

Chapter 131 - Desperate Confrontation

His sister's screams covered the whispers of Hallowed Intuition warning him of the danger. Kai was about to dart into the building when Flynn grabbed his arm.

"You can't help her dead," he whispered with gritted teeth. "Surprise is our best advantage, we need to make it count."

Another scream of help and pain.

His mind was a whirlwind of rage, worry and fear. It took most of his self-control to not punch Flynn in the face to free himself, and the remaining scraps to grasp the sense in what he was saying.

Mana Sense remained locked on the figures. Ele's unmistakable presence was cornered by another one in the hallway, but she wasn't dying or injured, for now. The last figure stood a few paces back watching the scene.

Both enemies had an orange profession and an Orange ★★★ race, the same as Tridel. Only, there were two Tridels this time. Boiling rage gave way to icy fury, contained just beneath the surface and ready to erupt.

There were no yellows—thank Yatei and Kahali both. That would have been a suicidal battle. Though he knew he would have tried anyway.

From their boisterous laughs, they were playing with her. His fists clenched till cracking, but that gave them time.

Linking to his ring, Kai took out one potion to improve strength and endurance, and another for mental clarity and reflexes. His muscles heated up, urging him to move, while his thoughts quickened.

Enhancing elixirs were a tricky thing. Adding an immature body to the mix, they became more trouble than they were worth. The effects would last twenty and ten minutes respectively. After that, the backlash would take hours to wear off.

Dora left better ones in her parting gift, but they were meant for the future. With his current attributes and body, they would be closer to poison.

The boost was mainly to his physical capabilities rather than his spellcasting. They put him on a timer, and he hated having to resort to them. Right now, it was a gamble he would take a thousand times to improve his chances by far less.

Kai considered offering them to Flynn too. Though it would have been better if one of them wasn't suffering the backlash when they needed to escape.

He quickly explained what waited them inside so they could devise a plan—or the sketch of one at least. Each moment Kai had to fight the burning itch to run inside swinging his sword.

Less than thirty seconds later, they made their move. The broken door saved them a precious moment. Broken glass littered the floor making a sneak approach impossible. Kai surged Empower and dashed inside. The first target stood at the inner door of the hallway, connecting the main room to three smaller ones.

A woman, quiver on her shoulder, bow in hand, average stature. Before she could react, he had already made it halfway through the main room. She turned wide-eyed. The amused grin froze on her face.

Somehow, she managed to knock an arrow in a blur of motion, probably a skill. A spike in Hallowed Intuition warned him. Kai jumped to the right, the shot hissed by his ear, weaker than Tridel's. Aiming with his mind, he released the water blade he had prepared.

Fueled by a third of his Water mana, the condensed blade crossed the remaining distance in less than a blink. Kai targeted her center of mass to ensure a hit.

Her bow and left hand were cleanly cut through. By the time it reached her body, the spell had lost too much strength and was stopped by a leather chest piece.

The pirate looked at her hand in shock, the start of a scream on her lips, Kai swung his hand. The sword appeared halfway through the motion. The scream remained forever sealed in her throat and her head rolled on the floor.

Kai didn't get a breather, pointing a foot before him, he forced his body to invert its momentum and retreat. His skills had already warned him. A burly man charged out of the doorway screaming in rage, dark eyes bulging. He swung a scimitar where Kai had been standing.

A tinge of relief swept him. He was alive. If the second pirate had chosen to kill her or take her hostage, Kai wouldn't have known what to do except beg. Though his relief was short-lived.

The man began swinging wildly, faster than his eyes could follow. Kai sent four water blades at him, another third of his mana. Their construct was shattered before they could reach him.

Instead of dispersing into droplets, the water turned into mist around him. Improvisation painted his face in shock and horror. Vainly trying to create distance, Kai raised his left hand as if he was preparing to cast a desperate attack.

With his guard up, the man pressed forward, unwilling to give him the chance. As the swings of the pirate's scimitar were about to reach him, the shadow waiting in the corner of the room struck, covered by mist.

The man reacted quickly, still not fast enough. One of Flynn's daggers plunged halfway into his lower back, the other slashed his arm.

Kai surged Empower, charging the man to prevent him from focusing on Flynn. His sword whistled through the air in a lounge.

“Fucking brats!” Suddenly the swings of his scimitar exploded into a whirlwind of slashes in every direction.

Despite his best efforts to parry, Kai took a bloody gash on his forearm and shoulder. The man retreated to get a wall to his back and keep them both within his field of vision. His breath had grown labored after the attack, likely his profession skill had taken a toll.

Kai dared to spare a look at Flynn. The boy had a cut along his face from the cheekbone to the chin but looked otherwise unarmed.

“Who the fuck are you two?” The man snarled, his beady eyes flashed between them with hate, a hand holding the wound on his back. “I’m going to teach you why children shouldn’t play with adults, and rip you limb from limb.”

The raider attacked again, the stab Flynn dealt didn’t slow him down yet. Their rushed plan hadn’t gotten much farther. Running outside was out of the question, the chance of coming across more raiders was too high.

Reaching the same conclusion, they retreated to opposite ends of the room. No matter who the pirate chose to attack, he would leave his back exposed to the other. At least, that was the idea.

Shit, how can he be that fast?

The bald raider chose Kai, probably wary he might cast more spells. Empower flooded his body with strength and speed far exceeding his attributes, the boosting potions pushing him a step higher than he ever reached. Even then, he was forced into a defensive position, each second brushing with death. Hallowed Intuition warnings were too hard to interpret amidst the frenetic battle.

Rapid metallic clanks filled the room. Kai had to thank Elijah's teachings once more. If there was something he was good at, it was holding out against a stronger opponent. Even if he was fighting a losing battle.

Superficial wounds and cuts accumulated over his body under the flurry of strikes. Flynn's attacks were the only reason he was holding on, granting him precious moments of respite.

Shit, just die already!

Using his remaining blue motes, Kai commanded streams of water to warp around the man's head in a bubble. Most were dispersed into droplets by ferocious swings, but enough managed to reach him.

The raider closed his mouth to prevent the streams from making their way down his throat. Even without training, a human at the peak of orange could keep his breath for a handful of minutes, and for a pirate who sailed on the sea, that was a bit *too* optimistic.

Distracted by the spell, Flynn managed to inflict a slash to his thigh. Kai had hoped the man would panic and commit a mistake, but the bastard reacted in the worst possible way: retreating toward the broken doorway.

The hastily constructed spell was kept together by prayers and wishes. Away from him, Kai lost any chance to reinforce the crumbling construct.

If he chased after him, he would risk the pirate escaping outside, something they had to avoid at all costs. He could only hope the bastard's pride and anger would stop him from looking for help against two kids.

The man stood by the entrance, spluttering water. Through the coughs, his eyes remained focused on them.

Kai also used this time to catch his breath. This break would work to both their advantages. He'd been flaring Empower since the beginning of the fight, soon the consequences would catch up to him.

That's a future-Kai problem. He'll deal with it.

The question was whether his body would hold on till his mana ran out and he collapsed from mana exhaustion. Flynn appeared to have reached his limits too. His stats might be higher, but he didn't have a boosting skill and his combat experience was likely lower too.

The man's beady eyes glowered at Kai. "You're going to die screaming, I promise you on the abyssal god," he licked his lips as if he could already see the scene.

"Well, I'm waiting," Kai served him all his contempt with Improvisation. "You've been saying that for a while. And I'm not the one who's running away."

Not his best taunt.

The bastard came at him with burning hatred, his movements slightly slower than before.

If the fool had focused on taking out Flynn first, they'd likely both be dead by now. Thankfully his water spells showed a bigger threat than his measly mana pool actually represented. Inside the building, Earth and Nature spells wouldn't help him either. The focus required to cast them would do more harm than their effect on his opponent.

Steel clashed, his sword reverberating with the strength of the scimitar's flurry of blows. Blood dripped on the ground. A battle of endurance to see who could outlast the other.

The edges of Kai's vision were beginning to blur, but exhaustion was an old companion. He could see the smug confidence in his opponent.

The fool didn't even realize when he missed a step. Kai was ready to take advantage. With a downward slash, he finally managed to score a hit. A deep gash opened along his chest.

There was always a way to tilt the balance in your favor. Flynn had taken a trick from Tridel's book, coating his daggers with the poison he looted from the hunter. Old habits die hard. For once, Kai was glad the boy had helped himself to someone else's possessions.

The bald man faltered an instant, clutching his wound in pain. Kai didn't give him time to recover, another slash sent his scimitar flying and a third cut through his neck.

Elijah had told him swordsmen didn't need poison, if he scored a hit, the fight was most likely over. Though he never said anything about having a helper with daggers.

Thank you, butler.

Confusion and pain remained frozen on the pirate's face as he flopped to the floor, dead. Kai gradually deactivated Empower, leaning against his sword to remain standing.

The stinging smell of blood filled the air. Two people lay in pools of blood because of him.

I've done this.

He pushed the moral quandaries out of his mind. Those were better reserved for more peaceful times. Right now there were more pressing problems.

Without his boosting skill, his legs felt like jelly. Darkness gathered at the edge of his vision, all he wanted was to let go and sleep. He didn't care if the floor was covered in blood and broken glass.

Not yet.

Kai gritted his teeth and took out another healing potion—one of the last he had remaining. He had lost count of how many he had taken today, certainly more than was healthy. Healing required energy, and only a small part came from the potion. The more he drank, the smaller the effect grew compared to the drawback.

His fingers, sleek with blood, struggled to uncork the vial. He hadn't realized how much he had lost.

"Let me do it," Flynn came to hold him up and grabbed the potion. His eyes worryingly took in the extent of his wounds. He also had a few scratches, but the pirate had focused his effort on Kai.

In a few more minutes, his boosting elixirs would run out too. Kai didn't even know if he would hold out till then. Empower might keep him standing, but adding mana exhaustion on top might turn into a fatal combination.

Spirits, just give me a bit more time.

"You drink it," Kai refused to take back the potion. The effort of healing would probably knock him out. He couldn't risk that.

"You need it more than me."

"I can't," Kai took out a hemostatic balm for himself. "Help me with this."

Flynn downed the healing remedy without arguing, and started to apply the salve on the worst bleeding wounds. Kai was limping towards the hallway before he was done.

"Wait, I'm not finished."

Kai continued to hobble forward with Flynn fussing over him. Ele's presence still shone to Mana Sense. She was alive, but he couldn't tell more. His mind refused to focus, his thoughts moving at a crawl.

The first boosting potion must have run out.

"Ele," he tried calling. The raiders hadn't had time to plunder the inner rooms yet. Guided by his skill, they reached his bedroom. The door was shut.

"Ele, it's me," Kai raised his voice and hid his fear. "We need to go."

There was no response. The glowing figure inside didn't move, huddled in a corner. Flynn easily picked the newly minted lock, and the door opened a crack. The bed had been pushed to block the way.

"We've come to take you home," Kai forced his tone to remain even and reassuring.

The figure stood up, she took one step, looking hesitant to come any closer.

"Little brother?" Her words were weak and filled with disbelief.

"Yeah, it's me," his voice cracked, tears swelling in his eyes. Only Improvisation kept his words coherent. "Are you okay?"

"I— yes, I'm fine."

The bed was pushed aside, allowing him to squeeze through.

Dried tears on her cheeks, a cracked lip and several swelling bruises, but no bleeding wounds. Ele stood before him, alive. A weight lifted off his chest, Kai took the first true breath since he had been kidnapped by the rebels.

Ele looked at him like she was seeing the great spirits. Then she rushed toward him. They both hung on each other with desperation and relief.

"I'm s—sorry, I—"

"You're safe now. Everything's going to be fine," Improvisation made his words soothing.

Among some sobbing, she told him what happened.

People weren't too worried about the initial fires since they were confined to the outskirts and the enforcers seemed to have them contained. She came to his lab looking for him and had just discovered his disappearance when the raid started.

She was hiding inside the lab with Jomei when the pirates arrived. The guard had gone to face them, but...

“I’m so sorry, I should have helped him instead I…”

“You made the only possible decision,” Kai tried to calm her. “If you tried to fight them, you’d both be dead.”

The two raiders had been more interested in whatever valuables they could find than her. They took their time beating her up demanding to know where the money was hidden. Thank the spirits Kai had *interrupted* them before it was too late.

Flynn cleared his throat, standing by the door. “I think we should go now.”

They cautiously approached the broken entrance. Ele didn’t flinch at the sight of the two corpses, but she retched when they came upon Jomei’s.

Kai limped over to close his eyes. He didn’t dare imagine how his twin brother, Jiro, would feel.

I’m sorry I couldn’t save you too.

He could barely focus enough to sweep their surroundings with Mana Sense, but he couldn’t detect any human presence.

When his sister noticed his unsteady walk, she clung to him like a clam to a rock. Kai could tell she focused on helping him to not think about what happened. He only opposed when she tried to pick him up.

Wary of their surroundings, they made their way out of town. Flynn led the way, while Kai listened closely to Hallowed Intuition for any spike in danger.

The wind carried the echoes of explosion and battle near the docks. The streets around them were surprisingly clear. Though the signs of destruction were everywhere, with more than one building still burning fiercely.

“Someone is coming,” Kai stopped them. His heart skipped a beat when the presence headed straight for them, then he noticed Hallowed Intuition wasn’t reacting.

Moui appeared before them, eyes filled with worry. “What happened? Are you wounded?”

This time Kai didn’t get to choose whether he wanted to be picked up. His eyes drifted towards the sparks of bright flames near the sea, wondering what was happening there.

Numerous notifications blinked at the edge of his vision. His eyes closed before he could pay attention to them, the toil of the hardest day of his life caught up to him.