

Chapter 130 – Chaos and Flames

With people frantically running around, no one paid attention to two more kids. The wind had spread dark smoke clouds over the farmland, the last dying embers were put out by teams of farmers.

The humid climate of the archipelago must have stopped the fire from going out of control. Some were even cheering, unaware these were only a simple distraction. The true danger was about to crash on Sylspring from the sea.

Kai's lungs burned on the acrid smoke that rose out of the fields, but he continued to push on, spurred by the urgency. Flynn had recovered from the initial shock and followed behind him with labored breaths, barely keeping up.

Empower leaned on the brink of what was sustainable. His body hung on thanks to the tonics he had downed on the way.

One or two minutes won't make a difference if I'm forced to crawl by the time I reach the streets, or if I break my neck.

The sun had sunk beyond the jungle. Covered by the smoke, only thin rays of moonlight managed to reach the ground. Without Mana Sense to guide him, Kai would have already fallen into an irrigation ditch or tripped in a pothole. On that front, Flynn was faring better than him, thanks to a higher Perception.

They were little more than two-thirds to the gate when a bright blaze from the docks banished the shadows for a few instants, lighting the horizon in red.

The feeble hope the rebels' plan had failed was squashed.

They're going to be fine.

No enforcer manned the booth at the western gate, but his rush was forced to stop by the flood of panicked people streaming in the opposite direction. Cries and screams, children clutching tightly to their parents. A crowd of locals reversed in the farmland looking for safety.

Shit!

Kai considered pushing his way through the crowd of adults before discarding the thought. Apart from the risk of getting trampled, he'd lose too much time.

It was illegal to move in or out of Sylspring any other way, but no one was going to care enough to stop him right now. The wooden wall reached eight meters in height, and two below ground—he'd tested it with a pulse of Earth mana weeks ago.

"This way," Kai chose a nearby section of the palisade. Taking a run-up, he leaped at the wall, Empower surging through his legs.

The first step brought him halfway up. He manipulated his mana how he learned from Steady Runner years ago. His foot found a momentary grip on the palisade, allowing him to take a second and third step. Just enough to reach the short wall walkway where enforcers sometimes patrolled.

The ability was too awkward to use in battle without the help of the skill. Luckily Elijah had insisted he kept practicing it anyway.

Flynn looked up, heaving for breath. A clear question on his face. Looking into his spatial closet, Kai took out a rope, secured one extremity to the wall, and threw the other at his companion.

It was more of a thick twine than a proper rope and its length ended well before it reached the ground. Flynn eyed it skeptically for a moment, before grabbing it to climb his way up. He jammed his knife into the wall when the rope snapped a meter from the top.

Kai hoisted him up. Flynn was covered in sweat, looking about to collapse, too exhausted to even curse.

“You, okay?”

The boy gave a weak nod, staying uncharacteristically silent. Turning to look for a way down, they were both stunned in place.

Under the moonlight, the streets near the gates were overflowing with people trying to run to safety. Further up, plumes of smoke rose from scorched buildings all over the outskirts. But it was the scene near the sea that sent a shiver down his back.

Bright flashes of fire highlighted the figures of three huge ships with dark sails moored at the dock. The scarce light wasn't enough to make everything out, but Kai glimpsed the faint figures of people fighting.

Focus on what you can do.

If the raid could threaten the Republic forces, it was far beyond the scope of his abilities.

“Drink this.” Kai offered Flynn one of his energizing tonics. “We need to go.”

Thankfully the boy didn't freeze at the grim spectacle and downed the potion without a question. They headed down toward a step ladder back into the streets. Away from the main avenues, the buildings were eerily empty. Those who hadn't run had shut the doors and windows of their houses.

They are going to be fine.

Accompanied by screams, cries and sudden flashes of light, the duo hurried toward the town center, sporadically meeting people running in the opposite direction. When the painted white door stood before them, the cold clank of metal was closer than ever.

Mana Sense caught the presence of some signature inside, lifting the worry that threatened to crush him.

“Mom, it’s me!” Kai banged the door with his fist.

It took less than a second for the door to be thrown open. His mother pulled him into a tight hug. “Where have you been? I was so worried.”

Moui stood in the doorway carefully watching the streets. An ax firmly in one hand and a bow on his back. Kea’s head popped out behind his uncle, wielding a knife.

“I’ll explain later, we need to leave town immediately!” Kai grabbed her arm to lead the way when he stopped abruptly. That wasn’t right.

He couldn’t find any sign of Ele.

Mana Sense scanned the house, unable to find a fourth signature. “Where’s Ele?”

“We thought she would be with you. She went to bring you dinner at the lab when you didn’t come back in time.” The panic in her voice rose with each word, eyes wildly searching behind him.

The streets were empty except for Flynn who stood aside to give them some space.

Shit, shit, shit!

The weight of the world fell back on him, threatening to crush him. It wasn't time for pointlessly cursing his fate. He forced all his emotions and worries into a corner of his mind and sealed them there.

"There's a pirate raid," Kai explained quickly, making sure his words remained even. "Uncle, you need to bring them to safety outside town, till this is over. I'll go pick up Ele at the lab."

The hunter grabbed his arm before he could dash away.

"I'll go."

"No, you need to protect them. Some pirates could have slipped through." Kai matched his gaze. "A kid will be easily ignored, and I have a much higher Favor. With your presence, both the enforcers and the raiders will attack you on sight."

They needed to avoid the fight at any cost. With Mana Sense, his scouting abilities were far better, especially outside of Veeryd. If Moui ran armed like that, the Republic might think he was one of the rebels.

Kai broke free of the grip. "There's no time to waste."

Numerous objections flashed in Moui's eyes. The hunter firmed his gaze. "Once they're safe, I'll meet you here at the house. If you don't come back, I'll look for you."

With a nod, Kai ran down the streets before his mother might raise any objection.

"It's better if you let me lead," Flynn spoke up. "I know where your lab is, and I've got more experience moving around unseen."

Kai swallowed his instinctive rejection at the idea of giving up control. He had only spent a fraction of his time in Sylspring, while Flynn had grown up here.

Stop hesitating, he's right on this.

"I'll scout with Mana Sense," Kai let him move ahead.

The sounds of clashing metal and pained screams grew stronger. High orange and yellow signatures ran and clashed around each corner. The colorful windows of the shopping district lay shattered, some also in flames.

The shortest path to his lab cut through poshtown, where the fighting was most intense. Flynn led him through a maze of cramped alleys, eyes focused on the path, searching for clues. Sometimes, he stopped to listen before changing route.

Even though he knew it was the best course of action, each detour sent Kai's heart racing. Hallowed Intuition couldn't save him if he ran straight ahead. Whispers of danger came from almost any direction.

"Three against two, fighting," Kai informed Flynn with a whisper.

The alley they were in opened up onto one of the secondary avenues. On the opposite side, another backstreet squeezed between two buildings. If they reached it, they would have officially entered the northern side of poshtown, with an easy route to his lab.

Beyond the building, just a few meters on their right, the two factions were fighting. At any moment, the balance could be broken, putting an end to the standstill.

"They're focused on each other. We can cross it unnoticed if we're quick," Kai urged.

“We’ll be completely exposed. They’ll see us for sure.”

“They won’t, trust me,” Kai offered him his hand. “Keep close and move at my signal.”

Flynn remained wary but grabbed his hand. Kai threw one last glance at the fight and began gathering his scraps of Shadow mana.

Cloaking another person sharply increased the complexity. It was a hybrid spell that required active manipulation. Since mana became harder to direct with distance, he’d need to adapt his shadow construct to Flynn’s movements on the go.

I’ll have to make do.

“Now.”

Kai wove a veil of shadows around them and dashed into the open street, keeping Flynn close to him. The thin layer of darkness revolved around them like smoke. It obscured them from any sense, while it only slightly impaired their vision.

Two enforcers—one bleeding from an arm—were facing off against three raiders wielding two sabers and a spear. One of the raiders failed to dodge a slash that hit his leg. Before Kai could see more, they were on the other side. They jumped into the alley without looking back.

The spell fell away, having consumed his attuned mana. Confusion and surprise alternated on Flynn’s face. He held the questions on his lips, continuing to sneak their way onwards.

She’s going to be fine.

Two blocks from his lab, Flynn suddenly stopped. Kai checked with Mana Sense if he had missed a threat, then the stinging metallic smell hit him.

Standing in their path, the corpses of two young enforcers lay in a pool of blood. One man and one woman, dull eyes stared lifelessly at the moons. They didn't look to have reached thirty yet.

The man had been pelted with arrows, one sticking out of his eye must have provided the fatal blow. His death had been the cleanest of the two. The woman clutched the wound on her stomach, vainly trying to close the gash that splattered her guts across the street in a red streak. Her features remained twisted in agony.

Kai barely managed to keep himself from puking. Swallowing the bile back with some effort, he looked away. The Republic might be a bunch of imperialist assholes, but these two were just cogs in a machine. No one deserved to die like that.

"Come on, let's go," Kai grabbed Flynn to walk around the carnage. Urgency and panic were mounting again. If two enforcers were killed here, the pirates could be anywhere in town.

Ele's going to be fine. She has to be.

Mana presences roamed at the edges of his senses. One ransacked a shop with broken windows, forcing him to slow his speed to not conceal his steps.

Turning one last corner, Kai reached the lab. His heart froze in his chest.

The door had been ripped off the hinges and lay broken off the side. Jomei lay with an arrow in the shoulder and a deep slash through the chest. His spear with a bloody tip was broken beside him.

A scream ripped the air. Three mana presences shone inside the building.


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The guard raised his baton to block. Jab activated Crushing Strike, his saber doubled its momentum and speed, breaking the defense. A couple more strikes and the inexperienced guard fell like the others who had crossed his path.

Caught unprepared, these idiots didn't even carry proper weapons for the most part. They were just begging to be robbed. Only now a few groups tried to mount a proper resistance, but Jab let the other vanguard deal with them.

The woman hiding behind the guard stared with an empty gaze grasping at the body of another dead man. Her face was covered in snot and tears, disgusting. Jab finished her with a single strike.

He clicked his tongue in distaste. The ones who gave up were so boring. He looted the corpses, keeping an eye that another pirate didn't try to sneak up on him.

With all the free money waiting to be plundered, no one bothered. He got away with a handful of coppers. The woman fetched better, her purse was fat with silver. She wore fancy silks and a pretty necklace of gold and pearls.

Jab had to admit he had been skeptical when Mad Jon proposed the idea to their captain. Everyone knew the Shallow Sea was only good for trash and cowards that preferred misery to risking their lives on a stronger opponent.

Who would have ever thought such a juicy catch hid here?

*What was the name of this port again?*

He shook his head, who cared anyway? Looking for an untouched target, Jab found a shop that was still intact. He easily broke down the door with a kick.

This one sold paintings, and not even something interesting. Just boring landscapes and self-portraits of no value. Worse yet, there wasn't anyone hiding inside.

Jab tore the canvas off the wall looking for a stash or safe. Nothing.

"Such shit luck," he spit on the floor, clicking his tongue. He set fire to the paintings with an oil lamp and left. The owners would learn not to hide their money so well.

Looking around, he chose his next mark with more care. A corner shop that sold herbs.

*That might contain something decent.*

“That’s mine, get lost,” Jab glared at another pirate. Not anyone he recognized, probably a newbie. With a look at his bloody saber, the little shit ran away.

The door took the first kick with only a little creaking, three more before it gave way. It was all worth it as he took a look inside. Apart from the weeds, rows of shiny potions lined the shelves.

*Yes, this is more like it.*

Jab was about to step inside when that fucking newbie brat came running at him.

“Do you want to try me?”

His saber was ready to strike, but the man continued to run past him without so much as glancing in his direction.

“What in the three hells?”

A gust of cold wind made him shiver, the fleeing man suddenly stopped his rush. Head, torso and legs fell to the ground with a wet flop still carried by his momentum.

Jab turned around to look for the mage responsible. With spellcasters, the secret was rushing them. Without time, all he had to do wa—

A towering man marched down the street, a two-handed longsword in one hand. The silver hawk stood out on his uniform.

Something wasn’t right. The swordsman continued to walk with an unhurried pace. His cold blue eyes didn’t even seem to register him.

Without thinking twice Jab turned in the opposite direction and ran faster than he ever had in his life. His saber clattering, abandoned on the ground.

What the hell was someone like that doing here? The vanguard and the first mate should have kept anyone like that busy.

A group of three raiders exited an alley laughing among themselves. One-hand Bili was with them. The gods must favored him.

Jab dashed towards them, hoping they might buy him enough time to get back to the ship. That was someone for the captains to deal with.

“Where the fuck are you running, Jab?” Bili shouted after him. “Got something good?”

Glancing over his shoulder, the three finally noticed the swordsman, raising their guard.

*Perfect. With a bit of luck, they’ll just—*

Before Jab could finish the thought, all three heads were rolling on the ground. Jab hadn't even seen that monster move his longsword. Those steel eyes didn't glance at the bodies.

Jab fell to his knees begging, "Please, I—"

A fourth head joined the pile.

Zerith continued to march ahead.