

## Chapter 280 - Shady Affairs

Instead of charging straight into the house, Kea shielded herself behind the entrance of the cramped alley to study the building. The camouflage blended her features in the shadow of the worn boards behind her.

"I can check if he's in the house with Mana Sense," Kai said. Hallowed Intuition buzzed among his thoughts, the danger mild and indistinct.

"Don't," Kea snapped toward him. The abrupt movement highlighted her figure before her skill could reassert itself. "This is my investigation. If he notices you, he could destroy any evidence or run."

"I'm not an amateur," Kai pressed his lips. "He won't feel a tickle unless he's a yellow mage."

"There are wards to detect Perception skills. Can you get through those?" Her skepticism made clear it was a rhetorical question even before she deactivated her skill to arch an eyebrow.

*I probably can.*

While exploring the ruins of the Hidden Sanctuary, he had often run into arrays that reacted to Mana Observer—some even to the weight of his gaze. He hadn't been able to get past them, but when being detected was the difference between survival and the ravenous jaws of a beast, he had quickly learned the art of subtlety.

Still, he couldn't be completely certain to pass unnoticed without knowing his opponent's abilities.

*Every skill has a countermeasure.*

His sister would be rightly annoyed if he swooped into her affairs and acted on his own. It wasn't the best foundation to restart their relationship after two years.

"Okay, I'll follow your lead." Kai exhaled slowly before lowering his veil of Shadow enough to show his face. "What's the plan?"

"We must get inside."

"And I imagine you don't mean by knocking?"

"I didn't know where he lived before today. We must catch him inside where he has no way to run."

*Breaking into a creepy house to interrogate a slippery thug. What better way to start the day?*

“Don’t worry,” Kea softened her look. “The guards never come to the Grindstone Quarter. And if they did, Herry would rather jump into a pit of vipers than talk to them. His profession is focused on information gathering, his intel *was* usually good.”

*Sounds like he’s a model citizen.*

Any question would have to wait for a more opportune moment.

“Okay, stay close to me.” Kea turned to check the house again before fixing her eyes on him. “And I *mean* it. You’ve not been on the mainland as long as I have. I’ve seen many people at your grade die in an ambush.”

*I wasn’t the one who needed saving from the mist.* Kai swallowed his observation. Being around his sister was bringing out his smartass side. “I’ll be careful.”

Her curt nod was barely visible as she reactivated her camouflage. They slinked out of the alley toward the dingy two-story house, circling past the rusty front gate to look for a secondary entrance. A tarnished copper drain ran the rim of the slate roof, flakes of brown paint that must have once been red peeled off the walls. It must have been a nice family house in its heyday; now it looked like it could topple over at any moment.

Kai drew Shadow tighter around him to balance the rising sun. The stink of rot and waste soaked the air. No sound came from inside; this neighborhood was even quieter than the rest of Limgrell.

He carefully extended Mana Observer around the building. There were indeed arrays embedded into the walls meant to conceal, detect intrusion and other effects he needed time to decipher. The runic patterns were woven more intricately than he expected from the house of some washed-up criminal and stopped him from prying deeper inside.

*Why does this guy live in a dump if he can afford to enchant his home like a fortress?*

There was no back door, and every window had been boarded up with an abundant number of nails. The seemingly gruff method didn’t leave a chink to peep through.

Breaking the wood would alert anyone inside, and probably the whole block in the misty silence. If they had a couple hours, he could break the wards and cut an entrance with Water Magic.

They walked around the building twice before Kea stopped in the narrow alley left of the house. “We’ll enter there. Mind your steps.” She pointed at a window on the second floor. It was covered by a dark curtain, but the glass and wooden frame gave them a chance to make their way inside.

*Is this subterfuge necessary?*

A thousand and one doubts crowded his mind. Who was this guy? Why did Kea trust his intel to the tower? How was he linked to the investigation and the people who disappeared?

Breaking into a building without having a grasp on the situation filled him with disquiet, but Kea was already testing a moldy board to see if it could withstand her weight. She threw a look back at him before pulling herself up.

Kai could think of several ways to enter using magic, but spells were much easier to detect than Mana Observer. He could also jump to the window if he channeled Body Augmentation, though it probably wouldn't be quiet. Pride and cautiousness forbade him from being the one to raise the alarm.

He squinted to see his sister's figure and hurried to follow. The second plank he clung to, over the window of the ground floor, crumbled into rotten mulch under his fingers. Trying to stabilize himself, he failed to hold onto the slimy drain for the rain.

Kai curbed his instincts to cast a spell and jammed his foot into a chink between two planks to arrest his fall. The nailed wood let out an odious *creaking* that pierced the oppressive silence.

*Fuck.*

Kai locked his limbs in position, forgetting to even breathe. His ears perked to pick up any sign that they had been discovered. Kea stood frozen just above him. He could feel her glare burrowing into his skull despite her camouflage.

They stayed in position for over a minute—no one was coming. Kai tested each handhold before slowly making his way up to the glass window, standing on a board that stuck out of the building. Aside from a patch of black mold, the wooden frame of the window was like any other old pane kept in place by a latch on the inside.

*Hmm... how do we open it? Flynn usually takes care of this stuff.*

Urban infiltration was outside his area of expertise, especially when he couldn't use magic. "How do we—"

"Quiet," Kea muttered under her breath. The metal glint of a lockpick and a thin twine glimmered through her camouflage.

*I should learn how to do it too...*

The frame glowed to his senses. Layers of runes had been laid in the interstice between the wall panels, even more tightly than below.

*This Herry guy must be more paranoid than me. There are villas in the upper city of Highharbor with fewer protections.*

“Wait!” Kai hissed and grabbed her wrist before the lockpick could break a conspicuous filament of mana. His eyes and skills darted between the runes to grasp the working of the enchantments—something was off. Unraveling the cloaking, he noticed an incandescent sphere lay just below the windowsill. “It’s rigged with Fire mana.”

*Damn lunatics. Who puts a booby trap in their windows?*

“What— Are you sure?” Her tone was tense, though she didn’t comment on his use of a Perception skill.

“Yes. There is enough mana to blast us into the next building.” What was more disturbing was that Hallowed Intuition had barely reacted, still pulsing with a monotone buzz. Since the danger came from an inanimate object, there must be more wards that interfere with Fate inside the house.

*What the fuck is this place.*

Cold sweat slicked his back, he couldn’t take one step in this damned town without running into some deathtrap. It would have all been much simpler if they had brought the team to the front door.

Kea stood so still her face became indistinguishable from the mottled boards. “We need to find another entrance.”

“That’s not necessary. I can deactivate the trap,” Kai murmured. Returning with their teammates might be wiser, but he wouldn’t rest easy till he found out what was going on.

His sister watched him straight in the eyes. “Are you sure it won’t blow us up?”

“Yes, it’s not my first time.” He had spent months breaking down the Vastaire runes in the Sanctuary. “You can wait below, out of range.”

Kea didn't move a palm.

The foolish show of faith brightened his mood more than he cared to admit. “Okay, give me a couple minutes.”

Perched on the edge of a windowsill three meters above a muddy alley wasn’t the most comfortable position to work. Mana Analyst, Arcane Enchanting and Runic Scholar bore down on the tangle of arrays. Once he saw through the trap, it took seconds to find the glowing lines linked to the Fire reserve.

He was about to cut the link when a doubt made him pause. The enchantments overlapped with each other. It looked like poor planning, and most people didn't bother to build a redundancy mechanism, but it—

*Motherfucker!*

There was a second trigger interwoven with the soundproofing array. Again, they had come so close to blowing themselves up. Kai clenched his jaw and double-checked each array for a third redundancy. If anyone found the second, they would have looked for a third, and it seemed whoever created this trap agreed and didn't set more.

Kai shaped a scalpel of essence, using Mana Engraving to make two quick incisions in the rune pathways. His body tensed, ready to dart in case he had missed something. The Fire mana shone like a miniature sun, bright and inoffensive. "It's done."

"Good one." Kea took out her lockpicks to finish the job. The latch of the window quickly clicked off. She pushed aside the heavy curtain to reveal a barebone bedroom. An unmade bed was pushed against the opposite wall and a bookshelf on their left. The furnishings were sparse but spotless, in stark contrast with the exterior of the building.

He stretched his arm to stop his sister. "Maybe we should wait to call the others."

She hesitated a moment before shaking her head. "I can't miss this chance. We've been running in circles for more than a month. Let me handle Herry, we need answers."

*This isn't the house of some common thug.*

From his sister's stubborn look, no amount of convincing would change her mind. And to be honest with himself, he was also curious to figure out what was going on.

"You don't have to come." She watched him with no judgment. "You can go call Caeli and Flynn and come back with them."

"No way, I'm not leaving you here alone."

"Uh... Then let's hurry before he notices us." Kea slipped inside the window and deactivated her camouflage. "Be careful where you step."

Kai followed into the bedroom, also lowering his cloak since his Shadow mana was running low. He never imagined he'd be spending his morning breaking into a house. "What are we looking for exactly?"

"Any clue about the people disappearing." Kea browsed the books on the shelves, an old collection of folktales, and a series of volumes about the Lake of Myst. She checked the spines and shook them for anything hidden among the pages.

The anonymous room had few hiding spots. Enchantments coated every wall, including the floor and ceiling, clouding his sight, though Kai was reasonably sure there were no hidden compartments. He crouched beside a trunk to reveal a pile of clothes in need of a washing. He still sifted through them and knocked on the wood to check for any false bottom—no such luck.

Leaving the pile of garments neater than he found it, he stood to see his sister already heading for the door. The lock was open and there was no trap hidden in the handle.

“We must check the other rooms for him.”

He hurried after her. “Are you sure he’s home?”

“I— I don’t know...” Kea bit her lip, showing the first hint of hesitation. “Belice heard he was hidden here. He could have already left... but that’s only more reason to look for clues.”

*Why do I feel like we’re running straight into some sort of ambush...*

The corridor, painted in a dark gray, had no decoration and only a feeble crystal in the ceiling for light. There were two more doors and a flight of stairs leading to the ground floor—no sign of Herry yet.

Kea moved to examine the first door on the left and threw a look at him. He almost sputtered when he found another Fire rigging on both sides of the entrance, probably enough to demolish the house together with them.

Gesturing to wait, he spent ten minutes finding and cutting six different activations.

*What are you hiding in here?*

Confident he had found every trigger, he turned the handle onto what looked like a study. If the bedroom had been sparse and orderly, this room was the embodiment of chaos and clutter. Three desks were covered in piles of papers and books spilling onto the floor; shelves and closets covered every inch of the walls that hadn’t been nailed with sheets of messy writings and runes.

“Stop.” Kea gruffly pulled him back before he could step inside. She furiously pointed to the floor space on the threshold.

Kai took a second to realize there was a hair-thin metallic wire pulled at the height of his ankles.

*Fucking psycho.*

Cold sweat drenched his clothes. He had been so focused on the Fire enchantments, he forgot not all traps needed runes to work. He couldn't tell what was hidden beneath the wooden paneling, but chances were it would have been equally deadly.

"Thank you." Kai mouthed the words, drying his hands on his shirt.

Kea dipped her head in acknowledgment with a half-smile. "Now, we're even."

They stepped over the wire and closed the door behind them. Given the towering piles of papers, it would take days to sift through everything.

*She did say the guy sold information...*

"Let's split the room." Kea went to peruse one of the desks on the left side, methodically leafing through a journal.

*If there is some useful information it must be here somewhere.*

Looking at the most recent papers on top of the table, Kai picked out a list of names and dates. He thought it might be a register of the people gone missing before he noticed a dozen more papers with similar information, too many for the numbers reported.

Gathering the sheets, he turned toward his sister to ask if she recognized any of the information.

A muffled voice echoed from outside, followed by multiple sets of footsteps.