

Chapter 267 - Sheep and Wolves

There were close to forty seekers gathered, from teens who had barely gotten their profession, to veterans with white beards. Given the short notice, Kai had offered one gold, hoping to get a handful of people interested. The prices of the central district made him misjudge how much the average adventurer earned.

Like Dora always told him, nothing good came from rushing things. In his urgency to leave, they'd waste more time sorting through this mess.

Hmm... You live, you learn.

Several pairs of eyes followed him, taking stock of his newly tailored clothes. Kai headed straight for Rain and Flynn to not give anyone the chance to approach him.

"The post worked!" The siren held his hands on the straps of a waxed leather backpack, an eager grin on his face. "I didn't think we'd find so many volunteers." His enchanted bracelet would keep their words private.

"Yeah, it went a little *too* well."

"Do you want me to handle it?" Flynn offered—he had been the only one to caution him to lower the reward. "We're in front of the Hall of Seekers. I doubt anyone will make a scene."

Kai bit his cheek. "I put my name on the posting. I'll deal with the initial selection." While he might not be a social butterfly, he trusted himself to judge people—especially if he used Hallowed Intuition. "Any preference?"

Flynn scratched his neck to sneak a peek at the crowd. "If we pick a team, I'd stick with two people at most. It might become problematic to handle more."

I should have worded the post more carefully...

Some adventurers were indeed staying close together in groups. The contract posed no limitations on the number of applicants, as long as they knew their way to Limgrell.

"You think they'd be a problem?" Rain has no qualms staring directly at the crowd, even gesturing with a smile. "The Hall will record their names in case something happens. And they look quite weak."

"If we are willing to pay a gold piece for a guide, they might think we're worth taking the risk," Flynn said, keeping up with his nonchalant act for their spectators. "And you actually carry enough mesars to settle a family for ten generations. The fact we're foreigners also doesn't help. No one might come looking for us if something happened."

“That’s bleak.” Rain tilted his head. “You really thought about this. Guess the surface isn’t much different from the deep.”

“Yeah, I—” The teen stared at his new boots, embarrassed. “I just want to avoid problems. We’ll still need to sleep with them around. I’d rather not watch my back every second.”

“Uh... That’s a good point.”

They briefly discussed a few more red flags to avoid. Kai examined the cluster of people with Mana Observer—no one seemed to react to his skill. There were four adventurers at early yellow: a woman with honey-colored locks, a man with flaming red hair, and a graying couple who looked to be married. A dozen more had only advanced their profession, while almost everyone had their race at the peak of Orange.

They’d be quite the force back home.

While none of them looked particularly impressive by themselves, how easily he had gathered such a crowd still impressed him.

With the siren and Hallowed Intuition on his side, Kai wasn’t particularly worried about getting mugged, though Flynn also had a point. He didn’t want to sleep with one eye open for more than a week—or be left without a guide because they thought themselves clever.

Time’s up.

Seeing the crowd grow restless, Kai walked out of the muffling bubble to address them.

A man with a deep scar carved across his upper lip stepped forward. “Are you really going to pay us a piece of *gold*?” he grunted. It was hard to say if he was trying to intimidate him or it was his natural look. His question was echoed by many of the people present.

Spirits, I shouldn’t have asked Rain to suggest a reasonable amount.

“You’ll get paid as stated in the contract,” Kai said, loud enough to be heard by everyone. “*If* you bring us to Limgrell in less than two weeks.”

At least I wasn’t completely brainless.

The crowd of strangers turned to stare at him. Kai clenched his jaw to not squirm under the uncomfortable amount of attention. “I’m the quest giver. Since we only need *one* guide, I’ll have to tighten our requirements.” He’d rather sell the arrogant young master looking to make his pick, than the gullible newbie overwhelmed by the situation.

The ginger-haired man shoved his way to the front, using his grade advantage. “Hey, kid! I’m the most experienced—”

A dozen voices rose to drown his words. In seconds, half the people gathered were shouting what made them the better choice. A few adventurers even looked ready to start a fistfight.

This is going to be worse than I thought.

He vainly raised a hand to ask for silence. The crowd continued to squabble, forcing him to expand his aura to dissuade the fools who attempted to touch him.

Guess this already cuts the numbers.

He eliminated the worst offenders from the pool of candidates, focusing on the people who stayed silent. When the ruckus quietened enough to speak, Kai didn't hide his irritation.

"We're in a hurry. If you can't depart right away, leave. If you're in a group of more than two people, leave. No!" He raised his voice to silence an objection. "These are not negotiable. If you've never been to Limgrell before, leave. We'll check if you're telling the truth. If you've not brought supplies..."

He quickly listed half a dozen criteria to thin out the group. Since he excluded a few people at a time, the remaining adventurers were eager to speed them along and get rid of the competition.

"You, you, and you also leave." Kai pointed out to a trio, fully into his young master persona. "I don't need people who shout like fish merchants."

An adventurer with a broken nose raised his fist at him. "Who do you think you are!" Only then did he seem to realize the crowd had reduced to less than ten people, none willing to back him up. "Huh... You'll regret it!" He stomped away, cursing under his breath.

Spirits, grant me patience.

They were free to call him an asshole. He wasn't here to make friends, and he had no time to spare for the feelings of grown men he'd never meet again.

Seeing a more manageable number of people remaining, some of the tension drained from his shoulders. The worst was over. All the seekers at Yellow were still present, together with several half-step into the grade.

"Thank you all for coming," he switched to the tone of a job interviewer, feeling incredibly awkward all the while. "Please make a line. We'll ask you a few questions before making our choice."

Kai retreated into the muffling bubble with his companions while the candidates figured out their order in a semi-civil manner.

“You did great.” Flynn clapped his back. “I was sure some people would make trouble, but you nailed them with a glare.”

“He’s right.” Rain emphatically nodded. “I can’t believe you’ve never been trained to command. You’re a natural.”

“Uhm... thanks.”

Are they saying this to make me feel better...?

It had turned out okay, though he’d be glad if he never had to do that again. Dealing with a crowd was exhausting.

“Do you want us to deal with the interviews?” Flynn gestured to the forming line. “You can just stay back and glare like you want to strangle them. Yes, exactly like that!”

Kai crossed his arms, fighting not to glower. “Sure.”

“I’m almost certain a few lied.” The siren mused at the seekers.

“Do you have a truth-sensing skill?” *That would be handy.*

“Mhmm... not exactly. I can get a hint of their intentions if they involve me.” Rain chewed his lip. “Sirens’ charms work based on how people feel towards us. Love, hate, it doesn’t really matter. It’s harder to tell away from the sea, but there is a kind of... *conflict* when people lie. With most at least.”

That’s a little creepy. Fuck, can he feel that too? Positive thoughts, positive thoughts!

“That’s awesome,” Flynn said, then he turned a shade brighter. “Anyway, we should get on with it.”

Rain fiddled with the latches of his backpack, seemingly unaware of everything. “I’ll tap your back if they’re lying.”

The guy with ginger hair was the first to walk into the muffling bubble, his biceps bulging as if he were flexing. He didn’t wait for a question before making his case. “Listen to me, boys! I’ve been a seeker for longer than you’ve been alive. You must have heard of Skar the Redaxe.” He spun a curved hatchet far too close for comfort. “I know every inch of this province like...”

Kai would think the siren was trying to massage his back from the incessant pokes he was receiving. The man went on a rant about how he wrestled down a yellow bear, treating them like a bunch of impressionable kids.

“How long would it take you to bring us to Limgrell?” Flynn asked.

“No more than a week, depending on how fast your legs can move.”

“What about crossing the Boggard of Fo’hoolis?” He scratched his stubble, pensive. “I’ve heard it’s infested by crocodiles.”

“Don’t worry about it, boy. I know a shortcut around it,” Sker snorted with a dismissed look. “I’ll beat up any croc we meet.”

“And the Mor’non River?” He continued with a straight face. “How do we avoid the leeches there?”

“I’ll carry you if you’re afraid of the water. I’ve got a skill that will make any insect run like…”

This guy is so full of shit.

Two days of research had been enough to check a few maps and gather general information. Kai was pretty sure there was no Swamp of Fool, or Moron River between them and Limgrell.

“Thank you,” Kai intervened when it was clear the guy had no such limit. “We’ll let you know after we talk to the others.”

“Why waste time with those amateurs?” Skar scoffed.

“I’ve already said I would.”

“Well, if you must. But don’t make me wait too long. There are many looking to hire Skar the Redaxe.” He left, performing another Dexterity trick with his hatchet.

Did he reach Yellow with bullshitting skills?

The woman with honey-colored locks was up next—they had probably arranged themselves by grade.

“Hi, I’m Arlynn. It’s nice to see three young new faces.” She offered to shake their hands and get their names. “You can just call me Arly. I’ll be happy to accompany you to Limgrell. You must be new to the province. Ask me anything you want.”

Arlynn appeared to have been to Limgrell, though she wasn’t ready to leave on the day and expected them to cover her supplies. If that weren’t enough, she kept making not-so-subtle inquiries about their background.

Hallowed Intuition gave him a foreboding feeling. The whispers were too subtle to figure out the nature of the danger, but Kai didn’t need it to make his choice. “I don’t like her.”

"I agree..." Rain seconded him. "She lied only twice that I could tell, but she isn't going to settle for one gold."

"She's out too then," Flynn looked at the line. "We still have options."

Last of the Yellow line was the old married couple: Mr. and Mrs. Celisia. They must have advanced later in life or be positively ancient to have graying hair at their grade. Among everyone present, Kai held his greatest hopes for them. They didn't look boisterous like Skar and were already dressed for the road, carrying weathered bags that told of countless travels.

He quickly changed his mind once they started talking, struggling to keep a casual smile.

"Don't you have any uncle to accompany you?" Mr. Celisa scolded them as if they were naughty children. "The road to Limgrell can be quite perilous if you've never threaded it. Have you packed food and dry clothes?" He squinted at the cloudless sky. "There'll be rain before the day is over."

"Come on, Vert. They're not children." Mrs. Celisia patted her husband's arm. "I'm sure these young men can take care of themselves." She gave them a grandmotherly smile. "But if you want a guide, we'll be happy to accompany you. We were already planning to go to Limgrell to visit our nephews. Little Randell must have just started walking. I try not to have favorites, but his red cheeks are so adorable." She sighed with contentment, gaze lost on the cobblestones.

Mr. Celisia cleared his throat. "We're in front of clients, honey."

"Oh, right." She jolted from her daydreaming. "Forgive me. Do you know how long you'll be staying? The Lake of Myst is quite lovely in spring. Not so much in winter. You know, it's too misty." She chortled. "Our grandson will be happy to show you all the best sights. Oh, but don't feel pressured to come with us. The offer still stands even if you want some younger bones to be your guide."

"Barren Skies! You always do this Marta," Mr. Celisia grumbled with an exasperated look. "How're we going to pay for Micha's education if you ditch all our jobs? I can take any of these youngsters with both hands tied behind my back." He narrowed his eyes at the other adventurers.

"We already have enough savings, dear. And it would only do you good to skip some meals." Mrs. Celisia smacked his belly before turning to them. "You know, Micha has quite the talent for magic. We were hoping she'd get accepted into an academy."

Between one grumble and several anecdotes about their nephews and grandchildren, the couple answered every question about Limgrell. They even went into great detail about different routes to take depending on the season.

“What do you think?” Flynn asked once they were alone. “Everything they said checks out with what Thomil told me about the town.”

“No.” Kai rubbed his arms, his skin still crawling about their experience. His back was drenched in cold sweat. “We can’t go with them.”

Rain furrowed his pale brows. “Why? They seemed like quite nice humans, and I couldn’t detect any lies.”

“You didn’t notice?” Kai struggled not to focus Mana Observer on the threat.

The fact the siren hadn’t perceived anything was all the more disturbing. Hallowed Intuition had been bellowing to get away since the couple started speaking. While with Arlynn there might have been doubts, here there were none: if they went with them, they would never reach Limgrell—not alive anyway.

There had been sharper dangers in the Sanctuary, but the whisper had never sounded so insidious and ominous since the marine horrors had almost ripped him to shreds. “We should make sure they don’t follow us. They’re not what they seem.”

They don’t just need money for all their nephews...

Kai barely listened to the next interviews, too disturbed by what had happened. They might have gotten killed if he didn’t have Hallowed Intuition.

After excluding the liars and the incompetent, the candidates weren’t so numerous anymore.

There must be someone who's not looking to rob or murder us, right?