

Chapter 256 - The Nuclear Option

Kai downed two vials to boost his mental and physical attributes, soon imitated by Flynn. They were weaker versions than those Dora had once gifted him, carrying a smaller backlash.

Shrouded in mist, the cloaked figurehead of the ebony ship aimed straight at them, gliding over the waves like Charon's ferry. His hand tightened against the Tidal Wand; he would have preferred the hilt of his sword.

"Cursed Gods! What kind of pirate ship carries artillery spells in these seas?" A sailor tended to the burned leg of an unconscious woman. The sentiment was shared by many, spreading a plague of fear among the defenders.

"Get a hold of yourselves!" Nathumeli yelled in a last-ditch effort to organize the resistance. "Their ship must have exhausted their mana reserve as well. We'll send those filthy pirates to the bottom of the sea!" Despite his authoritative and confident tone, Kai could see frightened ripples in his aura.

The sea serpent blade waited in his ring. If the pirates overwhelmed their defenses, it was better to risk compromising his identity than losing his life.

"Shields up and brace!"

The dark vessel rammed into the hull of the *Intrepid*, throwing dozens of passengers off their feet in a groan of wood. The pirates didn't fling themselves on lines to board them. Over than a hundred marauders in black clothing and veiled faces stood in rows on the enemy vessel, silent like wraiths.

They sure got the sinister appearance down.

Strangled sobs emerged around him. Kai was hardly an expert in buccaneers, but the group who raided Sylspring had looked far more ragtag. Mana Observer failed to cross onto their ship and peruse its enchantments, blocked by impenetrable wards. Even Hallowed Intuition remained strangely muted.

That's not goo—

When the whispers spiked, Kai threw himself behind a mast, dragging Flynn with him. Barbed harpoons linked to heavy chains pierced the starboard of the *Intrepid* in a rain of splintered wood and chipped paint. Three missed and bore into the ranks of the defenders, crunching through bones and flesh of several unlucky souls.

"Are you okay?" Kai crouched behind the cover.

Flynn coughed and looked up with a blank gaze. "Yeah, I—"

Screams of pain and fury interrupted him. Volleys of arrows were exchanged freely between the two ships, breaching the fragile formation.

“Fire at will!” Nathumeli stood on the quarterdeck beside the old Wind blower. Malia summoned a gale to deflect the incoming projectiles, dueling against an enemy Air mage.

At the sound of a low drum, the pirates charged over the bridge of chains with spears and sabers, piercing the line of shields broken by the bombardment. Murmurs of danger rose like mourning laments. Whatever was interfering with Hallowed Intuition was likely linked to the ebony ship.

“Stay close.”

Flynn mutely nodded, eyes darting around the scene of chaos. His hands tightened around a pair of enchanted daggers till his knuckles whitened.

That's as good as it gets.

A pirate thought himself cool enough to leap over the defenders. Kai cast an ice shard and caught him in the gut. The man fell without sound, finished by a spear through his chest.

When Kai pierced the runes woven into the clothes of the assailants, he had to admit the overconfidence wasn't entirely undeserved. Every single one of them was at least at the peak of Orange with a yellow profession, and every third person was fully into that grade or higher.

This doesn't look good.

The *Intrepid* had more than three hundred people on its side, but only a fraction of the sailors were specialized fighters. The situation was even worse among the volunteers, some frozen with fear or scrambling to retreat.

He exhaled a breath. *I've survived worse odds.*

Potions flowed into his blood, enhancing his reflexes and speed. Kai delved into the rhythm of battle, mind split between the whispers, spellcasting and the surrounding fighting. He sidestepped a black fletched arrow and retaliated with another ice dart.

The cloaked archer on the railing of the *Intrepid* just managed to parry with his bow. Taken aback by the strength behind the blow, he flailed his arms not to fall into the sea and left himself exposed to a second spell.

Amateurs.

Body Augmentation strengthened his legs to take cover behind a crate. Where Empower had been a raging river, its evolution had scalpel precision, directed exactly where he needed with no waste.

He could barely keep up with the pirates' movements using Split Mind. Three more darts found purchase in a leg and shoulder, the last missed. Once they gained a foothold on the *Intrepid*, the pack of marauders reined in the wild charge for a more cautious advance.

A sharp gust of wind threw off the aim of his projectile. Malia floated a span off the ship, robes fluttering around her, wrapped in a battle against the unseen Air mage.

Focus on what you can do.

There was no honor in battle, just survival. Hallowed Intuition allowed him to dance behind the frontline, retreating whenever someone beyond his reach noticed him. Kai thrived on the distraction of the melee, taking any opportunity to sling in a shot.

There was no need for a sword or flashy magic. A sliver of ice set at the right angle was more than enough to pierce a squishy human. No one would realize the speed or sharpness of his projectiles in the midst of battle and any proof would melt in the blood of the attackers.

A whisper rose from the clamor. His muscles strained to invert his momentum as a blade whistled an inch from his nose. A pair of amethyst eyes stared at him beneath the black cloth concealing his attacker—a woman judging by her height and figure.

Shit! Mid-yellow.

The pirate's surprise at his dodge didn't stop her from dashing towards him with another slash, her dark saber little more than a blur.

There wasn't time to take out his sword. All his boosts couldn't hope to match her Strength, and engaging in close combat was a death sentence. Kai abandoned precision for power to cast a hail of ice.

Bending at an impossible angle below the projectiles, the woman pushed against the deck to fling herself at him. Her blade whizzed toward his head at twice the speed.

Fuck.

While the whispers told him how to dodge, his body was a sitting duck, too slow to move and react. Kai gathered his mana to cast every speck of magic, praying it would be enough. His cover identity didn't matter if he died.

Something whistled beside his ear. Hidden in a wisp of Shadow, a throwing dagger flew past the guard of the pirate. Her gaze widened in surprise, and she twisted to the side with superhuman speed, but she was too committed to the slash to dodge entirely.

The knife pierced deep into her arm, forcing her to fall back. Her icy eyes glared behind him. She pulled out the dagger without a noise, ready for a second round when a spear-wielding sailor tried to skewer her.

A hand dragged him behind a mast.

“Are you hurt?” Flynn watched him down with worried eyes. “We agreed to stay in the backline.”

“I— I’m fine. Thank you for the help.” Kai patted himself down. There was a cut on his shirt, but no wound. He crouched against the towering mast to survey the battlefield. “They need my help. It’s not going well.”

The deck was soaked with the metallic smell of blood from almost a hundred bodies. There was barely a frontline left. For each foe he had cut down, the pirates felled several more on his side. They would have already been decimated if Malia didn’t hold the advantage in the air.

Flynn leaned over him, growing pale at the sight. “We... we still have numbers on our side.”

Kai shook his head. “Just barely.” Their count were much closer than when the fight began. At this pace, there wouldn’t be anyone to celebrate, even if they won. “And I think that woman was holding back. She could have beheaded me on the first strike if she used the speed she showed at the end.”

“Are you sure? Why would a pirate hold back?”

“What’s on the mind of a murderous psycho?” Looking at the battle, the strongest raiders advanced with methodical, almost bored movements through the slaughter.

Is it some kind of sick ritual to let the weaker members ahead? Who are they?

Kai forced himself to ignore the empty eyes of sailors and passengers, staring vacantly at the sky. He was used to watching beasts die, not people. How could anyone slaughter other human beings like this?

Focus on what you can do.

Each second mattered, there wasn’t time to curse the skies. He was about to jump back into the fray when a thundering voice silenced the conflict. “Get off my ship!” Captain Nathumeli roared red with rage. He held old Malia in his arms, an arrow poking from her chest.

Shi—

Ship and captain glowed with incandescent mana. Every splinter of wood blown by the harpoons and the boards of the deck exploded at once, shredding skin and flesh.

Kai summoned a water shield to protect them. While the attack was aimed at the pirates, the line between the two forces was too jagged for a clean strike.

The wooden shards caught some of the defenders, though the result clearly favored them. Dozens of black-clothed pirates lay in pools of blood, moaning and crying in pain—the first sound they emitted since the fight started.

It was grim to feel relieved at such a massacre, but Kai finally held some hope they'd make it through the day. Such large losses would put a dent in the raiders' morale, they might even make them retreat.

We just need to regroup—

“Who knew the old dog hid such a trick.” A tall man scoffed, standing nonchalantly in the middle of the battlefield. Despite donning the same anonymous black as the other raiders, his contempt at both sides of the bloodied deck couldn't be more blatant.

Kai blinked, trying to understand how he had gotten there without him noticing a ripple of mana.

“We'll need to correct our standards,” he sighed heavily, stomping on the skull of a moaning pirate with a wet crunch. “Truly disappointing...”

“Who— who are you?” Nathumeli leaned unsteadily on a railing, his face emaciated after the last spell. “What do you wa—”

A blade of Darkness severed the captain hip to shoulder, his upper body slid squelching to the ground. “That's why dogs shouldn't meddle in affairs that don't regard them.” The sneering man stood on the quarterdeck beside the body, dissolving the blade in wispy smoke.

We're dead.

Kai crouched behind the mast, filled with a primal terror that was all too familiar. In the split instant the raider executed Nathumeli, his presence slipped through. It was the difference between overwhelming power and certain death. No amount of tricks and subterfuge could bridge the gap with someone standing with both feet into Green.

He could only run and pray they were too lazy to chase him down.

We're in the middle of the fucking ocean, genius. Do you want to swim to land? You don't even know where that is!

It was hopeless.

“What are you waiting for?” The monster snorted impatiently. “Finish this job before you embarrass me further.”

Why...

Hallowed Intuition spurred him to action with a lonely murmur. Yes, there was still a chance, a flickering hope that would soon be extinguished.

“Follow me.” Kai snapped his finger in front of Flynn’s face to wake the boy from his stupor.

“Huh?”

“It’s time for the nuclear option.”

“Nuclea what...?”

“No time to explain. Move quick.” Kai dashed towards the closest hatch to the bowels of the *Intrepid*, glad to see Flynn was trailing him.

The raiders cut down the sailors like cattle, wielding dark blades of mana. Most defenders were too shaken by the death of the captain to put up a proper resistance.

Those bastards were actually holding back.

“I surrender.” A grizzly passenger abandoned his sword and fell to his knees. “Mercy!”

The pirate didn’t even hesitate to behead him before moving to the next target. The response didn’t matter, the spirit of the defenders had been broken. Scores of others abandoned their weapons to beg for their life or run, shattering any resistance.

Dammit.

Kai wove a cape of Shadow and crept low to the ground to the hatch that would give him a chance at survival. When he got his hands on the latch, he bit down a curse. It was locked, probably to stop pirates from sneaking in. Worse yet, the feeble enchantments of the *Intrepid* still protected it.

Brute Strength won’t work, and a spell will expose us. Kai went through the possibilities in his mind. Any other entrance was too far or already overtaken by raiders.

“Let me do it.” Flynn pushed him aside to fiddle with the lock, his actions concealed behind an enviable veil of Shadow. In seconds the bolt snapped free, and he held it open just enough for them to slip inside.

Kai dashed into the bowels of the ship, feeling immediately safer with a ceiling over his head. He looked at the unfamiliar companionway and extended his senses to find the faster way down. They needed to create some distance, in case any marauder could perceive the artifact activation.

“This way.” He was about to jump down a ramp of stairs when a whisper forced him to turn around.

A woman donned in black stood in the corridor behind them, her right sleeve cut and soaked with blood. “Boys,” the pirate said with a flat accent, twirling the saber in her hands. “Didn’t your moms tell you it’s rude to leave without saying goodbye? Especially after such a memorable first meeting.”

“Sorry, miss.” Flynn dropped his cloak with a sincere look of apology. “I don’t like clingy women.”

Die already.

Kai cast a volley of ice, taking advantage of the cramped interior of the ship to corner her. Alas, the shock at being rejected didn’t stop her from slashing the projectiles too fast to follow.

Damn, she was holding back a lot.

“How eager,” she laughed, not worried about another attack. “Don’t worry, I’ll teach manners. If you fall to your knees begging, I might consider even sparing you. We’re always looking for promising new blood.”

“We?” Kai couldn’t stop his curiosity from peeking through, slowly retreating.

“Nice try, pretty boy. But / ask the questions.”

The raider shot forward, twisting around or shattering any elemental attack he threw at her with casual grace. A wall of ice gained him half a second before it was destroyed with infuriating ease.

“Here!” Flynn opened a random cabin, and shut it closed when they were inside. A kick made the wood creak, but the enchantment of the ship held.

“Good thin—” Kai shoved his friend back before the door flew off its hinges and crashed on the opposite wall.

“You made me sweat.” The pirate growled, heaving slightly in the threshold. “You’ll pay for that.”

I liked you better when you weren’t talking.

Scouring his mind out of options, he summoned a flood of water bullets and mist—less lethal than ice, but harder to destroy. The creep predictably dodged and struck the bullets down, with the only result of drenching her. Her aura prevented him from affecting the water so close to her body.

“You got me wet. I’ll make you wish you hadn’t done that.” She slashed at his leg, victory in her eyes.

Got you.

He took out his sword, arm already swinging strengthened by Body Augmentation to his utmost limit. He was more than willing to exchange wounds. The pirate was less willing to get injured and darted back with a burst of speed.

“Almost caught me,” she giggled, suddenly cheerful. “How did you get your hands on a spatial artifact, pretty boy? Mhmm... No matter. I always wanted one.” She advanced on them.

“Kai,” Flynn said behind him. “Mind the *whispers*.”

Huh? Oh!

Kai leaped into the air right as crackling electricity crossed the wet floor. The pirate was fast, but she wasn’t faster than Lightning. Her body went rigid with a gurgling sound. He didn’t wait to find out if she could survive the attack and threw an ice spike through her eye.

“Is she really dead?” Flynn stared at the smoking raider, stunned that his spell had worked.

“Not even beasts recover from that.” Kai grinned with the euphoria of escaping certain death. “Good thinking.” He would have liked to hug him and drown him in compliments till his friend begged him to stop if they weren’t on the clock.

Now or never.

The Fate Fulcrum appeared in his hands, the silvery disk reflected its multicolored hues. Kai adjusted the nubs to unleash all its accumulated charge. His index finger ready to call untold mayhem upon their heads with a single click.

Why does it look brighter than before? I thought it had reached its limit...

No matter, the pirates would either kill them or worse. Even getting swallowed by a marine monster was preferable if it killed them fast.

“Marina?” A voice rumbled through the ship, sending shivers down his back. “Are you having fun with some rats? You know I get jealous. Uh... what’s this smell?”

A burly man appeared in the broken threshold of the cabin. His dark eyes stared at the corpse of his companion with incredulity, quickly turning into blind rage. "You!"

Glaive raised to turn them into mincemeat, he stepped in towards them, burning with even brighter mana than his lover. "I'll make you regret you were ever bor—"

His massive body fell sectioned in two perfect halves at their feet. Majestic silver fur, violet eyes, and poise worthy of an emperor. Hobbes stepped over the left side of the corpse to not dirty his regal paws in blood.

"Mew."

Love you too, buddy.

His hand tightened around the Fulcrum an imperceptible amount.

Click!