

Chapter 271 - Night of Blood

Kai squatted in the mud behind a tree, wishing to pull the siren back by his ears.

Merciful Spirits! Why did he have to walk up to them like that?

The marauder's puzzlement was obvious even in the pale light. "What...?"

"Did you follow us from Varsea? Me, two other younger humans and a seeker." Rain gestured to their height as if worried he would be understood.

"What is it, Sten?" Someone rumbled from one of the five tents. "Do you need help killing a red mouse?"

Kai took a moment to place the voice. The tone was quite different from the empty boasts he had endured the day before.

Skar the Redaxe walked out of the flaps, raising his hatchet when he noticed the teen outside their camp. "Uh... what are you doing here, *boy*? Did you come alone?" He raised his voice higher than necessary.

Wasn't that guy supposed to be harmless?

A clatter of voices and faces filled the camp.

"What—"

"Is that the rich brat?"

"I told you we'd do well to continue!"

More enchanted lights defined the shadows into people—*even* more men had come out of the tents. They crowded together, holding weapons and disbelieving thrilled whispers.

The siren stood nonchalant under the rain. A flash of lightning illuminated the thin smile on his lips. "So, you're the ones planning to attack us... Can you go back now?"

"What is he saying...?"

"Is he that dull?"

"I told 'ou. Spoiled brats all think everyone will leap at the snap of their fingers."

"Spared us the chase."

Skar silenced the chatter with a raucous laugh. “I don’t know from which gilded hole you are from. But you should have stayed there. Think you can just parade through our town, dismiss us like servants?”

“Hmm... I see.” The siren sighed. “You won’t leave us alone no matter what I say?”

A chorus of chortles and sneering murmurs circled the marauders.

“Skar, maybe we should go back.” A petite woman stepped forward to whisper. “We don’t know which house he belongs to... Someone might come to look—”

“Don’t be a fool.” The seeker gave her a backhand slap. “From the coins he threw around at the market, he isn’t even a Republican citizen. This is our chance to settle for life.”

“Yeah, I bet he has run away from home without even taking a guard.” Another man jeered. Still squabbling among themselves, the marauders spread out to surround the siren. Archers covertly leaned on the bows, swords were unsheathed, and a crimson wand was covertly taken out by the petite woman.

“So that’s a no...” Rain pursed his lips with a shake of his head.

Fuck.

Kai cloaked himself in Shadow to creep closer. He only recognized a couple adventurers from the day before, most were new faces. From the whispers, everyone had at least their profession at Yellow—seven also their races. He might take down a couple if he played the surprise right, but not *twelve* of them.

Dammit! There are too many.

While the siren was at the peak of Yellow, his profession was only at Orange. How much fighting experience could a sheltered sixteen-year-old have anyway? His skills might not even be that high.

A woman with wet brown hair sauntered toward Rain, lighting reflected a metallic glimmer in the back of her palm. “Don’t be hasty, hon’. I’m sure we can come to an agreement. Why don’t you—”

She had yet to fully raise the dagger when her head had rolled to the ground, splashing blood and water. The spell had been cast so quickly Kai barely registered it.

For an instant, everyone stood frozen, then two arrows whistled, flying wide of the Rain. The siren was already dashing to break the encirclement. His form moved with such speed, it appeared to blink in the storm.

A wide line of water coalesced from the pouring rain before disappearing. The spell bisected two men wielding bows, only stopping after cutting two pines behind them.

“Don’t let him run!” Skar screamed. “He’s just one kid.”

Recovered from the shock, ten figures glowed with skills, charging with swords and spears up. Two knives and a hatched fly threw the air—but the siren had no intention of fleeing.

Three bubbles intercepted the attacks with comtempus ease. Rain calmly drew more lines in the air. Ten shorter blades flew to his foes like a farmer harvesting wheat.

Shields and skills flared in response. The bandits were prepared—though it made little difference. More severed limbs flopped to the ground in harrowing and gurgling screams. One seeker had been split across his chest, white ribs showing; one woman bleeding out from where her thigh abruptly ended.

In seconds, the group had been sharply cut down to seven people, everyone not fully into Yellow dead or rapidly dying.

“Cursed gods! Always a *mage* line,” Skar spat. He was bleeding from a cut that almost took his scalp. Aside from long lines of swearing, the marauders formed up with shields forward, unblinking eyes staring at their target.

“I admit we underestimated you. Most golden brats can’t tell their face from their arse. You sure know some tricks—”

“Tzashk The’er.” Rain enounced a sharp and vibrating note that no human could produce. Every droplet of water for a hundred paces stopped like crystal beads lit by the storm.

The marauders cursed, guessing what came next. A flickering golden dome enveloped them, accompanied by other gleaming shields and tightening ranks.

“Xeerthe.” The word traveled like a whisper to his ears.

Thousands of water needles flew toward the bracing group at once. The woods filled with a cascade of chiming clinks and pained yelps, covered again by the freed downpour.

Enlarging dark patches dotted their clothes; blood trickled down their faces. Despite a thousand cuts, all seven marauders survived the onslaught.

“Don’t let him cast again!” A hoarse cry commanded. “He can’t face us up close!”

“Aye!”

Three shieldbearers charged with a rallying cry, advancing through the mud as if it were solid ground. Their heads lowered behind their defenses with only their spears and swords poking forward.

Once again, Rain showed no intention of running. His blades of water shattered against the glowing shields, carving shallow chinks. Forced into an awkward dodge, he threw himself to the side.

One of the assailants extended his spear to draw a bloody line on his arm, behind him two men, wielding a saber and two knives respectively, took advantage of his unsteady footing to attack. They pressed the siren into a series of worse steps, while the rest of the group circled to trap him.

“Now!” Skar shouted from the backline. Beside him, the petite woman pointed her wand to send a string of fireballs flying sizzling against the storm.

Boxed in by five fighters who took cover behind the shields, Rain couldn’t run anywhere without exposing himself to a stab. A dense bubble of water swiftly condensed around him before the bright flames burst—the night turned into day.

Hidden forty meters away, Kai felt the mud drying and cracking on his face. The cloak of Shadows also weakened under the direct light; thankfully no one was looking in his direction. He had been studying the marauders for a chance to intervene, but he hadn’t anticipated the battle would escalate so rapidly.

Shit.

Dense steam rose from the bubble, obscuring their vision. “Is he dead?” A man asked with undisguised glee. He peeked over his shield long enough to have a water blade shorten his head, his brain scattered among the weeds.

Rain stood in the middle of a flimsy bubble, alive though not unscathed judging from his reddened skin and his scared grimace.

Skar lunged from the backline, a hatchet in each hand. “Finish him!”

Dammit. This is definitely reckless.

It was now or never, Body Augmentation swelled his muscles and senses. Kai crept closer, about to abandon his cover for one last ditch effort to save the siren, when Hallowed Intuition howled at him to stop.

What?

None of the bandits appeared to have noticed him. The time his head jerked to check, they were already upon Rain from three different directions, too fast and far to stop them.

Fuck—

Suddenly, the world slowed. The descending blades hesitated in their assault; the eagerness of their wielders turned into incomprehension. Bodies sank into the mud, the weapons falling short of their target.

The ground itself bent into a concave around the siren as if...

Gravity?

Before the marauders could regain their bearings, Rain cast three crescent blades of water—any trace of fear and pain gone. The spells whistled toward their targets with sharp efficiency.

Skar threw a glowing red hatchet to intercept, twisting in mid-air to avoid the spell. Two of his companions weren't so lucky. The man with the saber was neatly cut across his upper body, while the fellow with the daggers lost his left arm near the shoulder before he jumped behind a shield. His screams and gushing blood overwhelmed any other sound in the night.

Four left...

Kai's brain was still trying to catch up when the mud squelched upward, no longer weighted by Gravity Magic. The siren also stopped his relentless assault for the first time to take a breath.

"Don't stop. He's out of tricks!" Skar shouted, throwing another hatchet from safety.

One of the remaining shieldbearers thrust his spear, the tip gleaming with a silver light aimed at his heart.

Rain bent under the hatchet and used a water bubble to redirect the pole, turning the fatal strike into a bloody cut across his ribs. Before the spear could retract, he grabbed onto the shaft, lowered his center of gravity and dug his heels into the ground to yank free the weapon.

The shieldbearer scoffed at the attempt, tightening his grip to accept the contest of Strength. His contemptuous smirk turned into a strained scowl when the spear stood tense between them, and then into fear when his feet slipped on the muck.

"Nooo!" The remaining defender left Skar to run to his aid. From their same dark hair and eyes, they were probably related.

The man falling toward the siren slammed his tower shield down but couldn't stop his momentum. Rain swung his free hand, a steel blue trident appeared in his grip. He pierced the skull of the marauder with a wet crunch and spun the weapon to meet the charge of the surviving shieldbearer. His boots slid on the drenched ground, too busy avoiding another spear to regain his footing.

"Die, you monster!" The petite woman shrieked. Another string of fireballs, even brighter than the first, flew from her wand.

"Yes, Avy! Burn him!" The shield-wielding attacker was too enraged to worry about his safety. A golden glow covered him. He disrupted a forming water bubble and pressed the attack to pin the siren down.

Unable to disengage, Rain cast a half-dripping bulwark. His trident caught the spear, though that only tied him down. The searing bolts had already crossed the halfway point, promising to incinerate friend and foe.

Nope!

A volley of ice shards intercepted the marauder's spell. From what Kai observed the fireballs were a profession skill—rigid and predictable. He couldn't compete with their sheer power, but he could tick them off.

His theory was proved correct when the flames exploded in a chain reaction that swallowed the battlefield before their target, wild and uncontrolled. Kai dove back into the mud and cast a layer of ice to cover himself.

By the time the inferno died down enough to see, Rain had broken the shieldbearer's spear and scored a thrust on his shin. His hand flung a spell to finish off the one-armed bandit, holding onto a knife.

Skar stood with half-burnt clothes, lingering a moment before lunging at the siren's back with his hatchets. "Fucking brat!"

Gnarly roots and vines sprouted from the ground to entangle his legs, regrowing as fast as they were cut. The man realized too late that someone else had joined the fray, his gaze vainly searching for a shadow.

Kai shot three icicles at each of the three marauders. The shieldbearer, busy fighting Rain, collapsed without a sound, while the half-mage interrupted her next cast to dive on the ground with a yelp. Already ensnared by the creeping plants, Skar managed to shatter two and took one in the shoulder.

"Cursed gods!" His hatchets blurred in a flurry of red, hacking the Nature spell apart. He turned to run without a glance at his fallen comrades. He didn't take five steps when Rain's trident pierced him through the stomach.

The siren flicked his wrist to call back the weapon and shred Skar's intestines. With a see-through hole in his abdomen, the boasting seeker breathed his last. Rain spun the trident to get rid of the gore and turned toward the last bandit.

"No, please. I— I don't want to die." The petite woman fell begging into the mud, vainly trying to get away. "I d—didn't want to—" Her head joined the rest.

The siren surveyed the battlefield with a detached look, a hand firmly onto the harpoon. The downpour washed away the blood from his cold and handsome features. "Come out." It was an order, not a request.

Whispers warned that running would be a *very* bad idea. Kai lowered his cloak of Shadow and stepped in the open with his hands half raised. "It's just me."

“Oh, Mat... How...” The siren made his trident disappear—suddenly just an awkward teenager. “I didn’t know you could use Shadow. What— what are you doing here?”

Kai glanced at the gory remains of twelve humans and the boy’s bleeding wounds. “I came to save you from getting yourself killed...”