

Chapter 283 - Next Steps

Kai moved to the cupboard above the sink. Resting his hands on the counter, a tired sigh escaped his lips. He closed his eyes, distractedly taking notice of the runes engraved on the piping and the burrow of a red mouse below the house.

This wasn't the archipelago any longer. There was so much he had yet to learn, from common appliances to the highest levels of power and magic he might encounter. Fascinating and dangerous, the mainland had brought the challenge he craved.

What he *hadn't* foreseen was the slim amount of time he would get to gain his footing. One blow after another, Fate refused to allow him the tiniest breather. He had been tossed into the deep end: if he didn't learn how to swim quickly, he'd drown.

I survived the Sanctuary. How much harder can this be?

Kai picked a stubby chalice from the cupboard and poured himself water from a ceramic jug. Drinking what he conjured through magic never tasted quite as good with its distilled purity.

His finger tapped on the glass, a thread of mana chilled the liquid out of habit. "Do you want some water?" He broke the awkward silence without turning.

"I'm good. Thanks." Kea remained seated, lost in her own thoughts.

Okay, I can do this.

Kai downed the icy glass with a pleasant shiver. Burying his frustration, he marched back to the table and settled in the chair across from his sister. "What do you know about the missing people? Any suspicion and suspects. Don't leave out any details."

Her lips pursed at his curt tone. She opened and closed her mouth as if going through several possible answers. "I should ask the others before telling you everything. We've been working on this contract for a month. The information isn't only mine to share."

It was a sensible albeit vexing objection since her team didn't know they were siblings. "Are they going to say no? We've survived that fire together, that should be enough of a reason."

"Huh... fine. I guess they'll understand."

Kai blinked, unsure if he had heard that right. Did his sister just concede something with barely a fight?

"What?" She snorted at his stupefied look. "Time is of the essence. I'll talk with them when they're back. Your help is welcomed, but this is our investigation and livelihood. You must promise not to act on your own."

“I understand.” Kai dipped his head in acknowledgment.

“That wasn’t a yes.”

Mhmm... she has gotten smarter.

“I swear I’ll warn someone of your team before taking any drastic action.” It wasn’t exactly what she had asked for, though Kai was glad to see Kea accepted anyway.

“Good.” She drummed her fingers on the table and suddenly stood up, her chair creaking back on the wooden boards. “Wait here.” She disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

Kai fought against the temptation to peek. The privacy wards around the house were a mismatched tapestry of arrays, likely repurposed from other projects. Their clever positioning couldn’t fix the poor quality, it hardly took any effort to pick them apart.

The light scraping of a piece of furniture being moved reached his ears. Before his curiosity could erode his will, Kea returned with a pile of documents and folders in her arms. “This is all we know.” She deposited them with a proud air.

That’s quite... something...

He stared at the hundreds of pages covered in dense writings. Frankly, he had expected no more than a messy notebook, if *that*. While they may not have made much progress toward an actual solution, her team hadn’t spent their time twiddling their thumbs either.

She did say this was their job...

“What’s all this?” He reached for the large folder on top.

Kea placed a hand over the papers to keep them in place. “Nothing leaves this house.” Her gaze hung on him with seriousness. “Caeli and Niel will already be mad that I showed you without their permission.”

“Your house, your rules.” Kai slipped the folder, stunned again when he noticed the soaring hawk crest on the first page. The ink was strangely faded and bright in patches. Flipping through the pages, the formal jargon, stamps and signatures left no doubt about its origins.

“How did you get your hands on this?” The document came from one of the archives of the Republic, and the clerks didn’t like to share just because you asked nicely.

“I have my ways.” Kea showed her white teeth, looking pleased. “Don’t look so worried, it’s just a dye dust copy. No one will ever realize.”

Spirits, what has she been up to?

Kai smoothed his grimace—perhaps it was better he didn't know. His eyes turned to the folder. It listed people who had gone missing starting from almost fifty years ago. Scanning the other files on the table, about a third sported the same official crest, while the rest showed personal notes written in different hands.

This is going to take a while.

His sister watched him sift through the documents, studying his reaction.

"This is quite impressive." Kai ignored his foolish pride in favor of convenience. "Is there an order I should follow?"

"There is," Kea readily answered. "People have gone missing around the Lake of Myst for generations. It's nothing *too* unusual around mana zones. At least it wasn't..." She pulled out a page covered in columns of names. "It's hard to say the exact number since many people who disappeared don't get reported. The numbers have been rising for a few years before they spiked in the last eight months or so."

The guy in the house did imply they had been abducting people for a while...

He had never thought his sister had the patience for this kind of research work. A sharp grin grew on her face as she explained how they had tracked down and connected the information.

Guess it's still a hunt in a way.

They poured over the papers, drawing more connections with what they had overheard at Herry's house. While her team had found no answers, the intel they gathered filled some pictures of the events. It was far more professional than he expected from a group of teenagers.

The only advice Kai could offer them was how to organize the data into graphs since checking the information was a mess.

I'll offer to show her later.

The people abducted had been all young, the oldest at twenty-nine and the youngest at just eleven, with an even mix of male and female. Over half lived in the farms and villages around the Lake of Myst, and the cases in Limgrell proper came from the impoverished neighborhood on the outskirts.

Is that why there are no people on the streets?

Kea clenched her jaw. "Herry probably helped pick the targets. The guards don't bother searching if the parents aren't yellow professionals."

“Yes...” He bit his cheek. “There must be a lot more cases from how those two spoke.”

Aiming at the fringes of society, there was less chance of someone taking an interest or being taken seriously. *The Republic's laws only protect those they consider worthy.* He had been a toddler in Whiteshore when his mom taught him that lesson, but those words still held true.

Wait a second...

“I might know how to find out more.” Kai emptied his ring of the material he had salvaged from the study before the house burned. A mound of papers, journals and ink bottles clinked on the table. Instead of complaining, his sister looked delighted at the idea of delving into the pile.

“Where did you get that spatial artifact?” She correctly identified his ring with a distracted glance.

“It’s a gift from my teacher. Can you keep it to yourself? I don’t want to attract attention.”

“I would have suggested the same,” Kea said. “I’ve only seen one similar artifact and it was on the finger of a patrician. Does Flynn know?”

“Yes... Hmm, this should be it.” Kai pulled five sheets of paper from the pile, the ones he took directly from Herry’s desk. “Do you recognize any of the names?”

She leaned over the table to read. “I... yes. A few...” Her brows knitted together. She dug through her own files to confront the names. “There are dozens of people here...”

“Do you think they were all abducted?”

“Or potential candidates...”

The more they grasped the true scale of the plot, the grimmer the picture became. From the nine officially missing, they found two dozen more. Spirits knew how many still evaded them.

“We should really tell someone,” Kai muttered. The scope of this plot kept escalating and their forces remained the same. “We can send an anonymous message to the precinct and the Hall of Seekers. Someone must do something.”

Kea shook her head. “Messages can be traced. No matter how careful we are, there are skills to track anyone who has touched an object. I don’t want to risk anyone else’s life till we confirm the extent of their reach.”

“There must be a way to protect us from being traced back. Every skill has a counter.”

“Probably. But do you know how? If we warn the guards, we should also prepare to run.”

Kai swore under his breath and went to slump into the old sofa smelling of mold. Despite piecing together the extent of the abductions, they were no closer to discovering how or why.

What do these people want? Where are they bringing all these victims? They are too many to be kept inside Limgrell.

He sat straighter with a frustrated groan. “If this praetor is the same man I met at sea, we must avoid a confrontation at any cost.”

“Agreed. I don’t have a death wish.” Kea continued to sort through the papers with a feverish look. “I want to find out what happened to Caeden. And the others if they can be saved. Then we’ll write to every public building and disappear to the other side of the Republic.”

“Uh...” Kai watched her till she stopped her frenetic actions with a huff. “Can you swear you won’t take any more reckless actions? I know it’s your case, but I’ve got more experience fighting higher grades and keeping alive.”

“Meeew.” Hobbes took that moment to saunter into the house and blink into his lap. The furball demanded to be petted, uncaring of the stunned girl.

“What—” She watched the majestic feline, speechless.

“Can you promise?” Kai ignored the magical cat purring on his knees; violet eyes closed to enjoy the scratches behind his ear. “If and when we find any clue of this group, I need to know you’ll let me help.”

“I— yes. Fine. I know you’ve always been stronger than me,” she grumbled with more resignation than bitterness.

Nice assist buddy.

Kai rubbed Hobbes's belly. He had already presented his familiar at the tower, though he failed to mention his grade. Nothing better than a teleporting cat to make an impression.

“You haven’t told me what happened. To Caeden I mean. How did he go missing?”

“There isn’t much to tell.” Kea buried her head among the documents. “He said he wanted to check something one morning. And he didn’t come back. We searched every corner of town without a single clue. No one had seen him since.”

“Do you have any idea where he was going? Was it inside or outside Limgrell?”

“I don’t know...” her nails dug into her fists. “It was only the second week since we had gotten here. We were beginning to suspect the situation was worse than the contract advertised, and...” Her voice died down.

Kai stood to hover beside her, unsure of how to act. "It's okay. We'll find him."

The clacks of the lock interrupted his dilemma. Their attention was pulled to a chorus of familiar voices and laughs. Niel poked through the door, his unshaven face split by a smile. Mari and Caeli followed him, with Flynn and Rain just behind.

"Kea, thank Yatei, you're here. Did you hear of the fire? I hope you don't mind we invited—" His eyes stopped on the pile of papers, and then on him, the smile turning into a frown. "Matthew."

"Hi." Kai waved. "A few things happened."

"Mew."

No, you can't order them away. It's their house.

"Well, guess it's too late to keep secrets." Caeli took in the situation with a shrug, her attention captured by Hobbes. "Kitty, kitty." She knelt before the beast lazily lying on a pillow. Her hand lingered just above the fluffy silver fur as if afraid of offending him.

"Meow."

I'm not saying that. No. Okay, fine.

"You can pet him if you buy him a fish later."

The girl bobbed her head with a delighted expression as if she had just gotten the deal of the year.

Alas, her two companions weren't so easily swayed. Mari flung herself to investigate the foreign pile of papers that had taken over their table. "Where did you find these?" She plucked a journal from the pile, carefully examining the writings. "This looks like Herry's writing..."

"We had agreed to discuss it before showing it to anyone," Niel whispered to Kea through gritted teeth. "You know we could get arrested—" Seeing him close, she pulled her out of earshot before continuing to mutter.

Rain stopped inside, inspecting the mess around the living room. Flynn barely spared a glance at the decor and strode straight up to Kai. "Please, tell me it wasn't you."

"What?"

"The fire. You didn't even flinch when Niel mentioned it. Tell me you weren't involved."

Kai lay a hand on his heart with his most innocent look. "I wasn't involved?"

Flynn narrowed his eyes. "You're lying."

"Yes. You asked me to. And, to be fair, that guy caused the blast on his own."

"What guy? What did you do *exactly*?"

"Was it Herry?" Mari snapped her head toward them, no longer lost in her books.

Damn, I should have spoken quieter.

"You did *what*?" Niel's voice rose an octave higher from his conversation with Kea.

Well, at least we're all here so I won't have to repeat myself.

"There were some *unfortunate* developments," Kai raised his voice. "Do you want to start with the bad news or the worse news?"