, huffy look, she'd realized someone had *inspected* her. He'd strolled out of the wealthy district, cold sweat running down his back. Thankfully, recognizing the touch of Mana Observer was much easier than pointing out its origin.

Kai would have done anything to keep himself distracted for the last two days. The more they learned about the missing case, the more dubious the contract looked.

*She'll be fine. Kea can take care of herself.*

They had already bought enough supplies and equipment for the journey, and Madame Le Garde had just delivered their new outfits that morning. Two sets of waterproof and sturdy clothes made for the wild—Kai had barely glanced at them. The last problem they had to solve was getting on the road.

Limgrell was about a couple weeks on foot going northeast. The easiest way to reach it would be to join a caravan, but the town wasn't part of the main trade routes. It could take more weeks of waiting before they found something—that was out of the question.

Rain had proposed they post a notice for a guide at the Hall of Seekers. The clerk warned them that giving a reward of one gold would leave them spoilt for choice and scammers—and possibly worse. Still, it beat traveling on land alone with no experience.

*We just need to pick the right person.*

Kai turned the street to the Hall of Seekers. Flynn and Rain were already there—together with a crowd of at least three dozen people.