

Chapter 288 - Rumors and Lies

The door to the Hall of Seekers swung open with an odious creaking that made Rain cringe. Everything was louder on the surface, sounds grated on his ears.

The way here had been annoyingly quiet. No presence tried to spy on him, much less approach. A strange guilt poked him for visiting the Hall without warning his friends, even if it was for their sake.

I'll tell them once I've confirmed my suspicions.

It was more efficient to come alone.

The layers of clothes he was wearing made the Hall stiflingly warm. Rain untied his scarves, pulling them beneath his coat to store them away. Across the room, six human adventurers drank beers at a table, likely another group lured by the bounty. Their suspicious gazes washed over him, they stopped to do a double take and stare at his face.

From the sense of threat, they lacked notable skills despite reaching Yellow. Rain put them out of his mind and headed to the front desk. Flynn and Kai often repeated to be careful, but how could he be wary of humans weaker than his eight-year-old self?

"Hi." The clerk—Belice—called his attention to her. "How may I help you?" She closed a notebook with a pen to keep the mark and smiled politely, adjusting her gold-rimmed glasses.

"Hi, I'm Oraine." Resting one arm on the counter, he reciprocated the smile, quirking his lip slightly on one side. Perfect symmetry could appear cold or unapproachable, and he needed her to talk.

Sirens were considered mesmerizing by most races, a positive first impression or infatuation made sapient individuals more susceptible to swaying. While his gift had dried up with the miles from the sea, he couldn't easily eliminate habits instilled since childhood.

"You're friends with Matthew, right? Is he okay?" Her spectacled eyes studied him. There wasn't the glimmer of attraction or even the surprise of finding a beautiful painting. She might as well have been looking at a fistful of sand. "You can let him know the contract hasn't changed since he last checked."

Any other time Rain would have found her lack of reaction delightfully refreshing, right now it was inconvenient. Did she have a skill to maintain composure? An artifact? Or had leaving the sea affected him more profoundly than he predicted?

It had barely been a few weeks, too soon for the *rattles* to manifest...

The sudden impulse of pulling out a mirror swept him in panic. *No. I'm jumping to conclusions.* He wrestled his thoughts back under control. Something else was going on.

The last time he had visited the Hall, he hadn't spoken with Belice though he gotten the impression her behavior was off. And he was becoming ever more certain.

"Mat's fine. I'll make sure to tell him about the contract." Rain fidgeted with the shells on his bracelet. "I came to talk to you actually."

It was more direct than he had planned on being. His skills could pick apart the truth from the girl, but that would be rude, boorish, and no fun at all.

"What about it?" If Belice was alarmed, nothing in her demeanor gave it away, only appearing mildly curious. A privacy ward sprung up around them. "If it's relevant to the Hall, I'll do my best to answer."

"Have you been in this town for long?" Rain asked, committing to his blunt ways. "Do you know Limgrell well?"

"I guess I do... I've grown up around here." Belice took out a silk handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her spotless spectacles. "Why?" She put the lenses back on her dainty nose. "Is there some information you need?"

"There is," Rain removed his woolen hats and scrubbed a hand through his flattened hair. "You obviously know about the things moving in the mist. We've been looking everywhere for clues. I was wondering if you could provide a better lead."

"Well... if I knew the culprits, I would have already stopped them." Her dark brown eyes peered at him, a small crease between her brow. "I'm just good at gathering rumors."

"So you think there is more than one person responsible? Do you know how many?" A faint flutter brushed his mind; Rain smiled brightly despite himself. The feeling reminded him of the social gatherings he attended as a child, rare occasions when his mother allowed him to measure his progress against other kids. Though he had never been this clumsy. "Rumors can be useful indeed. I've heard a few before coming here."

She must have a profession for information gathering. That's quite rare.

"What are you saying?" She pulled out her silk handkerchief again.

"Do you need a hand polishing those enchantments?" He raised a palm in offer. "Cramming so many arrays together must have made them finicky. You know, my sister taught me a trick for that. If you hold more mana around the engraving, that usually helps."

Belice wasn't smiling anymore. "What are you talking about—"

"Wait a second!" Rain leaned over the counter to stare straight into her hazelnut irises; he swatted the tingle away from his mind. Being subjected to an ability gave him the right to reciprocate, but he decided to be courteous. "It's not the glasses, is it?"

It was a clever diversion. If anyone noticed the charm, they would suspect the enchanted spectacles only to find nothing. “The compulsion is in your eyes. Do you need the sound cue to use it?”

Belice pressed her lips into a bloodless line, breaking her composure.

Rain hadn’t exactly figured out what he would do if she refused to admit the blatant truth. It would turn awkward with so many witnesses around, especially the snoopers upstairs.

Humans can be so stubborn—

“*Not here.*” Her icy tone was a better admission than he could hope for.

He didn’t mind humoring her if it made things easier. “Where would you like to talk?”

She grabbed a pile of documents from a drawer, sifting through them as if he wasn’t there. “My shift ends in four more hours at noon.”

“I see, I’ll wait here then.” Rain looked at the empty tables, they would give him a decent view of the front desk. He would cut close to Flynn coming back; he wasn’t used to having people worry about him.

I should have left a note.

“Wait.” Belice hissed before he could take three steps. Her hands gripped the desk as she stood up and raised her voice to the ceiling. “I’m taking my pause. I’ll be back in half an hour.” She slammed down a ‘*Be back shortly*’ sign, then turned to him. “*You.* Follow me.”

That sounded dangerously close to a command. Sixteen years of education urged him to respond to the repeated offenses. Rain clenched his jaw. He wasn’t Oraine Akeelise Ryuu any longer. He had left that identity behind when he breached the shore.

“Where are we going?” He forced his smile to remain light.

I’m just another adventurer here. I have to accommodate the land dwellers.

Belice gathered her notebook and strode toward the back of the Hall without answering; her face was an inscrutable mask that even his mother would have approved.

Depths. She’s vexing.

Sighing deeply, Rain hurried to catch up. The last thing he wanted was to chase her down. A presence on the upper floor peeked at them, showing an equal lack of manners that chipped at his patience.

The backdoor opened with a brass key. They walked into a dark corridor, a spiral staircase on their left, and continued to a secondary exit behind the building. Stepping outside, the mist cooled his skin and temper.

The rude snooper followed them across one street before reaching the limit of their puny skills. "Where are we going?" He repeated in his colder tone.

"To a safe place to talk." Belice gave a laconic reply, looking annoyed.

"No one's spying on us here."

"And how can you be sure?" She let out a harrumph. "Just because you can't sense anyone, it doesn't mean we're alone. Or do you think you have the best Perception skills in *all* of Limgrell?"

Hmm... I guess I can't be completely sure.

"I see your point."

From what he knew, the human girl didn't work for the abductors, though she could be leading him into a trap from a third party. The thought warmed his blood for how unlikely. He had never lost sight of her, and if she still managed to send a message, why not make him wait at the Hall longer?

Unless she's overconfident...

Either way, he didn't have to wander for long.

"In here," Belice stopped in front of a half-rotten wooden door. The wall was covered in crumbling plaster; the only feature distinguishing the house from the rows of identical buildings were the wards hidden in the frame. She glanced at the swirling mist and opened the entrance with a soft metallic clank. "Come quick."

Rain lingered a moment on the threshold. There wasn't anyone lying in wait inside, if he were to guess, the danger came from an offensive ward. It wasn't enough to threaten him anyway.

"Can we talk now?" The door shut behind him. He barely took notice, busy inspecting the hidden hideout. It was pitifully small, two rooms sparsely furnished with a gray sofa, a square table, a few cabinets filled with months of supplies, and two single beds.

I was right...

An array of shimmering runes had been engraved beneath the floorboards. More interesting was the hidden compartment containing shelves filled with folders and books. There might be some useful information in there.

Belice stood with her arms crossed in the center of the room. "You have no idea how much danger you put us in. You can't ask questions in front of everybody." She started pacing, cracking her impervious facade. "This house will need to be moved. *If* we survive till tonight. Blessed Moons, they'll..."

“Nobody saw us. And nothing of what I said was—”

“How many people have you told?” Belice jolted toward him, making a visible effort to appear calm.

“You mean about charming unsuspecting individuals?”

“I— It’s harmless,” she stammered, blushing beat red. “Why doesn’t it work on *you*? The glasses amplify my ability, it should work. Do you have a skill against it?” From her glare, someone might think he had stabbed her. “It’s better for everyone this way. They’re safer if they don’t wonder where I get my information.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before...” His mothers loved to weave elaborate excuses. He could write a book on the virtues of messing with people’s heads for their sake. “If it’s for the better, you won’t mind when I tell them.”

“No! Don’t move,” she squeaked.

“Or what...?” Rain arched an eyebrow. “Will you shoot me with the wand up your sleeve or use the arrays under the floor? Both will attract unwanted attention.”

She froze, eyes widening and confidence crumbling. Her hand gripped the sleeve where the weapon was hidden. “How do you— Who are you? I’ve looked everywhere. There are no traces of you anywhere before Varsea.”

So she’s some sort of information dealer...

“I’ve already told you my name.” Rain was tired of playing her tune. “Now what’s *your* deal? How are you involved with the abductions?”

Belice gaped at him, brimming with indignation. “I don’t have anything to do with those madmen!”

“Sure...” He believed her, but the accusation sounded like a good way to make her admit her true allegiance. “Is that why you’ve been charming people to ignore you?”

“No, I— That— There are too many people watching. I couldn’t take the risk that they’d alert somebody. You don’t understand the dangers.”

“What do I not understand exactly?”

“I’ve been trying to stop them!”

“Them?”

“They’re part of a cult.” Her shoulders slumped and she paced again, arms wrapped around herself. “They worship some kind of fallen deity. There have been signs of activity across the Republic.”

“What are they doing with the missing people?” He pressed. “Where are they hidden?”

“If I had all the answers, I would have already stopped them.” The girl snorted. “I only know snippets, they’re extremely secretive. And they have lots of people working for them in positions of power. Some of the administrators of the Hall for sure. They are breathing down my neck for *anything* suspicious.” She punctuated with a glare.

“My bad.” He said, more to appease her than for any real guilt. “You still haven’t told me how you fit into this. How do you gather information?”

Instead of being rattled, the question made her stand straighter. “You have no idea what trouble you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“Yes,” Rain titled his head, letting a sliver of his exasperation escape. “That’s why I asked *you*.”

Belice pursed her lips, wearing the mask of clerk professionalism she used at the front desk. “I work for the *House of Whispers*.” She took out a metallic black token from a hidden pocket in her skirt. It was engraved with a silver crescent crossed by three purple waves, representing the whispers they stole.

That...

“You’re part of the House?” It wasn’t entirely unexpected but still surprising. Rain examined the compartment hidden beneath the floorboards with renewed interest. Those folders might be more valuable than he predicted.

“Only fools would lie about belonging to the House.” A hint of smugness crept into her tone. “I’m in charge of gathering rumors in Limgrell.”

“The House of Whispers trades in secrets.” His mother had brought him along to see once. “Does your supervisor know you’ve been giving them away for free?” From everything he knew, the House didn’t involve themselves in morality, selling to the highest bidder.

Belice opened her mouth, covering her face with her hand. “Of course, she knows. We all see the importance of stopping more people from going missing.”

“Mhmm... Is that why you brought me here instead of to your local branch?”

“I can’t reveal our location to a random stranger,” she scoffed.

“Right... I recall anyone who unmask a *listener* of the House can access their services. So I’ve qualified.” He also possessed an access token, though that would give away his identity. “Why don’t you take me there?”

“No— I— You—” Belice started nervously cleaning her glasses.

“Are you even allowed to bring me *here*?” Rain studied the cramped rooms. “This place belongs to the House, doesn’t it? There are two beds and way more food than a single person might need.”

The picture was becoming increasingly clear. The House of Whispers’ own skills and professions explained how she gathered her rumors. Charming people to dismiss her ensured she wouldn’t attract the attention of the abductors, or her boss.

Is she a rogue member? Or is it a personal vendetta against this cult?

“Fine! My branch leader doesn’t know. Are you happy now?” Belice snapped, unable to bear the silence. “This is what I get for trying to help. You’ve messed everything up. What do you want to keep quiet? I can get gold. A lot. I can draft a contract.”

A bribe? He could hardly think of anything more insulting. *Mother of Tears give me patience.*

“To start, stop messing with my friends. We’re not your personal hounds to scout the dangers.” Rain took a seat at the square table. Kicking back the other chair for her, he laced his fingers. “Then... you *did* say you’re good at gathering rumors. I’m sure we can reach an agreement.”