

## Chapter 132 - Night of Blood

Zerith swung his sword, cleaning the enchanted blade from the blood.

The archipelago. A relaxing place with sunny beaches and naive people. A little forgotten corner of the world where trouble didn't bother going.

When Eryvn had offered him this assignment, it had seemed too good to be true. Commanding the garrison of a quiet small town of fishermen and farmers, a chance to do some good and leave behind the ghosts of the past.

Nothing more than a few bands of rebellious citizens with the occasional family drama or impulsive murder. Enough to keep boredom away and not let his skills rust entirely.

*Such a fool.*

Maybe it was the Republic's fault, if they'd left this place alone, the dream could have lasted longer. But that damn woman couldn't help herself. She had to pull schemes and money till the world came knocking.

A man rushed at him with a spear out of a broken window as a woman tried to sneak up from behind with two daggers. Both were at the beginning of Yellow, both swinging sticks like children, and no more effective.

He'd almost feel bad for them, almost. After massacring powerless locals, they must think themselves invincible. Incomprehension flashed in their eyes as they realized they were dead, their bodies flopping to the ground in three pieces.

The pirate leader who led the charge down the main avenue had been the strongest so far—hopefully the captain. They had been coming exactly in his path. It took a couple more swings each, but they fell all the same.

Grades grew wider as you climbed. Superior skills and experience could bridge the gap up to a certain point. He had been able to do that once, but none of these raiders were that good anyway.

*Why?*

Surrounded by corpses and broken buildings, it was the question that continuously tugged at him.

*Why* was all this pointless death and destruction necessary? *Why* couldn't people see reason? *Why* couldn't humans ever be happy with what they got?

As always, there was no answer. None that satisfied him anyway.

The pretty boulevard with colorful shops and smells of freshly baked goods was choked with the stench of ash and blood. Little of it remained intact, most people had managed to run to safety, but not all.

If these pirates had no shame punching down lower grades, he wouldn't either.

Zerith continued marching through the empty streets to hunt for more raiders. Death to reduce death. It never worked, but what else could he do? It was the only thing he had ever been good at. And it would be better than doing nothing.

The faster he was the better. He needed to clean up here before eliminating the root of the problem. Leaving people with nowhere to run never ended well. A single pirate could cause a massacre if they remained stranded on land among the population.

*What is he doing here?*

The marks faded in the back of his mind unless he focused on them. He distinctly remembered the kid being outside of town when the trouble began.

Running on top of the buildings, he had to be careful not to push with too much strength against the thin roofs. Faint violet rays of moonlight pierced the smoke and clouds hanging over the town, lighting the streets.

Balancing on the shingle roof, he got a full view of the kid's recently acquired lab. The mark showed he was still inside, alive. His behavior had been more suspicious than usual, something was up.

*Has he come to protect his property?*

No, that didn't make sense. Kai never seemed overly interested in money. No more than was expected from someone who had known hunger anyway.

It would be much easier to convince Cressida the boy was just another uninteresting brat if he didn't show up in the least opportune places. Though no one was likely to notice in the general chaos.

*Damn, kid. Can't you keep a low profile?*

His erratic behavior definitely warranted looking into.

Echoes of clashing metal resounded from the building. Zerith dashed to intercept a group of raiders who had been attracted by the noise. Wind Slash cut down two of them before they could react, though a third barely dodged the air cut.

Probably in the middle of Yellow. The woman bent her back to an unnatural degree, looking for the origin of the attack, "Show yourself—"

The second strike didn't miss, and he ran past. The continuous clanks of fighting coming from the lab interrupted.

*You're not going to get yourself killed, kid. Not after all the trouble I went through.*

The wooden framework of the roof creaked as he leaped closer to the lab, landing on the balcony of the opposite building. Zerith prepared to use Splitting Charge through the wall.

From this height, he had a partial view of the inside through the high window of the lab. His sensing skills completed the scene.

One headless corpse on the floor, three people still standing, one adult wielding a curved blade and two kids. Even without his mark, it was impossible to mistake the smaller child, wielding a sword.

A precise jab close to the hilt and Kai disarmed his opponent. Without any hesitation, the kid proceeded to slash the throat of the raider. His moves faster than they had any right to be.

Zerith scanned him again, his race still showed as Orange ★. He had known it had to be a ruse, but even if the kid had reached Orange ★★★, that speed wouldn't be possible.

*Has he reached Yellow or gotten a profession?*

Each new option was more unbelievable than the last, but the pirate had been at the upper limit of Orange. How high would his skills have to be to bridge the profession gap?

After defeating his opponent, Kai staggered, leaning against his sword for balance. No trace of those precise and ruthless movements anymore.

Another, older boy hurried to the kid's side. Judging from their body language, they were close to each other. He recognized the face, there weren't that many kids that got into the scholarship program from Sylspring. Filing Index quickly pulled the right document from memory. The boy's personal file flashed in his mind.

*Flynn Soveili, poor background, father died during the famine, graduated first in his class, upper common profession. He was offered a job from the Republic and should be working for the government, though his profile doesn't report details.*

His presence might explain the outcome of the fight, if it was a favorable matchup for his skills and a lot of luck was involved. Maybe the pirate wasn't as strong as he thought. But why was he here and what was his relationship with Kai?

*How many more secrets are you hiding?*

Even disregarding his teachers, his Alchemy alone would be enough to catch the *governor's* interest and receive an offer that *couldn't* be refused when he got a profession. If there was more, and Cressida found out, she might not wait till then. The kid had no idea what a thin line he was walking.

A bright flame lit the sky near the port.

*Blessed Moons!*

He needed to remove that mage before they could stop the fires. The kid would survive. There would be time to look into it later.

Every team of enforcers had orders to hold a defensive position as he delved behind the enemy's lines. Fighting through the streets would kill more people than it saved. The recruits who were posted here were newbies with little to no experience or veterans at the end of their rope.

Zerith intercepted two more groups of pirates heading toward the lab, looking for a new target to plunder.

Another man was walking out of a bookstore, dragging a screaming woman by her hair. The gleeful grin still on his face as his head rolled to the ground.

“Drink this and run straight for the western gate.” He made sure she didn’t have any fatal wounds and put a healing vial in her hand.

The woman stopped yelling, staring in shock at the dead bleeding corpse. She didn’t drink the potion, but she did start running in the right direction.

*Good enough.*

The best way to prevent the pointless loss of more lives was to put an end to the raid. There were too many pirates and his mana pool was dwindling to fuel his skills.

The closer he got to the docks, the more raiders he met. They seemed to have caught on to what he was doing, converging towards the three ships moored at the pier. That suited him just fine, less time wasted chasing after them.

Two teams of enforcers had been dispatched at the northern and southern end to keep them busy and contained while he struck through the middle.

The people closest to the port would have been caught in the initial wave without a chance of escaping. Now their corpses filled every alley, with most of the warehouses, inns and taverns around the port reduced to little more than burnt husks.

*Why, why here?*

Flashes of destruction rose from the depths of his mind, where he buried them. He'd sworn never to set foot on a battlefield again. He took a breath to firm the shaking grip on his sword.

Why were the gods forcing him to go through this again?

A couple lay in the mud still holding hands, their hearts pierced from behind. They must have chosen to visit the archipelago for their honeymoon. The woman held a protective hand to her belly even in death.

Zerith glanced at the moons, silently observing the world. As usual, the gods gave no answer.

*I need to put an end to this.*

Rounding a corner, Sixth Sense warned him of the danger. His body dodged before he could register the dozen shots coming for him thanks to Enhanced Reaction.

One arrow veered its flight toward him, rapidly approaching. Not enough distance to dodge again. Zerith angled his sword along the trajectory. The shot impacted with the strength of a charging bull. With a grunt, he grabbed his blade with both hands to brace and deflect.

He didn't get a chance to catch his breath as a bright red fireball headed his way. The crimson flames grew till they occupied the whole street. The arrows had forced him to dodge in a corner. Boxed in by two walls, jumping over them would leave him exposed to more shots. He could head on, but it would put another dent into his reserves that he couldn't afford.

Without hesitation, Zerith continued his momentum and slashed through the wall of the warehouse. A shoulder push carried by Splitting Charge got him through.

Scorching heat caressed his back. He used Windscreen just as a deafening explosion burst in the street behind him, accelerating his momentum tenfold.

Zerith braced for impact. His body smashed through the crates, but he never lost the grip of his sword. As he arrested his momentum on the opposite wall, a sea of crimson flames washed over him.

He stared at the burning inferno, barely feeling the heat. Windscreen did little to avoid direct blows, but it worked flawlessly against formless magic and glancing shots. On a battlefield, it was well worth the profession slot.

*I'm too old for this shit.*

He'd pushed them back towards their ship hoping they would take the chance to sail out of the Shallow Sea. That was what any sensible bandit would do. Avoid risk and get away before reinforcements arrive.

Apparently, these fucking pirates didn't get the memo. The unreasonable raiders like them never lived long, but always made trouble.

As the building burned around him, Zerith cloaked his presence beneath a pile of smoldering rubble and deactivated his skills. He suppressed a groan, tomorrow he would feel each blow getting out of bed.

The heat was quite nice, though there was no air to breathe. If they were stupid enough not to run away, they might also believe they killed him in the ambush.

"Told 'ou. If I can sink a ship, I can kill one swordsman." The voice of a woman heaving for breath. Arrogance dripped from every word. "Now we can't take our time enjoying this town!"

"If it wasn't for my arrow, you'd never hit," a man whined.



They might detect his sensing skills, but there was no need since they were so eager to give away their position.

*Just a little bit closer. Almost there.*

The crunch on their steps over the charred wood of the warehouse drew closer together with their bickering.

“Shut up, the both of you. We’d already been running if it was for you,” A grave voice stopped them in their tracks. “Go search the area and bring me his body.”

If he were to guess, those were captains of the three ships. They must have waited and sent forward their subordinates to plunder why they waited, unfortunately cautious.

The pair stopped and more boots came to search for him. A few people complained about the heat, but one word of threat from the old captain sent them scurrying away.

If he failed, Sylspring would be left without defenders till more reinforcements came. He had sent news to Higharbor immediately, but even if Evryn came personally, the down might be rubble by then.

Zerith mapped his opponents. His stealth skills were average at best. He needed to act before someone spotted him. His fingers clenched around the hilt of his sword, his muscles tensed like springs ready to burst. Just one more step—

With Splitting Charge, he burst through the rubble. Zephyr's Touch enhanced his body and skills. A large wind slash caught a dozen pirates searching through the debris and forced as many to dodge.

Zerith paid them no mind. Once he killed the three captains, the rest didn't matter. The archer, a middle-aged sleazy man, was the closest. The sneer on his face turned into fright as he dashed on an awkward retreat.

*Not fast enough.*

The first Wind Slash took his bow, the second was about to take his head when an iron shield got in the middle. His focused cut dented the metal. The man grunted in surprise and took a single step back.

Zerith scanned his opponent, both the mage and the archer were at the peak of yellow. The problem was the last captain. Sword and shield with almost a complete plate armor like a knight, an unusual choice for a pirate. Worse yet, he was half-step into green, just like him.

Why is someone on this level raiding the archipelago?

The strangeness of this raid was blatant. He would get down to the bottom of it after he freed their neck from those pointless skulls.

"The town will be completely defenseless, they said," the voice cawed angrily. Yellow teeth bared behind a dirty graying beard. "Should have kno—"

Zerith struck, it was obvious the man was trying to take time to surround him. He was already tired from cleaning up the town and heavily outnumbered. He needed to close the fight quickly.

He dashed towards the mage with dyed red hair, not sparing his mana to push his speed to the limits. The woman wore a flamboyant crimson coat with a very low neckline. She looked tired from the earlier ambush, and he didn't plan to find out if she had a way to recover her mana.

Fear lit her eyes. Instead of running, she sent a flurry of identical fireballs his way. Only a half-mage who relied heavily on profession skills. Zerith slashed through them letting Windscreen take care of the fallout.

In a panic, the half-mage cast a stream of crimson flames from her hand, laughing madly, "Burn! Burn for me!"

Zerith sidestepped the flowing fire. The knight was sprinting to defend, but he had him beat in speed.

Two red eyes shone with a crazy glint behind the blaze. "If you won't burn for me, we'll burn together!"

"Wait, stop!" The knight shouted, panicked.

Shit!

Sixth Sense warned him a moment before the insane woman exploded in a flood of roaring crimson fire. His sword cut the flame with Gale to avoid the brunt of the impact.

But it could only delay the inevitable. Zerith angled his sword before him, then flared Windscreen and Zephyr's Touch, sacrificing another chunk of mana to protect himself from the inferno.

His enchanted uniform was burnt and shredded, though it protected his skin from charring. With a grimace, Zerith put out the fire burning on his shoulder. He didn't waste time examining himself, there was hardly any part of his body that didn't hurt.

*Fucking lunatic, who takes a self-destruction skill.*

A long string of curses forced him to raise his guard. The knight threw his helmet off, his armor had been heated bright red, but he didn't seem otherwise hurt.

The remaining walls of the warehouse had been blasted away except for a room shining with sizzling enchantments about to give out behind him. No other pirate in sight. The night was strangely silent.

An Arrow hissed towards him, Zerith cursed for speaking too soon and forced his body to dodge.

"I'm going to kill you," the archer was back with another bow. He flung a flurry of shots, his face snarling in rage and tears. "You're going to die a slow death for what you did to her!"

Zerith gritted his teeth and dashed to meet him. The archer dodged the first and second Wind Slash, not the next five. Though he couldn't avoid an arrow to the leg in exchange.

With no mana left to spare and bleeding profusely, he turned towards his final opponent. The knight had finished ripping off pieces of his armor and watched him with grim determination.

Why?

"I should have known there is no easy target," he laughed sourly.

"You can take your ships and leave."

"Oh, I will." The knight showed his rotten teeth. "Just after I kill you and raze this cursed town to the ground."

The old pirate advanced methodically, sword and shield at the ready. Zerith raised his guard and prepared to meet him.

The metallic ringing of their swords filled the night. With an injured leg, his biggest advantage in mobility was gone. He had maybe another thirty seconds of Zephyr's Touch, not enough to chip away at his opponent's defenses.

Zerith retreated, trying to deflect the strikes. Each clash came closer to sending his sword flying from his hands.

He couldn't run and he couldn't win, truthfully, he could barely stand. His superior level in Longsword was the only reason he still held on. The pirate captain left no opening, advancing slowly with a sadistic grin.

No reinforcements were coming. He had given precise orders to his officers to maintain their position, no matter what happened. Even if they disobeyed, they wouldn't get here in time.

His last shreds of mana were consumed, tapping into his lifeblood to keep the skill going. It weakened him as much as it helped, only delaying the inevitable. His vision blurred and his arms grew weaker every second.

Sixth Sense flashed at his back, but he didn't have the strength to check with his skills. Surprise flashed in the knight's eyes. His shield raised to meet a threat he couldn't see.

That was enough.

Zerith lunged in a piercing strike that left him completely exposed. He burned his lifeblood to flare his skills. A meter-long crystal shard met the shield forcing it an inch back, enough to slip through the pirate's guard.

The knight's eyes widened in shock at the blade piercing his heart, as if he couldn't understand what had happened.

"You should have run away," he wasn't sure if he had said it or only thought it.

Zerith collapsed to the ground. The pirate's sword stuck through his own chest, a strike he couldn't avoid.

A merfolk with a crumbling wand hurried towards him followed by three other human guards. He might have seen his face before but didn't have the energy to pull up the file.

They were coming out of the collapsing enchanted room. He hadn't thought anyone was still there.

The last slivers of life slipped away. The eyes of the gods still hung unfeeling up above.

Zerith still didn't know why, but he thought it had been worth it.