

Chapter 286 - The Missing

Belice drummed her fingers on the dark oak desk, the tapping louder in the silence. “Are you saying Harry burned down his own house?”

“Kea mentioned some kind of magic trap.” Niel took the burden of explaining the events. “The fire wasn’t intentional...”

Their words became an indistinct murmur in the background. Kai couldn’t shake the feeling that something was *off*. A thought fluttered at the edge of his mind—but no matter how hard he focused, he couldn’t pin it down.

Is she lying?

Belice’s explanation made sense: she was good at gathering rumors. It could be a quirk of her profession. He had no proof that she was hiding something aside from a vague hunch. Without her tip, they would still have no idea who was behind the disappearances.

“...Mat?” Niel tapped his arm. “Are you alright?”

“Uh... I’m fine.” Kai tried to recall the last bits of the conversation. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“Is there anything else you need?” Belice gave him the polite smile of a clerk faced with an annoying customer. “I don’t mind the company, but I’ve got some paperwork to get through before lunch.” She peered at him, the golden frame of her enchanted glasses glowing with tightly woven runes.

Hmm... What are those for...? His skills detected no flaws in the cloaking. The challenge of picking them apart made him itch, but she would definitely notice. *Now’s not the time. Stop getting distracted!*

“I...” Kai chewed his cheek. What should he ask? Hallowed Intuition had gone silent without any further hint; he might see a payoff weeks from now, or have missed it entirely.

Damn, say something before this gets more embarrassing.

“Did the contract for the missing people receive any update?” He returned the affable smile, trying not to stare too intently.

“Yes and no... One moment...” Belice bowed behind the desk, shuffling some papers. She almost hit her head when she stood up holding a file. “I can’t tell you the details of the contract...”

“What do you mean?”

Is it revenge for my questions?

“Does nobody read what they sign anymore?” Belice tugged her braid with an exasperated huff. Crouching behind the desk again, she pulled a heavy tome from a drawer with a groan of effort. The weathered leather cover thumped on the desk with a puff of dust.

“This.” She heaved and wiped the dust from her nose. “Is *The Seekers Codex*. Contrary to what people say, seekers do follow rules. Even if the code of conduct isn’t enforced any longer, our members should know the *basics*.”

Kai glanced at the yellowing pages. With the preserving enchantments on the spine, this copy must be positively ancient to look this worn. “Oh, you mean my seeker rank?” He took out the iron badge he got in Varsea. The metal was shaped like a shield, sporting a quill over a map—something to do with the founding history of the seekers.

“Yes,” Belice nodded, looking pleasantly surprised. “Members can only check contracts up to one rank higher than their rating. You’re a Red ★ seeker with *no* quests completed.”

“Why don’t you show it to me, then.” Niel leaned on the desk, offering her a polished copper badge. There were three stars carved above the crest, the map was engraved with meticulous details that showed a region of the Republic. “Unless the contract has been raised above Yellow ★.”

“That’s...” Belice muttered something about the spirit of the rules and pursed her lips. “Okay, fine! Just this once. The administration refuses to raise the grade of the contract, but there has been another update.” She opened the file on the desk and flipped it toward them to read. “The bounty has been raised to twenty golds.”

“Twenty *gold* mesars?” Niel almost sputtered. “That’s the rate for a contract at the peak of Yellow.”

“Yes, the reward and fee have already been paid yesterday. I’ve no idea how those guys already knew.” She waved to the door where the rowdy adventurers had disappeared. “You can expect more teams to arrive once the voice spreads. Jingle a few mesars and the young fools seem to lose all sense.”

“Twenty mesars isn’t a little gold...” Niel clenched his jaw, his expression darkening. “This will turn even more messy. How can they afford four times the reward?”

“More people have gone missing, so more families chipped in to pay.” Belice adjusted her glasses with a grimace. “Apparently, Aldred also received a small fortune no one knew about. An inheritance from some family in Kertoll.”

Niel’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “That must have been quite the inheritance. He hadn’t said anything when we last talked...”

“Who’s Aldred?” Kai looked up from the papers before the conversation slipped away entirely.

“His daughter was one of the first people to go missing,” Niel said with a sigh. “He organized the families of the victims to place the contract at the Hall when the guards ditched the investigation. Nothing would have been done without him. He still hopes we’ll find his daughter alive even if it has been three months.”

“Almost four.” Belice slumped into her chair.

“Hmm... Does he live close by?” Kai asked softly. “I’d like to talk to him.” He had seen enough crime shows to know that questioning the victims’ families was the basics of an investigation.

Niel glanced out of the large opaque windows of the Hall. “I don’t think it’ll be much use. We’ve talked with the families and friends of the victims. No one saw anything. The people disappeared into the mist without a trace.”

“A new perspective could help.” Or perhaps he would get a bout of luck. “I’ll try to make it brief.”

“Trying doesn’t hurt. Aldred’s never bothered to talk with adventurers wishing to help.” Belice intervened to his surprise. She wiped the dust from the codex, putting it back into the drawer. “You haven’t officially accepted the contract. So keep in mind you won’t receive any reward or recognition no matter what you find.”

“I can still investigate, right?”

“Yes... As long as you don’t break the law.” Her dark eyes squared him up. “Without a quest, you won’t have Hall protection for minor infractions.”

No more burning buildings.

“That’s fine.” Kai dipped his head in thanks; basically it would be like usual. With his identity, he’d have to keep away from the guards either way.

Niel shifted his gaze between them, a little sullen. “Then we better go.” He put away his badge. “We can stop by Aldred before noon if we hurry. I don’t like leaving Mari alone all day.”

“Stay safe.” Belice waved them off. “I’ll call you all together if I hear an interesting rumor.”

The chill air outside stung Kai’s cheeks after the warmth of the Hall. The mist had risen from the lake to swallow the town; even the sparse passerby had disappeared. Glancing at both sides of the empty street, he looked at his guide. “Where do we go?”

Niel stood by the creaking door, arms crossed before his chest. “I’d like a warning next time you plan to accuse someone. I told you Bel is one of the few people who has helped us since coming to Limgrell.”

“I—“ He had been so sure that something was up. “I’m sorry if I was rude. I thought it’d be better to get straight to the topic instead of dancing around it.”

The young man scrubbed a hand through his short hair and shook his head. “Blessed spirits, you’re just like Kea.”

“I’m *not*.” Kai blurted before his brain could think better, his voice climbing an octave higher. He turned to the mists to look nonchalant, cold sweat already on his back. “What do you even mean?”

“Nothing. You’ll see when you know her better.” Niel chuckled. “You’re lucky Bel doesn’t get offended easily. I can introduce you to Aldred but try to be a little more *considerate*. That man has suffered enough since his daughter disappeared.”

“I’ll use more tact.” He promised, glad to cut away from his sister.

Niel peered into the swirling fog that shrouded the street. “Good. We can check if Aldred is home. He lives near the outskirts. Stay close. It’s easy to get lost in town when the mist rises.”

Kai spread Mana Observer around him and channeled Body Augmentation to enhance his senses. Droplets rhythmically dripped from a slate roof, soft voices murmured in a house across the street and an awakened cormorant creaked its call near the docks.

Beasts around human settlements were tamer than their counterparts in high mana zones. It was a truce born of thousands of years of cohabitation, any beasts that wildly attacked wouldn’t live long enough to enjoy the few easy pickings.

Natural selection at its finest.

Kai doubted he would ever get used to it. Tamer didn’t mean tame. On their way to Limgrell, Daniel had told him enough stories of men devoured in their beds to fill his nightmares. Stray beasts wandered out of their lairs, or went crazy with hunger after an advancement.

He rubbed his arms to shave off the chill mist. The sun was a pale light above, painting the world in frosty white. His thoughts drifted to Belice. Despite his *unorthodox* approach, she had been nothing but helpful.

Hmm, she didn’t bat an eye when I told her Harry was working with the culprits...

That revelation should have elicited some reaction. *Unless* someone expected that...

She must really be good at gathering rumors...

Kai couldn’t shake off the impression that something kept slipping his mind. His thoughts run in circles without any solution.

“We’re almost there. You good?” Niel watched him with a furrow. “I know I can be a little overbearing. With everything that happened, it’s just...”

“Everyone’s a little tense. No need to apologize.” Kai said. “You said you talked to all the families of the victims. Did you learn anything useful?”

“Not much,” he grimaced. “Most people have disappeared outside the town walls, others were on the streets, or *even* in their own homes. Someone loses sight of them in the mist, the next moment, they’re gone. No witnesses to what actually happened.

“Aldred’s daughter was checking their fishing vessel a dozen meters from her father when she was taken. He didn’t hear a whisper. When Aldred realized she was missing, he scoured the lake for days thinking she had drowned before he heard of other disappearances...”

His voice died down, replaced by their steps squelching down a muddy street. They stopped before a wooden building, yellow paint peeling off the boards that weren’t already rotten.

“We’re here. Aldred should be home.” Niel squinted at the light flickering behind the thick curtains covering the windows. “I warn you he has already told us anything he knows.”

“I’ll be considerate,” Kai couldn’t see the conditions of the upper floor in the mist, but it didn’t look like the house of someone who had helped put up a twenty-gold bounty.

He must have invested everything in that contract...

The door opened on the second knock, letting light and warmth spill outside. “Niel, so nice to see you.” A middle-aged man with a flat nose greeted them with a smile. “And who’s your friend? Why don’t you come to warm up inside? I was just brewing some tea. This weather is dreadful.”

“This is Matthew. He’s from...” Niel couldn’t finish the introduction that Aldred dragged them in. The house was clean, if a little messy. Fishing nets, rods and hooks hung from the walls, speaking of a lifetime of use. A fire crackled over an iron array, giving the space a homely feel that contrasted with the bleak outside.

“Please sit.” Aldred strode to the stove in the kitchen angle, a teapot already whistling. He grabbed three chipped mugs from a cupboard, stretching to reach a jar of tea leaves. “I imagine you have heard of the increased bounty. Everyone contributed what they could with a *little* convincing,” he chortled, holding his belly. “Hopefully, we’ll get someone who can find my Lily. You know most adventures don’t have the patience if they don’t get immediate results. Not like you lot... mmmm...” He turned to them, gaze lit by a quivering hope. “Tell me, did... Did you find anything new?”

“We’re following a new lead.” Niel pressed his lips. “It’s too soon to say. I’m sorry we can’t do more.”

“Oh, don’t say that my boy.” A glimpse of gloom was hidden behind a laugh. “You’re doing good. Very good. I’m sure you’ll save her. And everybody else... yes, she’ll be fine...” Aldred busied himself with the teapot, his mumbles growing too soft to make out.

Kai followed Niel’s lead and sat at the table. A steaming green cup was soon placed in front of him. “Thank you.”

“I’m afraid I’m out of honey.” Aldred rubbed his balding head. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I prefer it without,” Kai used a few specks of Water mana to not scald himself and take a sip. The rich floral blend was far from the best he had tried, but far from the worst too. With the cold that had seeped into his bones, the warmth was all he needed. “It’s perfect.”

“It’s alright, kid. No need for flattery.” The man gave another booming laugh and clapped his back with enough strength to rock his bones. “The market is quite scarce. You know, people prefer to remain indoors with what’s happening. Hopefully, we’ll get another caravan before winter.”

Kai smiled, taking another sip while Aldred continued speaking. The man seemed to have no problem holding a conversation with a few prompts from Niel.

Spirits, it was much easier when they were just numbers...

His gaze stopped on the lifelike portrait of a young woman standing on a maple cabinet. The silver frame shone with a recent polish, making it easy to guess her identity. She was pretty if not beautiful, with golden hair and bright purple eyes.

“That’s my Lily.” Aldred followed his gaze, plucking the picture with delicate fingers. “She took the beauty from her mom, you know.” He gently brushed the already sparking frame with his sleeve, his smile growing strained. “She will be twenty-two this winter. I wanted her to marry, but she insisted she already had everything she needed. She was stubborn like that since she learned to talk. She always knew what she wanted...”

Despite his plump gut and easy laugh, his face suddenly looked gaunt and his eyes sunken by dark circles. “I’m sure that she’ll be fine.” He laid the portrait back on the cabinet, blowing his nose on a patched handkerchief. “Uhm... thank you for listening to my rambles. Why don’t you tell me why you’ve come? If there is anything I can do, you just have to ask.”

“It’s never a bother.” Niel put his cup down. “Mat wanted to ask some questions about what happened *that* day...”

When they left the house an hour later, the cold was sharper in contrast with the warmth inside. The mist had grown denser, the sky darker despite being close to noon.

While Aldred had been eager to recount the events with rehearsed practice, Kai couldn’t pick any useful details. As Niel anticipated, Lily’s disappearance happened in a moment of distraction near the docks, not a sound or hair left behind. The same went for the other missings that the old fisherman knew about.

Some of them disappeared inside the town. Are they still here? How is it possible that no one noticed anything? I guess it could be magic or a combination of skill....

He got a headache considering all the possibilities the Guide created.

“We better get back to the house before the others worry.” Niel scowled at wispy plumes veiling the streets, shoulders slumped. He had grown gloomier hearing the stories of the other people abducted, probably reminded of his teammate. “Damned Ancestors... I can’t believe someone’s doing this. What do they even want from abducting a bunch of random people...”

“We’ll find them.” Kai was surprised by the conviction in his voice. “Caeden, Lily and all the others.”

“I... Thank you, Mat. I think I needed to hear that.”

What he couldn’t promise was that they would be alive.

“It’s nothing. Anyway, how was he?” Kai asked to stave off the oppressive silence as they headed back toward the center. “Caeden, I mean. Everyone keeps mentioning him.”

Niel stayed quiet long enough to make Kai doubt he would answer at all before finally speaking.

“Well, he was great. You know those people who are annoyingly good at *everything* they do. But you can’t hate them because they’re *also* nice and humble. Well, he was just like that. If felt that no matter what happened, he always had the solution to everything.

“We were barely scraping by when we joined teams and chased contracts together. It’s strange, we traveled together for only a few months, but it feels so much longer...” Niel said, his expression shrouded by the ghostly mist. “I miss him... Though it’s not as bad as for Caeli.”

“They were in a relationship?”

“In a *relationship*...?” He muttered, confusion apparent in his tone. “Oh, *no*. No, nothing like that. Caeden is Caeli’s brother. I thought someone would have told you. He was closer to Kea in that way. Even if they would have rather drowned than admitted anything.”