

## Chapter 273 - The Lake of Myst

"I hate traveling on foot." Flynn slouched his arms forward to counterbalance his backpack, his boots tiredly crunched on the pebble road. With an orange race and profession, he had been hit the hardest by the forced march.

"Meow," Hobbes agreed, sitting on Kai's shoulders and grooming his backside. The furball freely roamed the mana zones and came to get carried once he got bored.

*The shameless...*

Kai was careful not to let his thoughts slip through their bond.

They had pushed the pace to reach Limgrell in eight days, the temperature dropped lower each night as they fared north-east. Mana zones also interfered with the seasons. The verdant woods had been painted in the orange, brown and reds of fall within a week. Evergreen pines and spruces stood out amidst the empty canopies.

"I can carry your backpack." Rain offered, more spry than the day they left Varsea. A bundle of leaves in all shades dangled from his bag together with a hawk feather and a pinecone.

"It's fine," Flynn pulled on the straps of his backpack as if he could lift himself up. "We're almost there, *right?*"

"Yes," Daniel grunted, his scarred lips giving him a somber air. Since the night they got rid of their stalkers, the man had fulfilled his role as a guide with admirable zeal and cut down on his curt ways—especially if the siren was present. "We should be able to see Limgrell beyond that ridge."

The cobbled path winded through two slopes covered in lush weeds with no plant higher than a shrub—far different from the Rustling Hills they had left behind. Kai had seen enough swarms of rattling beetles and snakes for a lifetime.

Crossing through mana zones had saved them considerable time. Daniel had been adamant about staying away from any area higher than Orange-3 and Hallowed Intuition let them avoid any Yellow beast.

*Almost there. She'll be fine.*

In just hours he'd finally see his sister. Someone should have informed her that he was alive, though there was no way to tell how she'd react. It had been over two years since they last spoke. Was it too much to hope she'd leave Limgrell and abandon the case of the missing people?

*Being on the mainland should have made her more cautious.*

Close to his goal, his mind played out all kinds of unlikely scenarios.

*She won't stab me before we speak...*

The sooner they reached Limgrell, the sooner he could put his mind to rest. He'd convince Kea to not be reckless, and figure out his next step forward. Perhaps he could open that alchemy shop, or visit one of the mystical places he had read about. Traveling would be much more pleasant if they didn't have to march at breakneck speed through the wilderness. Everything would work itself out.

*Damn it. I jinxed it, didn't I? It should still be fine... Hallowed Intuition hasn't—*

Flynn clapped both his shoulders. "Stop thinking and relax. There is no point worrying until we know the situation."

*If only it were that easy.*

"Yeah... Ahi!" Kai twisted his neck to glare at Hobbes.

The cat had nibbled on his ear with too much enthusiasm. "Mrow," The violet eyes watched him as if that were his fault for being foolish.

*You can walk by yourself if you bite me again.*

"Meeew," The demonic furball licked his hair with innocent violet eyes.

*Spirits, how did you get so spoiled?*

Their combined efforts had got him out of his head. The road was rising on the slopes, the sky covered by puffy clouds. A chill gust ruffled his hair, smelling of heather, moss and myrtle.

Climbing over the ridge, Kai saw their destination—Limgrell. A pale wall enclosed a smattering of houses poking out of dense mists. The town size was unknown, though further beyond crystal blue snippets of the Lake of Myst and green islets peeked out of the fogs.

He would have called it picturesque if the current circumstances hadn't already tainted his impression into eerie.

"There's your destination," Daniel said with a labored breath, hands resting at his sides. "It should clear a little if the sun peeks through the clouds."

"Oh," Rain and Flynn gaped, mesmerized by the sight with almost coordinated expressions.

"Let's go, shall we?" The seeker gestured at the winding path down with a pleased smile. "I'd very much like to have a warm meal and a real bed."

"Not to get paid?" Kai mused.

A smirk pulled at his scarred lips covered by a dark stubble. "That too. We arrived a day earlier than promised. Are you not satisfied with my services?"

While not the most personable guide, no one could deny Daniel was competent. His knowledge of the terrain had saved them days of wandering; he spotted where to safely set up camp at a glance and recognized the markings of dangerous beasts.

"You'll get your bonus." Kai took the path toward the town.

Flynn and Rain were already running ahead. After a week on the road, the anticipation of food and shelter invigorated their legs for the last stretch. Water and Earth Magic made Kai look only slightly unkempt, but they couldn't replace a warm bath.

The chilly mist washed over them as they descended the slopes. Despite the farmsteads and barns being somewhat visible, no one was working in the fields. This far north, they might have already harvested and prepared the fields for winter.

"Let me do the talking." Daniel led them toward the barred main gate and knocked on a rusty panel with a hollow sound.

The shutter pulled back with a metallic click. A pair of beady eyes studied them with blatant distrust. "Who are you?" The guard snorted. "Traveling with three snotting kids?"

"Just weary travelers looking to admire the sights of the lake." The seeker had the most affable smile that his scar allowed.

"Pha!" The guard laughed in a shower of spittle. "No one comes to Limgrell in this season. You must be more adventurers looking for the bounty. If only those fools would accept their kids are gone, we wouldn't have to deal with your lot. People have disappeared into the mists for generations, and no one ever cared."

*The Republic still hasn't intervened to solve the case then... It's too much to hope they'd do something good.*

"May we enter the town, sir?" Daniel continued to smile politely.

"Who am I to keep you from wasting your time? Your IDs." The guard opened a second shutter lower on the wall. A minute later their papers were shoved back. "Remember you have to register in the townhall if you stay longer than a day." The shutters closed and a door creaked open beside the main gate.

"Such a warm welcome." Flynn mused once they were out of earshot. "No wonder they don't get any visitors."

"Did we have to get treated like that?" Rain narrowed at where the guard must be sitting inside the wall.

“Standing guard at the gate of a town with no visitors is often assigned as a punishment.” Daniel dipped his head in apology. “It’s just faster to go along with it. This guy wasn’t that bad. Trust me.”

Inside the gate, the streets were just as deserted. Kai would think Limgrell was a ghost town if he couldn’t see people and lights moving inside the buildings. Three alleys in, the first passersby threw them wary glances and whispered among themselves.

*What a lovely place.*

“It was more pleasant the last time I visited,” Daniel grunted. “Where do you want to go?”

His companions were both looking at him, Kai bit his cheek. While the Limgrell didn’t have more than a couple thousand inhabitants, running into his sister would take considerable luck. “We can go to the Hall of Seekers to close our contract.”

If Kea’s team was investigating a quest, it’d be the best place to look for her too.

The streets became more populated toward the center, though hardly more welcoming. Every local was able to tell they were outsiders with a look—and spirits, did they love to glance. From their murmurs, everyone assumed they were adventures looking to cash in the reward and gave them few chances to succeed.

*Guess the whole town will know who we are by dinner.*

The Hall was a more modest building than the one in Varsea. Two stories of mortar and brick with a shingle roof and a creaking door that echoed across the neighborhood. He was quite surprised to see an array meant to keep out the cold.

“You’re— oh, new faces!”

Kai turned to find the first warm smile of Limgrell. A girl in her late teens sat behind a counter a few steps away. She wore enchanted glasses and had her brown hair parted in two pigtails.

“Hi, I’m Belice. How can I help you?”

“Hi.” He wandered to the desk, taking out the documents of the contract while he studied the place. There was a quest board and a couple of tables, though no lounge to drink. “We need to—”

“I see,” Belice browsed through the pages in seconds. Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. “That’s quite the sum. You must have wanted to get here fast. I just need your signatures here unless you have any complaints to report.”

“No,” Daniel was all too eager to pocket the promised mesars and close the deal. “It was nice doing business with you. I’ll stay in town for a couple of days if you need me. I’ll give you a discount.”

“Thanks.” Kai shook his hand before turning to the clerk. “I’ve been looking for a girl. She should look around sixteen with…” He was about to point to his own eyes as a comparison, but Matthew didn’t have siblings. Thankfully, he had been the only one to inherit their father’s lighter hair. “Her name’s Keandra.”

“Kea?” Belice lit up in recognition before she covered her mouth. “I’m not at liberty to share information about other seekers.”

“*Please.*” Flynn leaned on the counter beside him. “Her family asked us to check on her. They’re worried since she hasn’t responded to their last letters.”

The girl scrunched her brows and squinted at them. Among all the pale faces, one look should be enough to tell they were from the same area as Kea and the other natives of the archipelago in her group.

Belice bit her lip, lowering her gaze. “I told her not to go…”

“What do you mean?” Kai struggled to remain composed. He didn’t like this one bit. “Where is she?”

“Her group went to the old tower to search for Martell. He’s one of the boys who disappeared out on the farms last week.” The words came out in a rush. “Kea said she had found a lead yesterday and wanted to check it out. She should have been back by now… but the tower is quite a distance away. And it’s easy to lose sense of time when the mist rises. They’re probably just late.”

He clenched his finger around the counter. Of course, his sister was still pursuing the investigation in spite of everyone’s warning.

*Why couldn’t she stay put?*

“Is this *tower* dangerous?” Flynn inquired.

“Uh… not really. The area is Orange-2. It’s not a problem for her team. It’s just a crumbled building that has been there since the town was founded. There have always been rumors it was the home of some ancient, but it’s probably just an old mill.”

“She didn’t say what she went looking for?”

“Kea’s not much for words.” Belice shook her head. “Several seekers have taken the contract, but no one has found any real leads. It was why I was skeptical about the tower.”

*She’ll be fine.*

He exhaled a sharp breath and asked. “Where is this place?”

"It's a few miles further along the northern shore. But it's easy to get lost if you're not used to them. You should wait here. I'm sure she'll be back..."

"Thank you," Kai headed for the door, already not listening. He hadn't come here to leave things up to Fate.

Flynn and Rain caught up to him in the streets. "Wait up!"

"She could be in danger." He slowed but didn't stop walking.

"Yes. And you've no idea how to even get out of the town or find her. If people keep getting lost around here, I don't think it's as easy as that girl made it out to be. We should also find an inn—"

"We don't have time for that." Kai brushed his hand off his shoulder.

Flynn grabbed his arm to slow him. "We'll be faster if we don't have to carry our full backpacks. It'll also give us time to ask around for more information. Ten minutes now to save hours later."

"I think he's right." Rain piled on. "Remember you told me to not act without talking it through."

Looking between his two companions, Kai admitted defeat. "We must be quick."

"Like lightning." Flynn nodded. "I saw an inn on the way here. Rain, can you ask around if anyone knows about this tower?"

"Okay." The siren smiled at a pair of women staring at them from across the street.

Twenty minutes later they stood before a different gate with an equally grouchy guard. The guard insisted on triple-checking their IDs before waving them through. "Be careful of the Mist Wraiths. Don't follow the voices." She warned and shut the door before they could ask what she was talking about.

"I think it's just local folklore." Flynn shrugged.

A dirt path lined with a rotting fence headed north, disappearing into the fog; the lake extended on their right, an eerily calm mirror without a single ripple. While it was also a mana zone, only the deeper area miles offshore was actually considered dangerous.

*Not eerie at all.*

"Let's go," Kai started jogging. "Tell me if you spot any landmarks."

It was indeed easier to run without baggage. Without anyone to spy on them, they had stored their supplies inside their spatial artifacts. The tower should be visible by the

shore—when the air was clear in summer. As if he hoped his friends' Perception and his Favor would pull him through.

*She'll be fine.*

When he spread Mana Observer, his vision was distorted by the mist and effectively halved. Part of it seemed due to the ambient essence, though not everything. He would have been eager to study the phenomenon any other time, now he just focused on the run.

Body Augmentation flowed in his veins. Kai pushed a little faster than was reasonable, eating the miles with a single-minded focus. The cold bit his lung. Enveloped by the fog, everything looked the same, silent and pale. It was Hallowed Intuition that first warned him that something had changed.

A soft whisper, building up with each stride and step.

"I... I hear... something," Flynn said between the panting, slowing his pace to focus. "It's... almost like..."

"There." Rain pointed to a shadow looming tall among the mist, a faint scream echoing to their ears.