

## Chapter 255 - Black Sails

At the shout of *'pirates'*, the deck was thrown into a flurry of rushing sailors and panicked passengers. Parents ran to grab their children, men and women froze in frighten at the misty horizon.

Nathumeli strode out of his cabin, yelling at the spotter. "Are you sure it's pirates?"

"Aye, captain! They fly black sails and no flag!" A wiry woman shouted from the crow's nest.

"How did they come so close without us noticing?"

"Some kind of shielding, Captain. But I don't recognize their ship from any of the lists."

"Cursed depths!" Nathumeli went to stand on the prow beside them and took out a golden spyglass to peruse the distance. The object lit with mana and his attention snapped on a spot.

Kai squinted in the same direction, using Body Augmentation to enhance his sight. He could faintly make out a shadow fluttering on the far waters, concealed in the mist rising from the ocean.

"Safe route, my arse. I shouldn't have taken the money," Nathumeli grumbled under his breath before turning to his underlings. "All hands on deck! Unfurl the sails and adjust our heading, 120 degrees turn to starboard."

Sailors leaped and climbed on the masts following orders with the calm and coordination of a life at sea. White canvases were hoisted up the five masts, tightened by the wind. The ship thrummed to life guided by its enchantments.

*A safe and easy trip, they said. Should have known that would jinx it.*

The wooden railing dug into Kai's ribs when the vessel changed course at full speed. His head was pushed overboard to the dark frothing waters.

*Blessed spirits, why do I need to run into freaking pirates before I even land?*

He doubted Kahali's influence reached foreign seas. Memories of battles and flames from the last pirate raid rose in his thoughts. At least in Sylspring, he hadn't been the target, just a kid on the outskirts.

"Every passenger to their cabin." Nathumeli shut every protest with a steel gaze. "No worries, gents. My crew can handle some measly pirates. And no vessel can match the *Intrepid*."

Despite some angry mutters, people were too shaken to protest or question the man. Even the most outspoken travelers during the storm dutifully filed inside.

The captain turned to him and Flynn. "Same goes for you, kids. Go take a nap. This isn't my first run into pirates, and sure as the sea is wet it won't be the last."

"Can't we stay?" Kai wished he sounded more confident and less pleading. "My skill was right about the danger."

Even disregarding the reek of vomit, hiding below deck with no idea of what happened outside horrified him more than the dark depths. His mind would spiral into catastrophic scenarios for hours.

"Huh..." Nathumeli curled his mustache. "Did it tell you anything else useful?"

"It's telling me to run." The danger still pulsed ominously on the horizon. Strangely, it didn't spike when the threat had been revealed or abated when they changed course. Even the direction he should run to wasn't clear. "It could reveal more when I see the pirate ship."

"Or it could be a coincidence that it told you to run at all..."

"But what if it's not, Captain?" Flynn stood beside him. "It costs you nothing to take a chance."

Nathumeli studied them silently. "Fine. You can stay. Don't get in the way of my crew or I'll have you locked in your cabin till we land. Are we clear?"

"Crystal." Flynn nodded. "You won't even notice us."

"Uh." The captain adjusted his feathered hat and left to shout after his sailors.

"Thanks," Kai whispered.

"No problem. Staying in our cabin would have been awful." He lowered his tone. "Is your skill really telling you nothing at all?"

Kai vainly listened to the murmurs, still vague and looming. At least they hadn't gotten worse. "It's been acting weird. I think we're going in the right direction, not that there is much difference out here."

They moved to the stern to keep an eye on the threat. As he had been often told, no skill was infallible. To be left without his life insurance wasn't pleasant, especially when he was in the middle of the open ocean.

*It had to happen now, didn't it? Did the mana storm mess with Hallowed Intuition like the captain said...?*

The old Wind blower straightened her hunched back and summoned a gale, while the crew climbed over the masts and sails to wring any drop of speed out of the *Intrepid*. Cutting through the waves at great speed reassured Kai somewhat.

*Nathumeli said this is just routine. When did a sea captain ever lie to reassure his passengers?*

He frowned at the shadow looming on the horizon. "Is it my impression, or does it look a little closer?" The pirate vessel had changed course to chase them, dispelling any doubts about their intentions.

"Uhm..." Flynn narrowed his eyes. Perception skills were still one of his specialties. "It's definitely gaining ground. Or water."

"Meow." Hobbes rubbed his head against Kai's leg with an inquisitive and worried twirl of his tail.

He leaned to pick him up. The situation couldn't be good if the furball was willing to risk matting his royal coat against the salty breeze. "Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you."

"Mew!"

"Yeah, I know you'll protect me, whatever happens." Kai snuggled with the soft silver fur, feeling reassured. "We'll get through this together as we always do."

He released half the iridescent motes he gathered with Astral Pathway. Despite his improvement, Space Magic wasn't suitable for combat till the higher grades. Any useful spell took too long to cast in a real fight, and he could often accomplish the same goal with another element.

Droves of blue motes flocked towards him from the soaked air. There wasn't any element better than Water at sea. Gifts of the Earth increased his reserves among its array of powers. Though the boost was only half of his previous boon, advancing to Yellow and a grown body gave him a sizable pool to work with.

"How common are pirates?" Kai mused to get out of his thoughts. Everyone mentioned the danger of the mainland so often he didn't know what to think.

Flynn scratched his brows without averting his eyes from the chasing vessel. "It depends on the area and how often the Republic patrols the waters. This one was supposed to be among the safest routes before the storm blew us off course. While trade with the archipelago has grown, it pales compared to the true merchant hubs on the continent. Few marauders bother to come here from what I heard."

"So, we just go unlucky?"

“Probably. Or someone got wind of the *Intrepid*. It’s a pretty large and valuable ship by itself. And we’re carrying goods on top of people.”

*Great.*

His high Favor made him suspect there must be more reasons behind it, though it could just be a bad draw. Half the chances of meeting pirates left still the possibility, and when numerous people were involved, it was harder for a single person’s Fate to overwhelm everyone else.

*Next time we take an airship, even if I have to sell a kidney to make up a believable story.*

The reason why, ultimately, didn’t matter. He was stuck on the *Intrepid* with nowhere else to go. Despite Captain Nathumeli spurring the sailors to increase their speed, the shadow in the clock of mist was only growing larger on the horizon.

“You got anything, young Mat?” The man turned to them with a somber look.

“I— no.” The whispers hung in his mind faint and nebulous, not much louder since they sighted the pirate vessel.

The man shook his head with a rueful smile. “I told you danger skills aren’t reliable at sea.”

“I don’t think it’s that.” Kai continued before the captain could dismiss him. “My ability is based on Luck. And it’s still working. It’s just like... it has been muted.”

“*Luck?*” The bushy eyebrows climbed his forehead. “That’s quite an unorthodox choice. Hard to level without feats, though I could see how...” He slammed his head on the railing. “Damn, barnacle eaters! Who disrupts Fate in the Vanean Sea...”

“You can rest Malia.” Nathumeli marched to the Wind blower mage and turned to his crew. “Conserve your strength and prepare for engagement! We’re not going to let them catch us easily, but there is no need to exhaust ourselves. Ask anyone willing to fight...”

*Guess it’s inevitable then.*

Nameless black sails were clearly visible, gliding on the waves to intercept them. The vessel was perhaps half the size of the *Intrepid* and far faster.

“Boy.” A tanned sailor walked up to them. “Everyone who’s not defending the ship must barricade below deck, captain’s order.”

“We’ll fight,” Kai said matter-of-factly, checking what potions and weapons he had in his ring.

*I should go to the cabin to take out my sword...*

“This isn’t a joke.” The man sized him up with a skeptical look. “Those filthy pirates won’t hesitate to slit your throat, or sell you in a Kershan slave market if you’re lucky.”

“I can use magic,” Kai snorted. The dark vessel was approaching rapidly now that Nathumeli had stopped their mad dash. Could he sink a ship with Water Magic?

*It must be protected with enchantments for the open sea...*

“Don’t blame me when you get yourself killed.” The sailor left to talk to the other passengers.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Flynn lowered his tone. “*Matthew*, you can’t even hold a sword and have no martial skills.”

*Oh... What was on the skill sheet for my new identity...*

His battle plans were forced into a harsh reevaluation. “I— I’ve got Water Magic.”

“Only in the middle of Orange.”

*Why did I have to become an Alchemist with no combat experience...?*

“I’ll only intervene if things get bad. No one will notice a stray spell in the middle of battle.”

“*Matthew*,” Flynn watched him seriously. “I know how capable you are, but talent alone can’t bridge the gap if someone with a Yellow profession attacks you.” He waved at the sailors arming themselves with spears, shields and bows. “We must have more than double the people. They can handle it.”

*He has a point...*

The Hidden Sanctuary had engraved the tyranny of grades in his bones. He only managed to defeat weak yellow beasts through subterfuge, and most of the time they were already injured. There was no winning a frontal assault when your opponent moved faster than your thoughts.

Even with a mediocre profession, a man fully into Yellow could easily have double his attributes. And humans weren’t as easy to trick when they were assaulting a ship.

“We’ll just hang back and intervene only if there is a good opportunity.”

“Okay,” Flynn looked relieved. “I need to go get more daggers.”

“I’ll come with you. I also need to fetch some potions.”

Descending into the ship, the stink of vomit and the shouts of passengers washed over them.

“What does it mean we can’t outrun them?”

“Do you expect us to fight?”

“Daddy, don’t go.”

*Fucking pirates.*

He followed Flynn through the crowd, trying to keep his mind away from grim possibilities. Before leaving Highharbor, he had brewed healing and enhancing potions for his journey.

Kai emptied his ring in his cabin, only keeping his emergency stash. This was the best way Matthew could help as an alchemist. Holding back his abilities while he fought for his life would be annoying, and exposing his identity could also create many problems.

*I’ll restock on shore.*

A small crowd of passengers with determined expressions had gathered on the deck beside the sailors. Some wielded gilded swords, there were even a couple of cheap wands while the rest held plain weapons from the ship’s hold.

“Does anyone need a healing potion or…” Kai had barely time to explain what the concoctions did and their side effects when he was swarmed by people. The volunteers took the largest share since they were closer, though a few seamen didn’t hesitate to elbow their way to get some.

“You should have sold them.” Nathumeli chuckled, shaking his head.

“I shouldn’t profit from an emergency.” What if somebody died because they couldn’t afford to pay? Kai didn’t want to have that on his conscience, especially when the entire batch was worth a drop of his wealth.

“That’s very *nice* of you, boy. But someone would have used them all anyway.” The captain said. “I would have just gotten more. Have you gotten any extra? I’ll pay of course.”

“I don’t.” He prepared an emergency stash for a reason, and he wouldn’t endanger himself by dipping into it.

Kai gripped his old Tidal Wand. Three scratches marked its glossy blue surface from his years in the Sanctuary. It was such a common model, Valela had seen no reason to hide it.

*I’ll buy something better when I get to the mainland.* He didn’t need to use his skills anymore to see the looming threat.

Minutes ticked by unbearably slow as the ebony pirate vessel inched closer and closer. Waves crashed against the hull and the wind howled while passengers and seafarers turned quiet, awaiting the inevitable moment.

Kai felt it first. A bright flare of mana and a furious whisper awakening from Hallowed Intuition. Then the shouts began. "Fire!" The spotter pointed incredulously at the blazing comet arching towards them.

"Helm hard over to full right!" Nathumeli yelled.

The *Intrepid* abrupt turn knocked some people off their feet, Kai held onto a line. He was about to breathe in relief when the fireball adjusted course to hit them, and he realized just how big that thing was.

*Fuck! It can't be the work of a single mage.*

He couldn't shield everyone in time, and certainly not within the limitations Matthew had to abide by. He grabbed Flynn, ready to cast his spell when a blue glow covered the *Intrepid*. Flames washed over the barrier like a second sun, burning his skin but leaving them otherwise unharmed.

*All those enchantments weren't for nothing.*

"Nothing to worry, gent—" Nathumeli paled, cutting short the cheers of the crowd.

Another two blazing projectiles emerged from the figurehead of the dark ship—perhaps Elydes' equivalent of a cannonball at sea. Though, from the look of the sailors, this wasn't a common sight.

The glowing blue barrier rose again to meet the threat, dimmer than before. It weathered the first impact but cracked under the second, bathing the deck in flames.

Kai cast an ice dome as wide as he dared. When he lowered the shield to help the others, agonizing cries filled his ears, the air so hot it hurt to breathe. A sharp gale swept the deck, the old Wind blower stood proudly beside the captain.

The devastation was smaller than Kai expected, with a dozen burned but no dead. The five masts had taken the brunt of the impact. Half their sails had already turned to ash by the time he and two more Water summoners could quench the fires.

There were no more projectiles, the ebony vessel satisfied with leaving them dead in the water, ripe for the taking.

"Brace for the boarding!"