

## Chapter 257 - Fallout

The crystal *click* reverberated across the bloodied sailor cabin, followed by a subtler pulse—years of accumulated Fate released in a single instant. Tension soaked the air, somewhere between static electricity and the soft tingle of magic. Kai couldn't say if it was an illusion from the adrenaline and enhancing potions, or his higher Favor had increased his sensitivity.

*Crack!*

*Huh?*

His eyes fell on the Fate Fulcrum, a hair-thin Y chink cut across the circles of elvish script, letting motes of light escape through the fissure.

*How? Was the charge too high? Flynn said it had remained unchanged for a while when he gave it to me, but it did look brighter now...*

The ship groaned, making the blood from the bisected pirate ripple. A glass paperweight rolled on the nightstand and thumped on the floor, tripping a quill straight for his eye. Kai moved out of the way, getting his cheek marred with ink. This wasn't the time to lose himself in theoretical speculation. He stored the cracked silvery disk in his ring—he'd deal with the artifact when their life wasn't on the line.

"You didn't tell me he could do that!" Flynn sat on the cot of the cabin, gaping at the gruesome pieces of His Majesty's handiwork splattered on the floor.

"Meeew." The furball sprawled at his feet, eager to claim its reward in belly rubs.

"Hobbes is a yellow beast focused on magic rather than rough brawn." Kai sent overwhelming praise through their Familiar bond. "Or did you think he was just a pretty coat of fur?"

"So he can just... slice people in half whenever he wants?" Flynn absently leaned to scratch the cat.

"It's not that easy to cast Space Magic on living beings. Unless they're distracted..."

"Mew!" Hobbes yawned lazily. Despite his regal poise and pleased purrs, spells on that level took a toll on him.

"C'mon, we need to move." Kai stood up, trying to chart the best course of action. His heart thumped in his ears, sweaty hands held his sword and wand. The Fulcrum might have been their only hope of salvation, but they were still surrounded by water for hundreds of miles with sea horrors aplenty.

“We... we...” A deeper tremor shook the *Intrepid*.

What could they do to prepare for the unpredictable? The whims of Fate could take seconds or minutes to show up, and he had never released anywhere close to this amount.

“We must find a safer place,” Flynn concluded with a glance at the frozen corpses. He headed toward the broken door, a veil of Shadow Magic making him undetectable in the dim interior of the ship. “Can you follow me?”

“I— yes.” Kai bobbed his head. Casting a shroud of his own, he trailed the faint swirling of Shadow motes.

They crept through the cramped companionways, down a ladder and past a pirate vainly trying to staunch the three bloody lines on his throat.

*Hobbes has been busy.*

“Are you sure we should be going deeper?” Kai hissed, tripping on the seam of a floorboard. The stench of blood wafted through the bowels of the vessel, screams of sailors and passengers echoing in the distance.

“Is your skill telling you something?” The shadow whispered back.

“No...” Kai dithered in the corridor. Hallowed Intuition was reduced to a concert of buzzing murmurs by the conflagration of Fate, a side effect he had forgotten about. “...but what if some sea monster sinks the ship?”

“Then we’d probably be dead anyway,” Flynn said with an even tone. “The biggest threat for us is the pirates. You’ve seen how their boss killed the captain. How many beasts can go against that?”

*Not many. There might not even be one in this sea.*

The Fulcrum couldn’t conjure a leviathan from nothing. Still, Kai couldn’t get the image of getting trapped in a sinking ship to the bottom of the ocean out of his mind.

The *Intrepid* rocked again; the jolts too frequent to be a coincidence on a calm sea. Was a beast already ramming their hull? Suddenly, ending in the belly of an abyssal horror didn’t seem much better than getting cut down by pirates. “How do you explain *that*?”

If Flynn gave any sign, the gesture remained hidden in Shadow. “Let’s find out then,” his friend said after an awkward silence, leading him in a different direction on the same level.

Crystal lamps flickered on the ceiling, powered by the dim arrays of the *Intrepid*. Kai soon lost track of their position inside the labyrinth of narrow hallways and cabins. Behind a

corner, they found the corpses of two veiled raiders and a graying woman skewered on the same spear.

*May the spirits guide her soul to rest.*

They stopped in front of a door reinforced with steel and runes. Flynn cursed under his breath when two of his lockpicks snapped, only to find out the bolt was already open.

“Here.” He nudged the door a crack to let them inside some sort of storage room and shut it with a *clang* behind them. “The soundproofing and lock are still working. We should be safe for a bit.”

*Unless Lady Luck decides to mess with us.*

From the round walls, they should be near the stern. Kai perused the plan crates and barrels with a furrow before realizing why they came here: three portholes filtered pale blue light near the ceiling.

Flynn stood on a chest to look outside. “Merciful spirits...” The cloaking spell fell to show his pale face.

“What is it?”

*Please, anything but a sea monster.*

Kai shifted his weight to climb on the same crate when the *Intrepid* tilted. Only a handhold of ice prevented him from kissing the floor. Mindful of any other whims of Fate, he turned to gaze outside. “Well... shit.”

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes since they escaped the deck, yet the world had drastically morphed. Rolling waves and spotless sky were replaced by dark thundering clouds that turned midday to dusk. The frothing ocean reared meters into the air, choked with Water and twirling Air motes visible in spite of his low affinity.

*Well, it could be worse. Maybe...*

Kai curbed his thoughts, there was no need to tempt the gods. The mana storm grew every second he watched, blowing the waves to titanic proportions.

“That's certainly a distraction.” Flynn let out a nervous chuckle. “Those bastards can't keep their ship tied to ours in this sea.”

“Mhmm...” Kai nodded weakly.

*If it doesn't sink the Intrepid first.*

There was no point lamenting his decision to use the Fulcrum. He had exchanged certain death or slavery for a chance at survival. Now he just had to beat the odds.

*Should we stay hidden, and hope the pirates leave and the ship survives? If the effects of the Fulcrum aren't done, a storage room isn't the best option to react promptly. Though if we run into another raider, Hobbes can't always save us...*

From Flynn's furrowed brow, he was having the same thoughts.

Neither of them was used to working with somebody else. They should have discussed Water synergies with Lightning long before a psycho pirate came knocking.

"What do you think—"

*Clank!*

The door bolt snapped open, and the crystals flickered one last time before dimming into empty glassware for good.

*What shitty luck.*

He was about to curse the Fulcrum when he noticed the myriads of glowing lines crossing the *Intrepid*. Weakened by the bombardment, some array must have redirected the mana to reinforce the hull against the storm.

Kai turned to the door, without the enchantments the reinforced bands of steel would only attract more attention. "We should move."

"We can't stay," Flynn said at the same time, sharing a grin.

"You take the lead. Hallowed Intuition isn't working well, and you've got better Perception skills. We should monitor the pirates' moves."

"From a safe distance," Flynn agreed. He was about to open the door when it swung on his own. A stout marauder dressed like a knockoff ninja stared back with equal surprise.

*Dammit.*

Kai dashed to close the short distance—the Sanctuary had kicked any hesitation out of him. Shadow and Earth mana concealed and strengthened the serpent sword, his muscles brimmed with Body Augmentation and the waning effects of the potions.

Despite his perfect execution, yellow attributes still trampled his efforts. The man raised his sabers and took the blow with a grunt. He parried Flynn's throwing dagger and forced them back with a pair of vicious strikes.

*Great, Yellow again. At least he has just advanced.* They had to close this battle quickly, the longer they fought, the higher the risk someone would take notice.

The pirate made a sweeping strike with his right blade, keeping the left for defense.

Kai circled him to take advantage of their numbers. With Split Mind, he cast two icicles from opposite directions while he lunged at his leg. A whisper of danger broke through the static to warn him to turn his attack into a sideways dodge.

In a blur of Darkness, a saber coated in wispy smoke whizzed for his skull. His ice shield shattered without slowing the slash. The man stepped to follow his retreat. His sneer only faltered when the ship slanted and pushed his blade off course.

Kai adjusted his angle to deflect the next strike, the power of the blow reverberated up his arms and threw him back. Kahali's Retribution awakened to dull his pain and bolster his body.

He turned the fall into a roll behind a crate, coating the floorboards in ice. That lunge had almost been disastrous. He was used to having Hallowed Intuition pull him out of trouble, but the warnings were too delayed to be serviceable.

Instead of pressing the attack, the pirate studied them with keen eyes. "Such petty tricks," he snorted and struck down a dagger aimed at his head. "In a few years, you might even be a problem."

Kai feared he might call for reinforcement, then he saw the gleam of derision and was reassured. This foe was too alert for Hobbes to approach, the Lightning trick was also risky if Flynn hadn't stored enough mana.

*Guess I'll test Kahali's presents then.*

He let the raider come to him. Using the boxes in the room to obstruct his movements and Water Magic as a distraction, he deflected each strike. Kahali's Retribution surged like a raging river, boosting his Strength and Dexterity with every nick, graze and blow that threatened to break his bones.

While the boon didn't cure the damage, it let him ignore it. Flynn's knives forced his opponent to keep one saber back and gave him a breather whenever he faltered. Bit by bit, Kai matched the pirate, though he wasn't the only one to notice. A lucky tilt of the ship let him score a hit on the bicep.

Realization pierced the disdainful eyes. "You little rat!"

Before Hallowed Intuition could whisper, he raised his guard and prepared his spells. Both sabers were covered in a layer of Darkness that doubled their length, while an ebony armor protected the pirates from icicles and daggers.

*I preferred being underestimated.*

The added reach wiped any hope of dodging. Kai sidestepped behind a crate to the left—the pirate’s weaker side—and cast seven frozen shields close to his guard where the twin strikes would have less momentum.

The man pulled back his right saber to shatter the obstacle.

Body Augmentation flared. Kai channeled every element into the serpent sword and shot one last ice shard at the pirate’s hand. Twisting the blade with all his power, he diverted the saber onto the crate. Splinters of wood, wine and glass burst between them.

“You slippery fu—.”

“Too late.” Flynn exposed himself to thrust two daggers through the ebony armor. The man tried to pull back but slipped on a broken bottle.

*It’s over.*

Kai slashed with all his might at the marauder; Kahali’s Retribution dampened his injuries and filled him with power. One saber diverted to block him, so he used the spirit’s second gift - Rippling Echo.

A glowing blue light covered his sword in imitation of the skill he parried, extending his reach to sever the pirate’s neck. Both of Kahali’s gifts required him to withstand an attack to use, but the payoff didn’t disappoint.

“Are you okay...” Kai collapsed, the power of his boon leaving him now that his enemy was defeated. His arms burned with pain and refused to move. He gritted his teeth and downed a healing potion with the help of a Water spell.

“Where are you hurt?” Flynn helped him to his feet, absorbing the impact when the *Intrepid* slanted forty-five degrees.

“It’s just the side effect of my boon. I’ll be fine.” Kai stumbled to put his sword in his ring. “We need to move before someone else comes. I can still use my legs.”

*More or less.*

“I—” Flynn bit his lip and nodded.

Hidden in Shadow, they slipped outside. Two raiders with gouged-out eyes and slit throats waited for them in the corridor.

“Meow.” Hobbes proudly licked his paw like a cat who had dragged a dead bird home.

*The best gift I ever got! And yes, you're a better hunter than me.*

The furball disappeared in a silver blink. Kai cautiously crept through the corridors while the *Intrepid* creaked and tilted at ever sharper angles.

"Ander!" A young male voice hissed, making them freeze. "We need to go back. There is something weird going on. And this ship is going to sink at any moment!"

"Stop being a superstitious hag," a lowered voice snapped back.

"I've seen Sera juggle a dozen knives without a cut. Deathless Abyss! How could she have impaled herself on her own dagger?"

"You heard the praetor," Ander snorted. "He's going to rip us in two if we don't retrieve what the spy stole."

"What does it matter? Everything is going to end up at the bottom of the sea anyway."

"Shut up! You're going to get us both killed." Ander furiously whispered against the low thud of someone getting slammed into a door. "We follow the orders to the letter. Are we clear?"

The strangled response was too low to make out. Their steps grew fainter down the hallway.

Flynn tapped his arm to lead them up a ladder in the opposite direction.

*Why did you have to say the Intrepid was unsinkable? We need to get out of here.*

Freezing water and dark depths crowded his mind. The ship rocked under the waves. In an attempt to keep his balance, his shoe slipped on a slick board and sent him crashing into an open cabin. His tumble ended against a wardrobe.

*How much longer do we have to endure this?*

Kai was about to stand up when a book fell on his head adding insult to injury. The leather-bound journal tumbled open on the floor. He was about to throw it away in frustration when his eyes fell on a list of names. One in particular stood out: Elijah Lockhart Greaves.