

Chapter 282 - Headstrong Will

A series of successive fires blasted the burning house—Herry Rickson had been nothing but thorough with the defenses of his house. The explosions showered their backs in heat and shoved them forward.

Kai leaned against the grimy stone wall of a building to not lose his footing. His right ankle sent a piercing pain up his leg. He could still move his foot, so it was just sprained, a modest price for jumping out of the second floor of a burning building.

Damn lunatic. Couldn't even blow himself up alone.

He took a vial from his ring, the alchemic potion flowed down his throat like an icy drink on a hot day. The pain dimmed into a dull ache, though his ankle couldn't entirely heal for as long as he kept moving.

What a mess.

The conversation they had eavesdropped in the study swirled in his head. When Kai tried to knit the knowledge into a coherent tapestry, he had the inkling he wouldn't like the result. He pushed the thoughts aside, pressed by the worry for his sister.

Aside from dust and soot, Kea came out unscathed from the fall—at least physically. She helped support his weight, her gaze lost among the shadows. "He's dead... I thought I could save him... They're all dead..."

This *he* could only refer to Caeden, her lost companion. Kai had no idea who the guy was, but he could understand the numb grief in his sister's eyes. They both knew the pain of losing someone close. From her mutterings, she also felt responsible for failing her teammate.

"It's not your fault." Kai poured conviction in his tone, though guilt and responsibility rarely cared for reason.

Kea didn't seem to hear, looking ahead with a vacant stare.

Spirits, I suck at this. Let's get to safety first.

Bright flames roared behind them, painting the sky a shade of red. The fire had managed to shake the town awake. Citizens screamed and hurried to curtail the flames before they spread to the whole neighborhood.

"Make space!" The authoritative shouts of the guards rose above the panicked yells; the rhythmic thump of their booted heels marched through the street.

Kai honed the cloaking spell around him, scraping his veins for the sparse Shadow motes he had remaining. The last thing they needed was to get noticed around the scene of the crime by the Republic.

From the derisive dismissal the thug had shown for the officers, Kai suspected there might be more than incompetence at play. In Varsea, it had been common opinion that the authorities should have stepped in when people kept going missing without explanation.

Why does the Republic never do its job when it's convenient?

He grimaced thinking of the clues that had been burnt with Herry's house. That house had brimmed with information, and all he was left with were a few scraps he had stored in his ring. How could he have predicted the guy would fall into his own trap?

At least the fire must have erased any trace of our passings.

No matter what profession skill existed out there, he refused to believe that anyone could trace them amidst the destruction. For the rest of the world, they had never been there.

Huh... Where are we?

Kai stared at the damp dark alley, the walls of two slanted buildings left only a thin layer of the gray-blue sky above them. The echoes of the fire sounded distant at their back. In his hurry to get away, he hadn't paid attention to *where* they were going. He wasn't familiar enough with Limgrell to distinguish the shade of blackened plaster or fragrance of the moldy stench in this particular spot of the outskirts.

The drape of mist that had fallen over the town didn't make things any easier.

Guess this explains why every local looks like a sour lemon. I'd also be grumpy to live in a place like this.

Kea rubbed her eyes. When she pulled back her hands, her face was a mask of stony angles. "This way." She led him through a series of narrow backstreets till Kai could recognize the main streets cutting through Limgrell. A column of smoke rose from the outer district, passersby threw them somber glances but didn't look particularly worried.

"Wait." Kai held her arm before she could step into the lighted walkway. "Hold your breath. It'll just take a second."

"What—" Ignoring her protest, he cast a stream of swirling water, washing any mud or dust accumulated from the Brimstone Quarter.

Kea spluttered and wiped her eyes. "Was that necessary?"

“Do you want to be seen smelling of burnt wood?” Kai dried her with a flick of his wrist and repeated the process for himself. “Did I miss any spot?” He raised his arms and spun on his heel.

“Just this.” She removed a wooden chip from his hair. “You’re good. Next time you use magic on me, warn me first.”

“Duly noted. What’s our story if anyone asks? Lost talking in the alleys?”

“No, that sounds too suspicious. Let’s say we were at the Hall of Seekers. The place is always empty, and Belice will confirm our story if I ask her.”

“You trust her?”

“Yes, I...” Kea gave a vehement nod. “She was the one who told me about Herry’s house. What would she gain from that?”

“You do have a point...” Whoever was behind the missing people would have no reason to risk them spreading the news. While the building had been a deathtrap, Herry and the thug had been none the wiser of their presence. “Hmm... how did she learn of that place?”

From the layers of enchantments, the paranoid informant should have carefully guarded the location of his house. How would a common clerk chance upon that information?

“Belice was always good at gathering rumors. I think she has a skill for it.” Kea shrugged. “And the town is not that big.”

Maybe you’re right...

There was still much to discuss, but his elemental reserves were running dry. Kai checked that no one was watching before letting his Shadow veil fizzle out. “After you.”

They strolled into the main road in more or less pristine condition. A child with platinum hair pointed a finger at them with mouth agape. Kai had learned that getting some glances was to be expected; few strangers stopped by Limgrell.

He wanted to go warn Flynn of what happened, but he couldn’t leave Kea alone when she was obviously distraught. The thug at the house had said he would *take care of them*. Whatever his ominous intentions were, the man had been pretty intent on keeping a low profile to not call attention to their activities. With the house of his associate blowing up, he would likely take time to reassess his plans.

We should be safe for a few days...

Speaking of people who wanted to hide their identity, Kai recalled another bit of information. The thug had mentioned a certain praetor to intimidate Herry.

Where did I hear that before...

A blade of Darkness aboard the *Intrepid* flashed in his mind. The memories of that night were fuzzy after the wreckage, though he was pretty sure the pirates below deck had used that same title to refer to their captain.

It must be a coincidence. Maybe I misremembered...

Unfortunately, the name wasn't the only clue. The trap in the ancient tower had shared the Darkness element beloved by the pirates, and the wards at the house had interfered with Hallowed Intuition, just like the black ship did at sea. Three coincidences formed a compelling argument that couldn't be denied.

Despite his desire for some peace, Fate had other plans.

You're supposed to be on my side. Not screw me over! Why can't I get a break?

"Are you okay?" Kea glanced at him with a worried frown. "You're looking pale."

"It's nothing. I'm just not used to the cold air." Kai put on a weak smile. "Is there a place where we can talk?"

"We're almost there."

Walking past a square with the statues of a Merian hero mounting a unicorn, they entered a residential district lined with discreet family houses. Kea stopped in front of an iron fence surrounding a three-stories cottage.

"We're renting the second floor." She soundlessly opened the gate and strode up a ramp of stairs on the back of the property to a tarnished green door. "Uh, the others are out." She removed a hair-thin thread from the hinges of the entrance, probably some kind of signal.

"Should we go looking for them?" After what happened, Kai would understand if she wanted to check on her friends.

"We'd just risk missing them. It's easier to wait here, they'll come back. We agreed to always move in a group since Caeden went missing..." her voice trailed down, looking away to hide her expression.

That sounds like a wise idea—if you follow it.

Just a couple hours ago he had found her on the way to Herry's house, *alone*. It probably wasn't the right time to point that out. "Can we go inside?"

“Yes...” She opened the lock with three quick clanks. “Sit wherever you like. I think we have water and cheese in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.” They entered a living room with a cooking place in the opposite corner. It was more or less what Kai expected from the dwelling of four adventurers not yet brushing their twenties. He could almost see the spots where each inhabitant had left their imprint. Dirty plates in the sink, random clothes strewn on chairs, a pile of books and a whetstone on an oak table.

Kea shut the door behind him, going to check on the two bedrooms on the back. She returned a moment later, her tense shoulders slumping slightly. “We’re safe. No one came here.”

Seeing her stand and her gaze wandering, Kai gestured to the table. “Maybe we could sit to talk more comfortably.”

“Hmm, yes.” She marched to a chair and sat with a rigid back. “What did you want to discuss?”

Isn't that the million-dollar question...

Kai took place across from her and laced his fingers to keep them still. A myriad of thoughts whirled in his mind, shouting to claim his attention. They had over two years to catch up, he had yet to explain what had happened to him in the Sanctuary and hear about her time on the mainland.

What happened during their month in Limgrell? How did they lose their teammate? Could she catch him up to speed with their investigation?

There was so much to say, though one thing soon triumphed over everything else. Kai took out the enchanted black pearl Rain had gifted him to shield their conversation—they could never be too careful if they were dealing with those crazy cultists.

Unsure of where to start, he got straight to the point. “We need to leave Limgrell before they come for us. This case is beyond what we can handle.”

“No.” Kea replied with steel in her eyes.

Dammit.

Kai held her gaze with all the sincerity he could muster. “You’ve also heard those two talk. Whatever is going on in this cursed town, it’s too dangerous to stay. That man wasn’t boasting when he spoke about their reach...” He told her about the raid and wreckage at sea. “This is bigger than us. If the guards in Limgrell won’t listen, we’ll go to another city.”

“And what makes you think that a different garrison will believe us?” She arched an eyebrow. “I’ve been on the continent longer than you. The guards never move for common adventures unless you bring them irrefutable evidence. And if you question the integrity of their colleagues, we’ll need a mountain of it.”

“I...” Kai prayed she was exaggerating. “Isn’t the situation already suspicious with the people gone missing without a clue? They must at least check.”

“Perhaps. They’ll take weeks to process all their pointless forms. And then weeks more to send someone to Limgrell, who might or might not find anything. Which will mean more, more weeks before anything gets actually done.”

“I know it’s not ideal. But that’s the best we can—”

“And *that*,” his sister interrupted. “Is taking for granted that they’ll let us leave. If these are really the same group you met at sea, how far do we have to run? How far will it be safe? They’ll likely send people after us if we run just as the house of that worm went up in flames.”

“I... hmm...” Kai hated to admit she had a point. “Leaving will still be safer than staying. We can wait a few days.” He offered a compromise to pull her into a negotiation.

“No.” His sister showed no hesitation in cutting him off. “I’m not running away.”

“Kea, *please*.” He leaned over the table, trying to keep a conciliatory tone. “I’d also like to help, but it isn’t worth dying over.”

“*Kai*,” she smiled mirthlessly. “I’m glad you came. All the team wanted to thank you for your help at the tower. But we aren’t children anymore. You aren’t forced to stay.”

“You know I won’t leave without you.”

“Then that’s your decision. I can’t change it any more than you can change mine. Anyone in my group is also free to do the same. Many have already done so. We were nine when we first got here.”

Kai tried not to raise his voice. “There is nothing to gain from certain death.”

“Now that I know what we’re dealing with, I can prepare,” Kea said with a tone of challenge. “It has been two years. You’re not the only one who has grown. I’m not the foolish girl you have to protect.”

Spirits, why does she have to be so stubborn?

He fell back into his seat, raking a hand through his hair. “We still know basically nothing. Why won’t you at least consider it?”

Kea pressed her mouth in a sour line. "I made a promise. I'm not leaving anyone behind."

Is she still...

"You mean your missing teammate?" Faced with her unyielding look, Kai gripped the edge of the table. He thought she had accepted it when he saw her tears—that would have been too easy. "You've heard what those two said. Your friend is dead." If stating it out loud was what it took to convince her, he wouldn't hold back. "You must know that too."

"*Herry* said he didn't know."

"These guys had him for a month. Why would they need to kidnap more people if those they took weren't dead?"

Kea crossed her arms, glaring a hole through his skull. "You've said yourself that we don't know much of anything for sure. I'm not running till I see Caedan's body and bury him."

The note of finality in her tone hung between them. He'd have a higher chance to reverse the tides than to change her mind, and he couldn't leave without her.

Now, the question was how to face this deathtrap...