

Chapter 268 - Lessons Learned

“What do you think?” Flynn hinted at the remaining candidates with a tilt of his head. “I’d cut the guy with the weasel face. He had no idea what I was talking about when I mentioned the inn in Limgrell. I don’t think he has visited the town in years. Do you have any preference?”

There were a dozen seekers gathered, and only six under real consideration.

“They all lied to make themselves look better, but nothing particularly significant.” Rain stared at a lone man with a streaked beard and a curved bow. “I’d exclude the hunter. He’s going to bleed us for more gold if he gets the chance. What about you, Mat? The skill you got is quite impressive.”

“Uhm...” Kai cleared his mind from the creepy couple to focus on the current task. “None of them triggered Hallowed Intuition. They don’t have sinister intentions, at least not for this journey.” He scratched his brow with a finger to glance at the last duo of swordsmen. “I’d cut them. Even if we run into trouble, they aren’t strong enough to justify the hassle of dealing with two people.”

One stranger is plenty.

That left two options: a middle-aged ranger who spoke in monosyllabic answers, and the scarred adventurer with the menacing air. “Let’s just toss a coin.” Kai patted his pockets looking for a mesar.

“I’ve got it!” The siren took out a coin—blessedly, it was only silver. “Is it a common human custom? How does this work?”

Guess you can’t exactly toss a coin underwater.

“If it lands on the hawk we get the scarred man. The number for the ranger.”

“Neat.” Rain threw the coin a couple meters in the air. The metal glimmered in the daylight and perfectly landed in his palm. “Uh, it’s the hawk.”

Mr. Scary Mug it is.

“Okay, follow my lead.” Eager to get moving, Kai met the gaze of the scarred adventurer with a faint nod. The man smirked, his scarred lip giving him a vicious twist. “We’ve decided to pick Daniel,” he said out loud, hoping that was his name.

“What do you mean! Him?” Skar the Redaxe shouted, pointing at the other man with his hatchet. But it was the old couple’s silent gazes that sent shivers down his back.

“That’s our choice. Thank you all for coming.” Kai slipped inside the Hall of Seekers, trusting the adventures wouldn’t make a scene inside. They needed a way to lose potential stalkers before getting out of town.

This has already taken too long.

His friends trailed after him, not yet understanding exactly what was going on. The bustle of the hall washed over them, mixed with laughter and clinks of beer despite the early hour.

Kai headed toward the counter to finalize the contract, avoiding Melisa’s line.

How did such a simple task turn into a deadly affair? Reishi had warned him revealing his wealth might attract the wrong crowd on the mainland, but he had gotten cocky with his rapid advancement.

This wasn’t the archipelago anymore, here he was just another fish in the ocean. All his spells would do him little good if someone stabbed him in his sleep or ambushed him in numbers. Luckily, the blunder only cost him entertaining a crowd of rowdy adventures—a cheap price for the wake-up call.

“What do you need?” the clerk curtly asked, doodling on a piece of paper.

“To register this.” Kai placed the contract on the desk, glad to see Daniel standing beside him. They quickly added their signature on three duplicates: a copy for each party and one for the Hall to enforce it if it were necessary.

“The sum has already been paid,” the bored clerk muttered, focused on his blotchy artwork. “You can cash in your reward in the Hall in Limgrell.”

And that’s done as well.

“Is it that bad?” Flynn stood in front of him, noticing his nervous glances.

Rain echoed his sentiments. “If they try anything, I’ll deal with them.”

“I’ll explain later.” Kai dried his sweaty palms on his coat. Only a couple adventurers from the crowd had followed them inside, looking for other contracts on the quest board. There was no trace of Mr. and Mrs. Celisia—though that was hardly reassuring.

Where did they go?

Daniel leaned behind him to follow his gaze. “I know a way out the back if you want to lose someone.”

“Huh... that’d be great,” Kai said, already liking the guy more.

“Just doing my job. I’m your guide till Limgrell.” Daniel strode towards a door at the opposite end of the Hall. He pulled an old iron key from his spatial bag and opened the lock with two quick clicks. “Newbies aren’t technically allowed in here. Keep your faces down if we meet anyone.”

They walked in beside a flight of stairs and two more doors. A woman sat on the steps, honing a longsword with a whetstone. She gave one glance at Daniel before returning to her blade.

Is it here where the cool kids meet?

Kai curbed his curiosity to inspect the place with his senses and followed the man through three more sets of doors. They walked out into an unassuming alley behind the building. There was no one else around, or any sign to point out the entrance to the Hall.

“Higher-ranked seekers come through here to avoid the main lobby,” Daniel explained, holding the exit for them. “I didn’t exactly get the key through the usual way, so I’d appreciate your discretion.”

Flynn furrowed his brow. “What’re you talking about? The door was already open.”

The adventurer barked a laugh, the scar giving his grin a movie villain look. “I think we’ll get on well just fine.”

In the light of day, Daniel couldn’t be any older than thirty, with only his profession advanced to Yellow. “Who are we trying to avoid? Don’t let Skar Blabbermouth intimidate you. He’s all bark and no bite, *literally*. I’ve seen him back out of a brawl with a kid half his age.”

“It’s the elderly couple.”

“The Celisias? Those frail bags of bones?” He chuckled. “Are you sure?”

“I’m certain.” Kai nervously paced. “Can we move? The last time I perceived a similar level of danger was from a green beast. I’d rather not stay here to find out.”

Their incredulous looks shattered against his seriousness. The threat had hinged on choosing to go with the old couple, but a little extra motivation never hurt.

“Hmm, this way.” Daniel jogged down the alley. “Those *two* did lose a couple clients every year. I always thought they were just incompetent cowards... Thank the Moons, I’ve never taken any contract with them.”

He stopped to peek over the corner at the intersection and then slipped through another narrow street. “Do you need to get anything before leaving Varsea? I’ve got a couple extra supplies in my bag, but they aren’t enough for four.”

"We're good to go." Kai listened for any whisper of danger that rose above the noise. Since he advanced it, the skill was too sensitive to go entirely quiet in a city—clarity had never been one of its virtues. "How long is it going to take to get us to Limgrell?"

"Depends which way we go. Keeping to the main road is the safest. We can shave a couple of days by cutting through the Lervyn Woods and the Rustling Hills, but that'll be risky. Are you in that much of a hurry?"

"I..." Kai turned to Flynn and Rain. There wasn't only his life and comfort on the line.

"The fastest way would be best." The siren answered for them.

"You understand I can't assure your safety if we cut across high mana areas."

"We're willing to take the risk as long as it's nothing too crazy."

"Then, we should make it in about nine or ten days." Daniel nodded. "But it's not only you who are taking the risk. And I won't get anything if you get yourself killed..."

Spirits, Reishi would make fun of me for the rest of my days.

One gold was already more than generous, still, it was his fault for not specifying the details in the contract. "You'll get your bonus. Ten silvers if you get us there in nine days, and ten more if we get attacked by beasts."

"What about bandits?"

"Those too."

"People aren't as easy to deal with..." Daniel scratched his scar.

"Not a chip more." Kai threw him an icy glare. "That's already more than a fair price."

The adventurer raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. "You can't blame me for trying, boy. You've got yourself a deal."

"Deal. He shook his rugged hand. "Now get us out of here without getting followed. Today counts as the first day."

"Yes, boss. Try to keep pace." Daniel followed a long meandering path across the outskirts.

By the time they reached the western gate, Kai had seen more of Varsea than in the previous three days combined, crossed three markets and an unknown number of neighborhoods. A stone wall enclosed the city, taller than the highest buildings and over four meters thick. No one else seemed particularly taken in by the sight.

The guards chatted amongst themselves, distractedly checking the line of people flowing in. They joined the column of carts and travelers leaving. Kai craned his neck to stare at the vaulted ceiling of the bulwark as they passed through.

It must have taken an army of Earth mages to build this thing...

They emerged on a wide dirt road leading into a series of winding slopes of grass and golden wheat. Farmsteads with red shingles dotted the hills surrounded by smaller specks of color, grazing cattle and people busy reaping the last harvest before winter hit.

“We’ll cross through the fields after the first ridge and turn north,” Daniel advanced with fast strides in the middle of the column.

“Can’t we just run?”

“Have you never traveled outside a caravan? Crossing the wilderness is a matter of endurance. We can’t run till Limgrell.”

“Why not? We just need to keep a good pace. It can’t be that hard.”

The scarred man searched his face for the signs of a joke. “*Because* none of us has a Courier profession. And even if we did, letting yourself get caught exhausted in the wilderness is a good way to get yourself killed. Beasts won’t care if you’re tired, and humans will see it as an easy payday.”

Guess that does make sense. In the outskirts of Veeryd, I could faint without any fear since the mana was low, here no place is truly safe...

“Hmm... What if we can detect any threat first?” Between Mana Sense and Hallowed Intuition, there was little chance to get ambushed, even if he ran. “We can jog slower.”

“How do you think no one suspected the Celisias of anything for years?” Daniel shook his head. “Everyone who walks outside a gate has a skill to detect danger, and every killer has one to hide themselves from it. I’m sure yours might be pretty good, but trust me, kid: it’ll never be good enough.”

But I did see through them once they approached us...

“Is that why Hunch didn’t react at all?” Flynn cursed under his breath. “Is there no way around that?”

“That’s how the world goes. You have to look for other hints. Some people are so confident in their skill they betray themselves with words...” Daniel listed the dangers of the road, enjoying the attention.

Kai fell a step behind, lost in his own thoughts. The number of mistakes he made before leaving his first city was frankly embarrassing. He had known the mainland would be different, and yet he still made them in his hurry to reach Kea.

I can't afford to repeat them. Erring once was human, twice was stupidity.

He reached through his bond to check on his familiar. Hobbes was hitching a ride on a cart twenty meters ahead of him. The furball was thrilled to be back in the wild on land, sending him waves of lazy curiosity.

We're about to leave the column. Kai warned him, sending meaning through their connection with increasing ease every day that passed. *You can teleport why should I carry you? Okay... yes, fine. But you can't show your powers to anybody. No, it's not about who's stronger. Do you want us to get chased day and night? Right. No... yes, there'll be plenty of fish where we're going.*

Mentally arguing with a cat was more futile than in their physical bodies. Thank the spirits, Hobbes agreed to play sneaky. While Daniel seemed a competent guy behind his menacing grin, trust was a harder currency to earn.

It'll be alright. I just lack experience.

The smell of tilled fields and grassy meadows relaxed him. He was finally on the march toward his sister. Travelers thinned out as the path forked away from Varsea. It was just a matter of days before they reached Limgrell. Getting to there was supposed to be the easy part, then he'd have to convince Kea to leave for safety.

They had just cut across a field of rye when a murmur rose to brush his thoughts.

Nope. I must have imagined it.

The pulse came again, growing higher like a wave with the rising tide.

Fucking jerks.

At the third whisper, there was no doubt: someone was following them.