

Chapter 31: An Elder's Chosen

Arthuria looked down at the chains binding her wrists together: they glowed a faint blue-green with runic etchings tracing the surface of the bronze metal. She was more than used to the sight of the unique bindings, Daesang Bronze; she could feel it binding to her blood, its anti-magic properties draining her chances of escaping with every second that passed. She felt lost without her blade, not that the cracked weapon would be much use against the squadron of high-ranking Church officials escorting her.

She looked up, glancing at her guards leading the way: a pair of High-Mages - Warlocks of the highest order, sitting only beneath their three Grandmasters. She looked behind her, immediately feeling the points of two longswords press into the back of her under-armour as her two Paladin rear guards ensured no escape attempts were made. "Eyes forward!" ordered one of the guards. Arthuria obliged, rolling her yellow eyes before attempting to push the loose strands of her golden blonde hair out of her face. "Hands down by your sides!" ordered the same guard. "Fine, fine," said Arthuria, resorting to blowing her hair to the side. "No need to be an asshole," she muttered.

They led her through the Holy Palace, away from the Paladin quarters, and down a long set of spiral stairs. At every twist and every turn a guard stood watch, either Priest, Warlock, Paladin, or Witch. They all stared at her as she walked, some muttering under their breath as she passed. "Traitor. Failure. Heretic." They were all the same to Arthuria, titles of shame for coming back from a failed inquisition. They entered a huge open hall, lit only by torches on the walls. Statues of the Church's founders stood judging Arthuria as she walked across the stone floor, the heavy footsteps of her boots echoing around the room. "Clear the path!" ordered one of the Paladins behind her to a group of Sisters blocking their way. The Sisters parted, their faces mostly hidden behind veils, the rest of the bodies entirely covered by their usual long robes, their habits.

Unusually, these Sisters wore white, highlighted by a light blue, as opposed to the usual black and white habits the majority of the Sisters wore. The six of them stood on either side of the procession, staring at Arthuria as she walked between them. "Do not worry Saint's Chosen. You are spoken for and have nothing to hide," echoed a series of voices around her. A shiver ran down Arthuria's spine and she immediately turned around to look at the six Sisters, but they were gone. "Face forward! Last warning," ordered her guard. Arthuria stood frozen, they had just been there. It was impossible for the Sisters to have just disappeared

from a room with only one entrance. She scanned the room - Arthuria and her guards were over twenty metres away from the stairs. Her eyes rested on a pair of small feet at the bottom of the stairs, the toenails painted a bright pink. "Hey! Are you listening?"

Arthuria blinked, the feet were gone. "Right," Arthuria said, looking at her armoured guards. "Sorry," she added with a faint smile, before turning back around to look at the large white doors before them on the other side of the hall. They crossed the way, a quartet of guards stationed outside the door, a member from each leading faction, alongside a lone figure dressed in a set of plate armour. He was helmetless, his sand-coloured hair messy, and green eyes full of concern as he looked towards Arthuria. He had light skin, with a long scar leading from his left temple all the way to his chin. He was young, no more than twenty-five. His armour was bronze, highlighted by red cloth underneath the main pieces, with a short waist-length cape of an identical colour. His usual helmet sat hooked under his arm, a strange and unique piece of metal, with two long vertical slits forming a 'Y' as his visor, an extension heading out of the top with a red ribbon and a pair of small spikes on his temples.

"That's far enough!" ordered Jean de Metz. The procession halted, the pair of guards behind Arthuria both placing a hand on each of her shoulders before throwing her forwards. "We were tasked with delivering her straight into the council chambers," stated one of the High-Mages, stepping in front of Arthuria as Metz approached. Metz pointed behind him at the large white doors. "And so you have. Dismissed," he ordered, looking down at Arthuria as he stood in front of her. "This is highly irregular, do you have permission to relieve us?" questioned the other High-Mage, the pair of Paladin guards quickly looking at each other before stepping forwards. "Hey, hey, that's a Sentinel you're talking to!" started one of the Paladins.

"And we are High-Mages! Are you fools so blind as to just believe words without question?" asked the leading High-Mage, the other turning to Sentinel Metz. "I'm her lawyer," stated Metz. "This is a trial, and she is in my custody. Dismissed, or you can walk with me the extra metres into the council chamber. And I'll dismiss you again in there, in front of your leaders whilst I explain the delay to them." The two High-Mages looked at each other before looking down at Arthuria as she sat there on her knees. "I'd listen to him," she said snarkily, putting on a wide smile. They looked back at Sentinel Metz before nodding and turning around. "Watch your backs, Paladins!" warned one of them as they

walked away. The two remaining Paladin guards saluted before quickly heading after them.

Once Arthuria's escort was out of sight, Metz crouched low, looking at Arthuria straight in her eyes. "Well, this is a remarkable predicament you've found yourself in," he whispered, with a small but clearly nervous smile. Arthuria shrugged, standing to her feet after refusing his aide. "If I had thought this was the warm welcome I would receive on my return, I'd have thought twice about coming back," she said. Metz shook his head. "What? Allow me some sarcasm." "As your lawyer, superior, and friend, if you want to remain in one piece, don't repeat that in front of the council."

"Noted, and we're friends now? Did you miss me when I was exiled to the North?" Arthuria asked, as she attempted to cross her arms. The Sentinel rolled his eyes. "I had nothing to do with that, and quite frankly anyone who would have send you on that suicide mission is certainly not your friend." Arthuria's stomach dropped. "Oh..." she said quietly, thinking back to who the orders had come from. Metz's expression changed quickly to concern. "No, I mean... sorry. I didn't mean it like that. The Elder doesn't have anything against you, I'm sure," he tried to salvage. Arthuria looked down at her feet and shook her head. "Let's just get this over with."

Metz nodded, placing a gauntlet onto Arthuria's shoulder. "Speak honestly- ". "Not like I have much choice," Arthuria interjected. Metz smiled faintly and nodded. "That's fair. You weren't in a state to participate in the campaign after the attack, by all accounts, you've committed no crime. I'll wrap things up after you've given testimony. Okay?" he asked. Arthuria nodded in acknowledgement. "Good. Let's do this." He led her forwards, the guards opening the doors for them.

They found themselves in a large, dark, circular room. Five curved benches sat forming a broken ring in the middle of the room, all facing towards the centre. They were padded, to a luxurious extent, and each were made from a different coloured wood. Arthuria was led into the centre, a spotlight descending down onto her from directly above, blinding her to her surroundings. Her mouth grew fuzzy as she felt the effects of a truth spell take over her. "Paladin Arthuria Pendragon, do you know why you have been summoned here today?" asked a voice from a white bench.

Arthuria nodded. "To explain why I wasn't present in the battle against the Nomads, and to give an account on what happened on the island of Frozen

Branch," Arthuria stated, as she turned to face her questioner, a Cardinal of the Priests. "Enlighten us," came a cold voice from a black bench - the voice of one of the three members of the Daughters of Shade Council. "The attack began with a deliberate sabotage of our black powder stores. It was ignited, resulting in a small fire that was quickly put out by the Priests sent on the inquisition. It was marked as a simple accident, a torch too close to the stores, a bit of wind, but as the alarms were disabled and we returned to regular routine, a shout summoned myself and a few others," Arthuria explained.

"How many of you went to investigate the call?" asked another voice from a red bench, one of the three Grandmasters of the Warlocks. "The report stated seven Priests and fourteen Navy Sailors, as well as myself, this is incorrect. There were Nine Priests and twelve Sailors, as well as myself," Arthuria stated. A familiar voice spoke up. "How many attackers were there?" asked Sentinel Baudricourt from a gold bench, his deep and gruff voice recognisable anywhere. "The report stated-".

"We know what the report stated. Those who wrote the report were neither there, nor are they still alive to tell us, Paladin. What did you see?" asked another unfamiliar voice from the Warlock bench. "There was one," Arthuria said nervously, her hands shaking in the chains, and a cold sweat building up as she found herself stood back in the cold snow of the North. "Only one person?" asked another Cardinal. "Yes." Murmurs echoed around the room, Arthuria's vision turning red in the corner of her eye. She went to wipe it on her shoulder, but another splatter smeared itself across her other eye.

"Impossible! How could one person have done all of that? We'd have known if a Pirate Lord was within a thousand kilometres of the island. She lies!" argued a Cardinal. "She can't lie whilst in my gaze! Sit down and shut up," ordered Sentinel Cauchon, another familiar voice on the Paladin bench. "Paladin," came another female voice from the Daughters of Shade bench, this one raspy and frail. "Describe this person to us." Arthuria took a deep breath, shutting her eyes as she tried to picture the aggressor.

"He wasn't tall, a child or a small man or a teenager. I don't... I think blonde hair. He stunned me before I could get a proper look. He moved like a blur, a monster, a demon..." There was the faintest of uncomfortable shifting from the white bench. "I don't really remember much apart from his hands," Arthuria added, turning to directly face the Paladin bench. "His hands?" asked a new voice from the Priest bench, a smooth and soft voice that sent shivers down Arthuria's spine.

"They were stained. He killed with his hands, his fingers like knives, fists like cannons. He was covered in blood, but even through his drenched hands, they were stained. A red-orange colour all the way up-".

"To his elbows," concluded the soft voice. Arthuria nodded. The murmurs picked up again, this time turning into quick shouts. "That's impossible!" yelled a voice from the Warlock bench. "You promised that was impossible!" they added, in the direction of the Priest bench. "Enough!" came a stern female voice from the Daughters of Shade bench. "This is not a discussion in front of prying eyes! Elder d'Arc, she is yours to deal with. Clear the room!" The chatter continued around the room, and the light above disappeared.

Arthuria blinked quickly to adjust to the light change; above the room were onlooking balconies, various high-ranking members of the Church quickly departing as they were ordered to leave. "Damn, I was looking forward to an execution..." muttered a voice from somewhere behind her. She glanced around the room at the various benches, her eyes eventually resting on the fully armoured figure of Elder d'Arc. Arthuria couldn't see her eyes, but she felt them on her. The seven other Sentinels were all sat or stood around her, their helmets off and their faces looking directly at Arthuria. Elder d'Arc looked towards Baudricourt and shook her head softly, eventually turning her head to Metz and nodding. He stood up and walked over to Arthuria, placing his hands onto her chains and inserting a key. Her chains fell to the floor with a clang. "Go. Return to your quarters for further orders. Watch your back, this may not be over..." he warned, his face steely and eyes fixated on the Priest bench behind her.

Arthuria opened her mouth to speak. "Not now. Go." She nodded, walking past him and heading for the large white doors, glancing briefly at the bench she passed on the way. It was brown, with a single figure sat upon it, a woman, dressed from head to toe in white, a black veil obscuring her face – the Mother of the Sisters. Her head turned to meet Arthuria's gaze as she walked past, the pair sharing the briefest of glances before Arthuria stepped through the doors. They closed behind her, an eruption of voices bursting through the final gap as the doors slammed shut.

Arthuria made her way back to the Paladin's quarters; the walk was long, and it gave her too much time to think. She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling in her body, it had seeped into her bones creating an untouchable feeling of discomfort. She walked on auto-pilot, not noticing the judging looks from the other members of her Order, nor hearing their murmurs as they spoke about her. Instead, she

looked up, walking with puzzlement as she tried to piece together the entire ordeal.

She turned a corner, entering into the Proctor's camp. Workbenches lay scattered across the open yard, forges sat in the corners, and, beyond all, magical equipment was everywhere. Suits of Paladin plate armour hung from stands as the various Artificers of the Order made modifications, Scribes ran around the area following the various, and often conflicting, orders from their senior Proctors, but the noise of hardworking smiths snapped Arthuria out of her thoughts. She made her way across the camp, heading along her usual path to her usual smith.

He was a large man, not overly tall, but with a large and protruding stomach covered only by a filthy and oil stained apron. The top of his head was bald, with a ring of black hair leading down to connect to a spiky mass that made up his beard. His arms were as hairy and muscular as a gorilla's and, from the way he hunched over, it was possible to even mistake him for one. "Gujin!" called Arthuria, over the sounds of clanging as the old man hammered away on a large sword. He raised his head, his eyes hidden by a pair of orange welding goggles.

He held up a finger, looking back down at the blade before he began to chant, raising his hammer high into the air, the head glowing a brilliant green. He smashed down onto the blade, sparks flying in all directions. The smith then nodded, reaching to a lever behind him before pulling it, a stream of water falling onto the anvil and the restrained blade from a wooden tube over his head. Arthuria followed the tube backwards, observing the interconnection of various pipes, leading all the way towards a giant water wheel.

Gujin took off his gloves and hung up his hammer, wiping grease onto his trousers before waddling towards her with big steps. "Arthuria!" he cheered, grappling her in a large hug before lifting her off her feet. She smiled as she hugged him back, a genuine relief after a miserable start to the day. "Are you okay? I heard what happened, I'm glad they didn't scapegoat you," he said, looking up at her through his goggles. She faltered and he put her back down, stepping back and beckoning for her to follow. He led her behind his workshop: a few Squires were sat playing cards, and, after getting an earful from Gujin, they ran off, giving the pair some privacy.

He took his goggles off, placing them onto a large crate, before inviting Arthuria to take a seat with him. "Tell me what happened." Arthuria recounted the events of the day, sparing no details for one of her oldest, and most respected, friends.

He nodded along, listening intently, his small brown eyes focused and full of concern as she concluded her tale. "I see, indeed it is some miracle you are still alive. It sounds like the schedule consisted of your public execution, presumably under the title of heretic. I'm glad it wasn't so. But, as your friend, I must express my concern. Your blade was cracked, not chipped, not warped, cracked - this shouldn't be possible by bare hands alone. Are you having doubts? Your oath is directly tied to your blade, neither should be breakable."

Arthuria thought to herself, thinking back to the events of the last few months: the massacre in The Gardens, the journey to and from the North. "I... don't know. I didn't think so, but maybe I need to renew my oath," she said. He nodded, getting to his feet and reaching to a half-eaten sandwich made from a baguette that sat on one of the shelves. He took a bite, offering it to her. She took it and bit her own piece before handing it back. For a cheese sandwich, it was potent beyond belief and the chutney inside was quite sweet. Arthuria recoiled from the overpowering taste. "Nothing quite like it," Gujin said with a toothy grin. "I think it's best you consider a renewal, but for now, keep your head down," he told her, through a mouthful.

She nodded, before tilting her head and pulling a face. "Is my weapon not ready yet?" she asked with mild curiosity. She had always skipped the queue, he had never not finished her weapon within a day. "It's been superseded, I'm sorry. I will send it to your room when it's ready. Your armour is there waiting for you." Arthuria nodded. "Right, thank you anyway. I'll leave you to it," she said with a smile. He nodded, extending a hand to her. She gripped it tightly with both hands and he pulled her in for another hug. "Stay safe, my dear. Don't lose heart, and keep your faith in those you look up to," he told her before releasing her. She nodded, turning around and walking away, giving one last look and a smile before leaving the Proctor to his work.

She returned to her room, stepping into the small space and locking the door behind her. Her armour sat on its stand in the corner, her winged helmet staring at her as she leant her head back against the door. "What are you staring at?" she asked the piece of metal. It didn't answer. Arthuria let out a long sigh, unzipping her under-armour and letting the clothing drop to the floor. She reached underneath her bed, grabbing the small box she had hidden beneath it, before opening it. Her small collection of banned literature lay in front of her, and with the broadest of smiles on her face she grabbed her most recent addition, the third volume of 'Noire Lucinda's Adventures of Love, Adultery, and Heroism'.

Arthuria ran herself a bath, scattering a handful of pink salt into the water before sitting in her tub and laying her head back onto the padding on the edge. The water had been run a bit too hot, her light skin turning a soft pink within the first few moments as she read her book. She cracked open a window, releasing the steam out into the cold winter air and letting the wind flow over her hot skin. She finished her page, carefully placing her book onto a stool she kept by the bath, before taking a drink of cold water. She then looked out of her window, the view looking down over the many snow-covered roofs of the Isle of Sanctity, her eyes closing slowly on their own.

Arthuria awoke a while later - she was still in her tub, the water cool but still slightly warm. She reached for her glass, finding it refilled, and cold. Arthuria took a long sip, placing it back down before dropping her head beneath the surface of her bath. She shot upwards with a startled realisation as she clutched her throat, her eyes wide. She glanced towards her stool, taking a deep breath of air as quick panic set in. A moment passed, it wasn't poisoned. She let out a long sigh of relief, only for her eyes to focus on the spot where her book had last been. It was gone.

Arthuria took a moment to calm herself, as she looked around the floor, trying to see if it had fallen. She shook her head, scolding herself, until a faint laugh drew her attention. Arthuria tilted her head over the edge of the bath, water dripping from her long golden hair onto the floor as she tried to peek through the doorway to her main room. She continued to lean, only to slip and crash back into the bath with a huge splash. She wiped water out of her eyes, standing up and stepping out as she peeked her head around the half-open door. A teenager lay on her bed, sixteen or seventeen in age.

She had short black hair, a middle parting on her forehead with two short clusters of hair curling around into broken bangs. Her hair was longer at the front, dropping down to stop just above her collar bone before shortening as it ran around the back of her head. Eventually it became shaved as it came to her neck, with a short amount left to hang over the shortest area. She was wearing black and jade-green under-amour, the pieces of her black and gold plate armour scattered across the floor. Her jade-coloured eyes were fixated on a book in her hands as she lay on her front, her feet kicking slowly behind her.

Arthuria stared at her with mixed confusion and curiosity, water dripping from her body onto her bathroom floor. "Elder?" Arthuria asked. Jeanne looked up, a faint smile on her face before her cheeks flushed a deep crimson. Arthuria stared

at her, and Jeanne stared back, desperately keeping her eyes in line with Arthuria's before she nodded her head, her eyes flicking downwards before back upwards in a silent message. Arthuria looked down, gasping in horror before she slammed her bathroom door shut. Arthuria grabbed her towel, groaning in anguish as she realised she hadn't brought any clothes into her bathroom to change into. She wrapped herself tightly in her peach-coloured towel before opening the door and looking back inside her bedroom.

Elder d'Arc sat up on Arthuria's bed, Arthuria's book gently placed to the side, her bookmark undisturbed. "Is there something you need from me, Elder?" Arthuria asked, as she slowly stepped around the edge of her room to her wardrobe. Jeanne nodded, turning away to allow Arthuria to dress herself. "I need your help, Arthuria," she said, standing up and stepping towards her before grabbing her hands. Jeanne was only slightly shorter than her. Arthuria nodded, looking down at the leader of the Paladins. "What do you need me to do?" Arthuria asked.

Seize the Seas Tales: An Overreaching Curiosity

William was enjoying the comfy and cushy life of a Priest: his duties were minimal, he got to boss people around, and people were respectful to him. Yet something still bothered him. He had been a Priest for a few months already, and they hadn't the audacity to promote him yet. He sat there in the snow-covered gardens of the Isle of Sanctity, a donut in one hand whilst he rested his chin on the other. "It's outrageous! It's not my fault I haven't had another vision," he complained to a pigeon as it sat nearby. It cooed at him before flying off.

William sighed, standing up and throwing the remainder of his donut to a few remaining birds before wiping his hands on the snow. His hair was short, brown, yet still messy. A pair of plain wireframe glasses sat on his nose. He was not particularly tall, but he was skinny, his body hidden entirely under his robes. With little else on his itinerary, he made his way back to the Holy Palace. Nobody greeted him, nobody bothered him, and he was grateful for it. He made his way through the central courtyard, past the Paladin's sacred tree, and towards the main food hall.

Something, however, caught his attention. It was a small group, a pair of Warlocks and a pair of Paladins escorting a prisoner in shackles. "Now there's something interesting," William said to himself as he crossed the way to follow after them, keeping a distance to make it look like simple coincidence he was heading their way. They descended a long set of spiral stairs, the main route to

the council chambers. William paused, but his curiosity dragged him after them, and it wasn't long before he found himself facing the two pairs of guards, the pairs arguing with each other. "Excuse me," William said, stepping between the four of them as he continued onwards into the hallway leading to the council chambers.

He approached the large white doors, the four guards stationed outside staring at him as he walked towards them. "Where do you think you're going?" asked the Paladin Knight stood by the door. "In there," William said matter-of-factly. The Knight looked at the other guards on duty. "Under whose authority?" asked the Knight. "I was told to head to the council chambers, there's a trial going on and I'm expected to act as a scribe," William lied with absolute certainty. The Knight paused, turning to look at the other guards. The Daughter of Shade shrugged, and the Knight slowly turned back around to face William. "Fine, go ahead."

William smiled and pushed open the door, stepping quietly inside and keeping to the edge of the room. The prisoner stood in the centre of the room, the various heads around the room all looking towards her. William grinned as he observed the spectacle. All of the major members of the Church were here. The Pope sat on a white bench surrounded by the six Cardinals. There was the Paladin Elder alongside her seven Sentinels. The Matron of the Sisters sat on her own. A trio of Warlocks, the three Grandmasters - William presumed, sat on their red bench. Even the leaders of the Daughters of Shade had turned up: a trio of old Witches made up the Council, their much younger Queen sat in the middle of them.

He basked in their presence, excitement building up as he watched the interrogation. Eventually William made his way around the edge of the room, heading to the Priest section to stand with the various Archbishops watching from the edge. They didn't notice him immediately until a voice rang out across the chamber. "Clear the room!" ordered the Witch Queen, William's chest falling as he watched the observation rooms clear out. "Damn, I was looking forward to an execution..." William muttered. One of the Archbishops finally noticed him. A very tall man: his robes were sleeveless, and his arms were huge. "Where did you come from? How did you get in here?" asked the Archbishop. William stared up at the giant. "I was invited," he lied. The Archbishop raised an eyebrow, turning back to look at the others. "Right, well, we need to go anyway. Come on," said the tall Archbishop, resting a large arm across William's shoulder as he walked William towards the door. "My name's William. I don't suppose you're

after an apprentice?" William attempted. The Archbishop laughed as he pushed open the door. "I'm sure we can find some use for you."

Chapter 32: Sisters

"What do you need me to do?" Arthuria asked Jeanne as she looked down at her, the pair only a few inches apart. Jeanne smiled faintly, but something caught her eye beyond Arthuria. "Could you sit down and shut your eyes? Just for a moment," she asked. Arthuria frowned, but she obliged: she sat down on her bed and shut her eyes. Jeanne began to chant and, a few seconds later, a bright light tore itself through Arthuria's eyelids, the veins and vessels in her skin glowing before her. The light faded and she felt the Paladin Elder sit down next to her. "There. We should have no more prying eyes for a while. I need your help," Jeanne said.

"Things are changing. Orders are being given without my consent. I am being spied on, although that's nothing new. The other factions within the Church are up to something, and I think there are radical ideals being spread in our Order. I can't investigate. My movements are watched constantly, and my position limits the actions I can take without consequence. You, however - although it was not my orders that sent you north - are by all accounts, erased. That person you encountered, the assassin, he has terrified the other leaders, and they do not want you to repeat your encounter. So, I'm sorry, but I need you to disappear for a while."

Arthuria hung on every word, only to blink in stunned confusion as Jeanne finished speaking. She looked away, spotting two figures who had entered her room silently and unnoticeably: a pair of Sisters dressed in their usual black and white habits. Arthuria recognised one, a familiar scar running from her lip to her chin, her blue eyes watching the pair curiously. "The Sisters have a habit of going unnoticed. A deal has been made with their Matron - you are to join them, at least for a while. You will work under them, using their ability to move anywhere to investigate all of the factions, including our own. I need you to be my spy. My hidden ace. Can you do this for me Arthuria? Can you be my saviour, before I find myself alone and betrayed?"

Sister Meredea smiled to Arthuria; as usual it was soft, kind, and warm, but for the first time it couldn't settle Arthuria's mind. Jeanne took Arthuria's hand in hers, holding it tightly as she looked up towards her, drawing Arthuria's gaze away from the Sisters and towards the Elder. Arthuria nodded. "Yes, I will do as you ask, Elder." Jeanne smiled, letting go of Arthuria's hand and standing up. "Thank you. Sister Mona will take your place for a while, acting in your stead and participating in away missions to buy you time. You will return every so

often, for appearances, and I will ensure we have chances to talk and discuss what you have discovered. Please stay safe. I leave you in Sister Meredea's care," Elder d'Arc said, stepping away and putting on her armour before reaching into Arthuria's stash of reading materials and pulling out the first volume of the Noire Lucinda series. "May I?" she asked. Arthuria smiled faintly before nodding.

Jeanne departed, leaving Arthuria alone with the two Sisters. "Right," Sister Meredea began, Sister Mona taking off her habit and laying it out on Arthuria's bed. "You'll come with me - put this on and wear these gloves," Meredea said, pulling a long pair of white silk gloves out of her clothes. They ran all the way up to Arthuria's shoulder in length, and as Arthuria put them on they tightened, eventually feeling like a second skin. "It is part of our religion to always have these on. As you're already aware, sometimes factions exchange members, although this can be dependent on particular groups. We Sisters are all women, as such we can only receive Witches from the Daughters of Shade, or female Paladins such as yourself. If you ever come across a Sister without her gloves, she is an exchange. Always wear yours and no one will question you, understood?"

Arthuria nodded, glancing over at Sister Mona as she put on a layer of under-armour, before she began to put on Arthuria's plate armour with clear experience, even accounting for the additional straps and buckles Arthuria had fitted. Meredea adjusted Arthuria's habit, the light clothing covering her entirely except for her face. "Wear this," Meredea said, pulling out a band of black cloth and placing it over Arthuria's eyes. She could see through it, almost perfectly, but there was something more to her vision. "This will allow you to see what is unseen. It will also protect your identity; your eyes – as beautiful as they are – are rather unique and you may stand out without it."

Arthuria looked over at Sister Mona as she finished equipping Arthuria's armour, even placing the helmet over her blonde hair to hide her face. Meredea reached out, placing a hand on Arthuria's shoulder and drawing her attention. "I know this is unusual, and your day has already been long and hard. I will help you as best as I can - the Sisters will help you. Although we are bound by duty to keep our mouths to ourselves, we can help you discover what we have learnt. But first, I have a gift for you, from your favourite Proctor," Meredea said, stepping to the side and pointing to a large staff resting by the door.

It was shaped like a cross, with a pair of golden scales acting as a cross guard before forming a grip at the top. Arthuria approached the item, picking it up. For its size it was quite light, and she immediately realised what it was as she twisted

the main pole of the staff, pulling a long, thin blade out of the pole. It was a sword, disguised like a holy staff - a perfect weapon for her mission. "You'll have to thank him for me," Arthuria said as she turned to face Mona. The Sister nodded. "Well, let's get underway," Meredea said, Mona and her exchanging a silent glance before she opened the door and stepped out, Arthuria following on her heels.

They walked quickly along the corridor, Arthuria skirting to the opposite side as she spotted a familiar figure wearing bronze plate armour heading in her direction. Sentinel Metz didn't notice her, and he carried on straight to her door, stopping and knocking, but as Arthuria turned to stop, Meredea grabbed her arm and dragged her onwards around the corner. They continued through the palace, passing unnoticed by Paladins, Witches, Warlocks, and Priests, with not even a glancing nod of acknowledgement.

Eventually they stepped outside into the open air; snow blanketed the island, and the streets were quiet as the sun sank slowly into the horizon. Hanging lanterns swayed in the gentle breeze as they walked down the main street, and for the first time in a while, as Arthuria walked closely after Sister Meredea, she felt at peace. She was led a little ways away toward a large apartment building. It had a small garden with a gate visible to the street, a small stream running through the yard with a little footbridge crossing the water. The building's roof was grey and curved outwards, but the curve stopped towards the middle to allow for a central courtyard. A simple white door provided the entrance to the Sister's convent: it was welcoming, a small lantern hung over the entrance and a snow-covered foot mat sat at the door.

Meredea opened the door, stepping inside before holding the door open for Arthuria. "Careful, it's a heavy door," she warned, as it closed quietly behind them. Arthuria looked at the door with a brief look of confusion before continuing to follow Meredea through the convent. An immediate set of stairs led upwards, another set leading down underground just beyond the staircase. Meredea led her onwards through the simple wooden hallways. The walls had been painted bright colours, with handprints and markings left on the walls by children the Sisters had looked after.

"The front of the house is bedrooms. The main floor has a medical wing, upstairs and downstairs are mostly just bedrooms. To the back, there are a few prayer rooms if you wish to get away for a little while," she said, pushing open a pair of doors to lead Arthuria into a large room full of rows of lockers. Several Sisters

were stood around a set of benches, a few changing whilst the others leant against the lockers chatting. "This is our changing rooms. No-one except official Sisters can come here: enchantments search for our gloves, preventing entry to anyone else. There are a few other places with the same enchantments, but for your own protection, ensure one of us is with you if you want to explore."

The Sisters all turned to look at Arthuria; all of them, even the ones dressed in little more than their underwear, were all wearing their long gloves. They glanced towards Meredea, exchanging a wordless conversation with little more than a glance, before looking back towards Arthuria. "So you're the one we need to babysit, the Paladin. Arthuria Pendragon, right?" asked one of the Sisters, snapping Arthuria out of her stares as she looked at the group. The Sisters dressed out of their habits were very toned. Arthuria had never noticed it before, but they were all muscular. A lean set of very visible abdominal muscles drew a sense of envy from Arthuria. Some had tattoos, hidden piercings, scars.

Arthuria glanced towards the Sister asking the question, she, in particular, stood out as she glanced over her shoulder at Arthuria. A large tattoo decorated her back: a waterfall rising up from her tailbone all the way to just below her broad shoulders, orange and black fish were swimming upwards in the waters. A serpent-like golden dragon lay on its side at the top - its stomach torn open - the dragon's blood mixed with the top of the waterfall before fading away. A large cat lay on top of the dragon's corpse, its fur spotty and grey, with a long tail - a snow leopard. "Yes, that's me. Thank you for helping me with my task. I'll try not to get any of you into trouble," Arthuria replied with a friendly smile, as the many eyes bore into her.

The tattooed Sister nodded, her short black hair tied up into a ponytail, a pair of black workout shorts and bra, as well as her long gloves, were the only thing covering her extremely muscular body. She stood up from her seated position on the bench and approached Arthuria, the pair meeting each other's eyeline - hers a stark grey, whilst Arthuria's were hidden behind her blindfold. Arthuria flinched as she extended a hand to shake, prompting a laugh from the unusual Sister. "I won't hurt you. The Matron wouldn't have allowed this without reason, so by all accounts, Arthuria, welcome to the Sisters. My name is Athena, behind me is Anzu, Mare, Lara, Nami, and Hestia," she said, pointing to the variety of Sisters stood around. They nodded in her direction, a few giving small waves. Arthuria greeted them in turn, ensuring she got all of their names correct.

"Anyway," inserted Meredea, steering Arthuria away from the group towards a set of lockers. "This is your locker, number one-three-five. Store any personal items you have or want looked after. There's no lock, but I can promise you the other Sisters won't touch your things, provided you don't touch theirs. This is a safe space, feel free to change – we won't judge, I promise. There's showers over there, but there's also a large communal bath over there."

A soft sniffing echoed behind them, drawing Arthuria's attention to a lone Sister shuffling in. She looked younger than the others, around her age, possibly younger. Her habit had been messed up, tears marked her face, and her nose was red and dripping. She held her arm as she shuffled in. Almost immediately she was descended upon by the other Sisters, Athena in particular guiding her over to the benches on the other side of the lockers. Meredea looked at Arthuria, a brief flash of anger igniting in her eyes before her usual soft expression returned. "One moment," she said, turning quickly and walking towards the group.

Arthuria followed, staying back as Meredea sat down on the bench next to the crying Sister, helping Athena to take off the girl's habit. Fresh bruises echoed across her arms and ribs, strange dots had been marked on her exposed chest, as if something thin and pointed had been pressed hard into her chest, scratches marked her shoulders and neck. Athena took the girl's head and pulled her into her chest, wrapping her tightly in her arms as she shushed the girl. She stroked her hair whilst Meredea spoke an incantation; glowing rings enveloping her arms and the physical injuries fading from their sister as she sobbed softly into Athena's chest. "I know, I know. You're safe now," said Meredea, running a finger gently across the girl's cheek, the other Sisters all surrounding her as they tried to help.

Athena released her, standing up before leaning over in front of her and taking her hands. "Who did this?" she asked, her voice soft and gentle, but the entire tone sending a wave of fear through Arthuria. "Lucina," whispered the Sister. Athena nodded, leaning forwards and kissing her on her forehead. "Leave it to me," she said, standing up and stepping back, her fists clenched and a cold and demonic look on her face. Meredea leapt to her feet, stepping in front of Athena as she began to walk towards the door. "Athena," Meredea said quietly.

Athena glared at her. "This cannot stand. I cannot let this go unanswered," she said. "I know. We all feel the same. This will have consequences, I promise you, but this is not the way. We can't. You can't. You know we can't. She has been harmed, but only harmed, she is still alive. Please Athena, let me handle this.

Have faith in the plan," Meredea begged, holding a hand out towards her, the pair staring at each other. "I... I can't do this anymore. If it's not the Witches, it's the Priests, or someone else. I can't watch our sisters get hurt anymore." "I know, Athena please. Follow our oath." Athena looked down, shaking her head before she slowly raised it, looking past Meredea at Arthuria. "The oath comes first. As always. I... will comply," she said, looking back at Meredea. "Thank you sister."

Athena sighed, walking past Arthuria and heading to the showers. Meredea then turned to the remaining Sisters still watching over their youngest member. "Come to my room when you're ready," said Meredea. The youngest Sister nodded sadly, before putting on a soft smile as she looked at Arthuria. "Come with me," Meredea said to Arthuria, leaving the locker rooms and heading back through the hallways. Arthuria walked next to her, keeping quiet as she sensed now was not the time to speak.

"We are pacifists," Meredea said quietly, as they climbed up a set of stairs to the next floor. "A convent full of women sometimes draws attention. Mostly from the Priests and the Daughters of Shade, but also from Paladins. The rules of the Church are that no faction may kill another; this doesn't exclude physical or mental harm. Normally we can prevent these events from occurring, but not always. The Witches, they are the worst. They torture members they take a fancy to. Use their magic on us, assault us... as you just saw. I..." Meredea said, concluding with a disturbed sigh.

"I will prepare you the best I can, and I, we, will do the best we can to protect you, but it is important to not retaliate. This is fundamental Arthuria, no matter how bad it gets, don't retaliate. It puts everything in danger," Meredea stated, stopping in her tracks and looking directly at Arthuria. Arthuria remained silent, but eventually she nodded. "Good. This is your room," she said, opening a door to reveal a simple bedroom with a desk, a wardrobe and a bed. "In the morning I will show you everything you need to know. Sleep tight, and don't worry about the Sister, she will be moved to ensure it doesn't happen again. Goodnight, Arthuria."

Her wardrobe contained night clothes, underwear, and a few spare habits to wear, and after wrapping herself up in her duvet, Arthuria found herself drifting off to sleep, the day's exhaustion catching up to her. A knock startled her awake, the sun only just shining through her window. Arthuria rubbed her eyes, letting

out a long yawn as the knocking continued. "I'm up, I'm up!" she said, putting on her habit, tying her blindfold across her eyes and grabbing her staff.

She opened the door to find Meredea stood waiting for her. "Good morning, sleep well?" she asked. Arthuria nodded groggily. "Good, go wash your face. We have a long day ahead of us." After preparing herself for the day, Meredea led her to a small kitchen. A few of the other Sisters were stood around eating breakfast. They smiled at Arthuria, a few not wearing gloves, and, after eating a simple breakfast of cereal, Meredea took her outside.

The morning was cold as they walked towards the Holy Palace, a fresh layer of snow coated the main road. Meredea led her through the palace, taking her straight to the private gardens at the rear. "Here you go," she said, handing Arthuria a large snow shovel. "What's this for?" asked Arthuria, holding it curiously, as she lay her staff down on a nearby bench. "We need to clear the paths. Get used to hard labour, we have our work cut out for us," she said with a smile. Arthuria's smile faded. "Oh... great."

They worked in the gardens for the majority of the morning, aiding a few of the Sisters, as well as the hired gardeners, to plant flowers for the spring, whilst also tidying up the winter gardens. Once that was over, Arthuria breathed a sigh of relief, proud with the hard work she had accomplished, and relieved that it was over. "Right, we'll get an early lunch and then we'll go about doing our duties inside the palace," Meredea said, handing Arthuria her staff. The relief faded in an instant. "Godsdammit," she muttered.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that Arthuria found herself achieving anything near what she had been expecting. They walked together through the palace, Arthuria close by Meredea's side as she was led to an area deep within the Witches' Chambers - a large series of bubble shaped rooms that created a maze decorated in reds and purples, with ancient vases and green flame torches lighting the rooms. Witches stood all over the place, dressed in open and tight-fitting dresses, usually with a cloak over their heads and backs, or a wide-brimmed pointed hat. Almost all of them wore bright makeup across their eyes, curving off of their eyelids into a crescent moon - the only exception were the young teenage girls accompanying them.

Arthuria knew the Daughters of Shade were made up of different ranks, she had seen the Serving Girls of the order before, but she hadn't realised just how many there were. Almost every Witch they passed had at least one Serving Girl tailing them and acting as an assistant. They ranged anywhere from thirteen to twenty,

but some looked even younger. They all wore simple cloth clothes of various colours, significantly less revealing than that of the Witches they were serving under.

Arthuria got too close to a Witch, an owl screeching at her from her shoulders as she passed. Arthuria flinched and the Witch turned to look at her, raising an eyebrow curiously as she stared at Arthuria who stood frozen. She was terrifyingly beautiful, her skin and hair flawless as she stared at Arthuria, something Arthuria had noticed was a theme throughout the faction. Arthuria gave a simple nod, continuing quickly after Meredea, but she felt the Witch's gaze on the back of her head as she walked.

Meredea led her through the maze, the pair eventually coming to a long set of curving stairs leading downwards. "Don't draw any attention," whispered Meredea. "Look like you have purpose, and no one will question you." Arthuria nodded, her heart thumping loudly in her chest as she raised her head high and followed Meredea down the stairs. The walls deteriorated from the smooth sandstone of the chambers above, the stone darkening to a grey colour, cracks and faults appearing throughout as they continued downwards. Arthuria lost track of how deep they had travelled, but she felt the area slowly getting warmer.

They stepped into a colossal room, the ceiling high above them with giant stone statues stood in the centre. Several purple vertical sliding doors lined the edges, leading to numerous corridors extending in all directions. Meredea led Arthuria across the hall towards a door marked with black symbols along the edge. She pressed a symbol in the centre, the owl token pressing backwards until it clicked. The door then rose up, the movement fast, the heavy wood grating against stone as it rose, chains rattling above as mechanisms lifted the door.

Arthuria followed Meredea onwards, the pair walking silently down a set of uneven stone stairs. Ancient crypts lay on the sides of the walls, most cracked open or empty, all raided long ago. The entire place sent shivers down Arthuria's back as they walked; the place seemed endless, huge, a colossal labyrinth of catacombs that the Daughters of Shade had claimed as their own. She remained silent, passing by a few other Sisters on their walk, their gloves missing, and eventually they arrived in another huge room.

This room was circular, gigantic bookshelves jutted out from the walls leading towards the centre of the room. Across the area, tables lay decorated by open books and stacks of notes as various Witches worked, but what drew Arthuria's attention most of all was the huge circle painted on the floor in the centre of the

room. It was at least thirty metres across, with unusual symbols painted throughout the pattern. It was incomplete, the outer circle had been painted – a few Serving Girls were slowly walking around the edge with buckets and paintbrushes, painting the floor with the red viscous liquid they held – but the majority of the circle lay bare.

Arthuria couldn't help herself, she found herself staring at the unusual ring they were painting, getting closer without thought. Meredea grabbed her arm, snapping her out of it, as Arthuria caught a strong smell of iron from the paint. Arthuria turned away, her eyes widening behind her blindfold as the all-too-familiar smell of blood alerted her to what the Witches were painting with. Meredea nodded slowly, stepping away as Arthuria slowly began to walk around the room, glancing at the many tomes that lay open on the countless tables.

A rolling cart sat near the edge: discarded books lay in a heap upon it, waiting to be placed back onto the bookshelves. Arthuria picked up a book, flicking through it. She didn't recognise the language within. She picked up another - the words moved across the page before her eyes. She shut it, putting it back down and stepping away. A crash echoed nearby and Arthuria jolted as she turned to see the source of the noise.

"You stupid girl, clean it up Eight. Now!" yelled a Witch, from near the centre of the ring, as a Serving sat on her knees in a pool of spilt blood. The girl looked up at the Witch, her face contorted in irritation, her eyes glaring at the source of the yelling. "I have a name," she said angrily, her pale skin slightly flushed as she righted the tipped-over bucket. The Witch just sighed, reaching inside her belt to pull out a long, pointed piece of black wood: a wand. "I'm getting fed up with this lesson, last chance Eight," she threatened, beginning to chant. The Serving Girl's eyes widened, a brief look of fear and regret flashing across her face. "I'm sorry! I-I didn't mean it."

The Witch finished her chant, pointing the wand at the girl - arcs of purple lightning flew out from the tip, striking the girl, her body dropping to the floor as she convulsed in a loud, echoing scream. "Please! No!" she begged, her long black hair mixing with the wet blood on the floor, her golden eyes wide with fear. Arthuria stood where she was, every instinct in her telling her to draw her sword, but something held her back, her feet stuck to the floor as she watched. The Witch finished her torture, a sadistic smile on her face. "If you don't want another, clean up your mess. Fix your attitude, or I'll see about procuring number nine."

The girl rolled over from her back, getting onto her knees and nodding in defeat. The Witch stepped away, walking quickly to the edge of the room and leaving Arthuria's sight. Arthuria looked around the room, spotting a small water bucket and a pair of brushes. She picked it up, carrying it over to the girl as she sat on her knees looking at the floor. Wordlessly Arthuria knelt next to her, taking out one of the hand brushes within and beginning to scrub away the blood. The girl looked fifteen at most, her nose slightly pointy, her ears round and sticking out from between her long sticky hair. She stared at Arthuria, her eyes wide.

"You can either sit and stare, or you can take the second brush and put this behind you," Arthuria said softly. She opened her mouth, closing it quickly before nodding as she reached into the bucket and pulled out the second brush. "Why?" she asked, as she began to scrub next to Arthuria. Arthuria shrugged. "Why not? Why work for someone like that?" Arthuria asked. The girl paused, thinking before resuming the scrubbing. "There are two paths in this world: the subjugated and the subjugators. The powerless are trampled, the powerful trample. I would rather walk free than get stepped on. Be powerful like the Paladins or the Witches."

Arthuria scoffed. "Power is meant to be used to raise up others, not to dominate. Power used any other way always ends in death. Usually for the one misusing it." The girl shook her head, but she scrubbed in quiet until the blood had been cleaned. Arthuria stood up, nodding in acknowledgement before moving to walk away. "Sister!" the girl said. "Thank you." Arthuria nodded, looking over her shoulder, a faint smile on her face. "What's your name?" she asked. The girl stood up, picking up the bucket off the floor. "Morgana. And you, Sister?" asked Morgana. Arthuria paused for a second, the name familiar. "Arthuria." Morgana frowned, before she nodded. "Thank you, Arthuria."

Arthuria walked away, heading back towards the trolley of books waiting to be returned. She kept her eye on Morgana, watching her as she grabbed a few items, before heading towards a set of stairs heading downwards. Arthuria moved to follow her, but as she glanced around she spotted a few Witches observing her. Arthuria picked up a few books, walking around the ring and returning them to their places. She flicked her eyes towards the last position she had seen Morgana, hiding a brief sigh as best as she could before heading back the way she had come, heading back towards the surface.

Meredea joined her, appearing from seemingly nowhere, guiding her along the path as they walked through the catacombs. They walked in silence, Arthuria

working slowly through everything she had just seen. She shut her eyes as she walked, breathing slowly, guided by the faint footsteps of Meredea in front of her. The circle, the moving writing, the ancient books... it all meant something, and she was going to figure it out. Arthuria opened her eyes, Meredea looking directly at her with a faint look of concern. "She's my way in. Morgana will tell me what I need to know."

Seize the Seas Tales: An Oath

They returned to the Sister's Convent, a few others eating their dinner in the kitchen, others simply milling around chatting in the courtyard. Arthuria headed to the changing rooms, placing her muddy and blood-stained habit into a laundry basket before hopping into the showers and getting changed back into a clean set. Meredea had left her, so after grabbing a bite to eat, Arthuria returned to her room. She placed a small notebook onto her desk, scribing the notes she needed to remember: the ritual circle in the library, the unusual writing, the moving words, the torture of the Serving Girl, Morgana. She wrote in as much detail as possible, placing the book deep inside her pillow, ensuring to the best of her ability that it couldn't be found.

Arthuria lay there in her bed, the sun disappearing into the distance and night falling quickly. She didn't sleep, she couldn't. She hadn't bothered to change out of her fresh clothes, and she lay there staring at her staff leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. Finally, as the clock passed midnight, Arthuria rolled out of her bed, picking up the weapon and opening her door. She crept quietly down the stairs and through the hallways - as best as she could across the creaking floorboards - heading to the front door. She pulled on the handle, struggling to pull open the extremely heavy door before stepping out into the cold and quiet night.

Arthuria walked through the streets back to the Holy Palace; the guards didn't question her as she passed, they didn't even look at her as she strolled by them. She headed silently to the Paladin district, the halls empty, bar a few patrolling guards or intoxicated members. Eventually she came to her destination: the Court of Oaths. Cobblestone made up the foundation of the courtyard, large marble pillars held up an onlooking walkway over the area, and stationed towards the rear of the area was a large pond with an island sat in the middle. Stone steps led to the island, with small gaps between each piece of stone, the cloudy green water of the pond a hazard to anyone not watching their step.

Arthuria stepped carefully between each step, her eyes staring forwards towards the large tree planted on the island, moonlight illuminating its white branches and cyan leaves. It wasn't the biggest of trees - it stood a little more than twice Arthuria's height, the lowest branches just beyond her arm's reach. A large piece of diamond-shaped black stone lay embedded in the trunk of the white tree. "Hello old friend, I'm back. Are you going to favour me today?" Arthuria asked, resting her blade against the trunk of the tree as she looked up at a large sword stuck in the embedded stone.

It's hilt was black and gold, a large red gemstone embedded in the pommel. The blade was buried up to its guard in the tree, the guard itself wide and curving upwards at the edges towards it's blade. Arthuria could only imagine the beauty of the full sword as she placed both hands on the weapon's grip. It felt perfect in her hands, the weapon pulsing as it beat alongside her heart, and, like every Paladin in the Order, she pulled on the weapon. It didn't budge, the weapon resisting her once again. "Not today then," she said, stepping back and picking up her staff.

She drew the blade, kneeling before the Tree of Oaths and touching her forehead to the long thin blade as she bowed her head and pointed her sword upwards. "I call on your power, your might, your wisdom, your guidance, your judgement, and your honour, mighty Tree of Oaths. To guide me. To embolden me. To strengthen me. And to humble me," Arthuria said aloud. "I have made an oath before, I have received your blessing already, so I come here today to renew my vows. To consecrate my oath once again."

Arthuria took a deep breath, turning her sword and resting in on her palms. It's craftsmanship was fantastic, as she always expected of anything Gujin could make her. She smiled, thinking of what to say. "Oh mighty blade, hear me, judge me. I will form a partnership of duty with you. A vow created through my purist of heart. I offer myself to you in exchange for your power. In the shadow of this mighty tree, I vow to harm no being unworthy of punishment. I vow to do my duty, to protect my Elder. I vow to commit no evil. I vow to do good. And finally, I vow to uphold my faith that my mission is pure. If I break my vows, I acknowledge my oath is broken, and with it, your powers will be removed. With this promise, I claim the title of Paladin."

The sword glowed in Arthuria's arms, light extending from the pommel all the way down the grip until it reached the blade. A single golden line extended along the blade to the tip before five branches spread out from it. Arthuria smiled, her

heart racing as she let out a sigh of relief. Her blade accepted her oath, the tree granting her her power, that of a Paladin of the fifth tier. She rose to her feet, bowing to the tree and sheathing her weapon. As she looked around she swiftly realised how exposed she was. Arthuria quickly skipped across the stones and out of the court, rushing quickly back towards the Sister's Convent.

As soon as she reached open road, with no one else around, Arthuria bent over, covering her mouth as she screamed with joy into her hands. The Sentinels were now only one tier above her, the Elder one above that. The energy subsided and a wave of exhaustion rolled through her. She stumbled back to the convent, the moonlight bright as she walked across the snow. She pushed her way through the doors, heading past the stairs towards the changing rooms.

The place was quiet, no one in sight as she walked through the hallways, but as she stepped into the locker rooms she paused. A lone figure, dressed in tight black clothes across her legs and chest, sat next to a window. She was smoking something strong, the smell billowing across the room as she leant out of the window. Athena's gloves had blood on them, and a loose black cat mask hung from her neck as she smoked a cigarette. Arthuria crept as quietly as she could into the room, but Athena still noticed her, glancing softly in her direction, the faint remains of tears glowing in the moonlight.

"Hey, where have you been?" she asked, rubbing her eyes on her shoulders before rolling off the windowsill to the floor. She offered the cigarette, but Arthuria shook her head, walking past her towards the sinks and washing her face. Athena shrugged, resting the cigarette on the windowsill and walking after her, washing the blood off her gloves. "I went to renew my oath. Are you okay?" Arthuria asked. Athena nodded. "Me too," she said softly, stepping back and looking down at her right hand, a white lump sticking out between her knuckles. She grabbed it with her fingers, pulling it out. It was a tooth, and the glove was unturned. She flicked it into the sink.

Arthuria stared at her. "You're not like the other Sisters," Arthuria said. Athena laughed before returning to her window. "Am I not? I guess not..." she said, staring out into the night. "What made you become a Sister?" Arthuria asked, walking over to one of the benches and sitting down. "A matter of chance, I guess. Bad luck, maybe. I joined with the others, and it was either a habit or a maid outfit. There's not much else out there for me beyond them." Arthuria shook her head. "You can leave, right? Even if only for a little bit." Athena smiled briefly. "Yeah... yeah. I... need to think about that. The mission is important, we do

good, important things here... but maybe... just for a little bit. Don't tell Meredea about this. Please."

Arthuria nodded, watching her as she crushed the cigarette in her hand and discarded it to the wind, before sliding off the ledge. The pair looked at each other, Athena reaching towards her and lifting the blindfold off her face. "You have beautiful eyes... Stay safe Arthuria, good luck with your mission," she said, walking away and through the door. Arthuria watched her leave, something in her wanting to follow. "You too..." she said, shutting it down and turning away.

Chapter 33: A Wildcat on the Prowl

Alara quickly flicked through the other posters, her heart racing and her breathing shallow as Jayce's wanted poster filled her mind. She stared vacantly at the pile, not realising she had already cycled through the entire pile. "Lieutenant?" asked Captain Onasi, as he and Commander Vao looked towards her. Alara snapped out of it, turning her head quickly towards them. "Yes, Captain?" she asked, faking a smile and placing down the stack before standing at alert, her hands shaking behind her back. "Are you alright? You're a little pale. I- I understand this is a lot to process, you've had one hell of a morning. By all means, congratulations on your passing and your appointment. Um... Commander, could you show Vanathur around?"

"I'm okay, Sir," Alara attempted, but the Captain raised a hand, looking towards his Commander. "Yes sir - Vanathur, follow me," said the Commander. Alara opened her mouth to speak, but she closed it as Vao ignored her, heading instead for the door. "It was nice to meet you, sir," Alara said, with a faint smile. The Captain nodded in acknowledgement. "I look forward to working together. Don't let my Commander ruin my reputation too badly," he said, turning around and looking at the map table, picking up the pile of bounties.

They stepped outside of the captain's quarters, the ship's wheel directly in front of them, overlooking the main deck of the large ship. There were two main masts, reaching high into the sky, with a cluster of several large sails tied to the large poles of wood. A pair of lookout posts had been built into the crow's nest, providing shelter from adverse weather. A large jib extended from the front of the ship, an unusual addition compared to the other Marine ships Alara had seen before.

Crew members were rushing about, finishing off the final preparations for departure. Several stopped and saluted before continuing their duties as the pair walked around The Lone Wanderer. "As third in command, it is very important you learn the roles of your subordinates and who you can rely on in emergencies. As a Cruiser-Class warship, The Lone Wanderer is expected to survive long voyages in pursuit of our prey. Most of the time a pirate's initial reaction is to flee; we give chase and use attrition to wear them down until they surrender or make a mistake," the Commander explained, showing Alara the kitchens before leading her towards the main crew quarters. Alara nodded along as she half-listened, her mind still wandering.

“Don’t worry too much about these things for now, voyages are long, and, as said, you’re the backup to the Captain’s backup. If both of us are out of action, survival becomes the priority above all else. Understood?” she asked. Alara nodded. Vao rested a hand on Alara’s shoulder. “You’ll do great. Come on, we’re about to set off.” Alara was led back through the ship, and they found themselves once again stood on the main deck. A collection of Marines were all stood, looking towards the Captain as he stood next to the ship’s wheel; a bald man with brown skin stood behind the wheel itself.

“Crew, today we depart from the Capital – our destination: The Gardens. The voyage may be long, but along the way we will fulfil the wishes of the Empire. Stand strong united, for we are Marines!” he called out to the crew, nodding to the few members stood at their stations. The ship began to move, departing quickly away from the Marine docks. “Oorah!” yelled Vao, the rest of the crew following suit. “Oorah!” repeated Alara, shaking herself off and regaining her focus, as she watched the Capital fade into the distance.

Alara was introduced to each major member of the crew: the lead Shipwright, the head Doctor, the Cooks, the Navigator, the Helmsman, the Master of Arms, the Quartermaster, and even the ship’s cat – a small tortoiseshell called Tilly. It was overwhelming and, as evening fell, Alara found herself heading away from the officer’s quarters to the main bunks. She stepped inside one of the many rooms and immediately the various Marines sat or stood around all saluted. “At ease,” she said quietly with a smile, still not used to the formal attention.

The room was full of bunks, small in design but with enough space for even a large baned. An entire wall had been kept clear of bunks, instead racks of equipment and personal effects were stored in the various personal lockers. A dummy was propped up inside each locker with a set of Marine uniform decorated by the ship’s colours, ready for use. Wulf smiled at her as he admired the additions to her uniform denoting her rank: a large gold ‘X’ marked the middle of her jacket, front and back. Paired with the grey and the blue highlights of The Lone Wanderer, it created an unusual colour combination that looked almost regal in design. “You look good, Lieutenant Commander,” he said proudly.

“Oh please, no need for flattery or formal attention when it’s just all of us,” Alara said, as she looked over her squad, her personal pride impossible to hide from them all. Brett rolled his eyes, turning away to face the inside of his bunk. “Respectfully, whether or not you are our friend, or squad mate, the rank

deserves the correct address, Commander," Astris said, her black hair tied up as she readied for bed, a set of white pyjamas laden upon her. Alara nodded. "Understood. How's the first day gone?" Alara asked, as she looked around the room.

There was a mixed set of replies, ranging from those clearly on the lowest end, Delex and Violette, to those on the highest end, Riley, Astris, and Witchford. "And you?" Riley asked, inviting Alara to sit on her bunk as the others wandered off to go to sleep. Alara remained silent, her mouth slightly open as she tried to form her thoughts. "Good... I think?" she answered. Those still paying attention turned to look directly at her. Witchford met Alara's gaze, and then tilted his head towards the door. Alara nodded and he walked wordlessly to the door, shutting it before locking them in.

"What's wrong, Alara?" Astris asked, dropping from her bunk to the floor and moving to sit next to her. Alara reached inside her jacket, pulling out a small stack of posters that the Commander had given her. "Are we meant to see this?" Witchford asked, as he sat down on the bunk opposite them, next to Wulf. Alara nodded. "The specifics aren't of huge concern, these are our targets. They could be anyone from the bounty directory, and by all accounts it's probably for the best you know who we are after. Still, just in case, I wouldn't openly discuss these out of context," she said, handing over the papers to Witchford. He flicked through the pile, Wulf also looking, until he faltered, squinting as he got a better look - his glasses missing.

"Jayce?" he said softly, looking up at Alara. She gritted her teeth and looked at the floor, barely nodding in acknowledgment. Both Riley and Astris shot up from the bunk, rushing to the other side to look. Alara looked around the rest of the squad - the others had all fallen asleep already, but she spotted the faintest shine of Brett's icy blue eyes from one of the bunks. "Piracy?" Astris asked, a look of confusion on her face. "How is this possible? He's the son of two Admirals!"

Alara shrugged, but she then faltered, half-shaking her head instead as she let out a long sigh. "Do you remember when I said he decided not to join the Marines to take someone north? Well... the person he was taking north is that redhead: Wicke." The others looked at her confused before they flicked back a page to Wicke's bounty. "A Sorcerer!" Wulf stated, wide-eyed. "He's travelling with a Sorcerer?" Alara nodded, nervously biting her thumb.

"So why didn't you go with him?" Riley asked, the others looking at her in surprise. "Riley! Magic is illegal. She would have been aiding a criminal!" stated

Astris. Riley shrugged. "I've known mages, not all are bad. Besides, she's a child. Is it really her fault that's what she was taught? Would you suggest imprisoning or executing a child for knowing something we don't?" Riley asked Astris. Astris stuttered as she tried to collect an answer. "Regardless," interrupted Wulf, as Astris turned a deep red. "If Jayce Exarga is a target, it is our duty to arrest him. How he's brought in would be up to the group who captures him. It would also be up to said group, who he is handed over to... A particular Admiral or Vice-Admiral perhaps?" Wulf suggested.

Alara stared at him, but he looked away, looking in particular at Astris and Witchford. Astris sighed, but nodded in agreement. Witchford finished flicking through the stack before he handed the posters back to Alara. "In the unlikely case we encounter Jayce, it would certainly be plausible for him to be too much for a small squad of new Marines to handle. As long as it's us encountering him, I'm sure things can easily be arranged to help him escape," Witchford stated as he met Alara's gaze. "If this is something you want?"

Alara looked up at him before she looked at the others, the group waiting for her answer. "I... I don't agree with his methods. I hate that this is what it has come to. But, if we do encounter him and his crew, we can at least hear him out. Before we decide whether or not to haul him to his parents," Alara stated. The others nodded, glancing around at the other bunks to see if anyone else was listening. "There's got to be a reason to all of this, beyond what we know. His parents, his mother, would have acted already if he had truly gone rogue and... I know Jayce. I don't doubt he's broken rules, but he's too kind for his own damn good." Riley stood up. "Then we help him. Right?"

Alara left the room, walking through the corridors back to her personal quarters. The various night watch on patrol all saluted her as she walked past them, the ship still sailing even through the night with the thanks of the graveyard shift crew. She stepped inside, locking the door behind her before leaning against it. "You idiot. You damned idiot, Jayce Exarga," she muttered, finally alone and sliding down the door to the floor. She sat there holding his poster, tears dripping from her chin as she memorised his entire crew. Eventually, she crawled to her feet, rubbing her eyes before getting ready for bed.

The morning came quickly, Alara reporting for duty to the captain's quarters as soon as the sun crossed the horizon. He was still asleep and answered the door in little more than his underwear. "Good morning," he groaned, scratching his behind as he let out a large yawn. Alara was bright red in the face, as she

desperately looked away from him. Large tattoos lay mingled across his hairy chest and his shoulders: a series of crown-topped crosses sliced in half, broken hearts, the number: '83'. "Could you get me a coffee? Please?" he requested, turning around and walking back inside his quarters, a large hole in his underwear on his right cheek. His upper back was covered in scars, a series of deep marks too numerous to count. "Right, uh, yes sir," Alara stated, walking away quickly to get him his coffee.

As Alara returned to the main deck, mug in hand, she heard Commander Vao long before she saw her. Vao apologised profusely on behalf of her Captain, a red handprint on his face as he remained still in his underwear. "Thank you for the coffee. I apologise, I've never been much of a morning person," he said, rubbing his face as he sipped the drink. Vao glared at Onasi. "Anyway, I hope you slept well. The first night at sea is always the worst. We're making our way at top speed towards The Gardens; a target has been selected and we are to find them at once."

"Who's the target, sir?" Alara asked, reaching into her jacket to pull out the bounties. "We're hunting a Pirate Lord," he said, Alara's eyes widening. "Katherine D'liva. Kitty Deliver herself. She's been seen sailing alone, and spotters have identified her lieutenants in regions too far to aide her. This is a rare chance." Alara frowned, Onasi raising an eyebrow at her confused expression. "I didn't realise she was a Pirate Lord. I've met her before," Alara admitted. "You've met Kitty Deliver? In person?" he asked. Alara nodded, thinking back to her encounter several months prior. "I got in a brawl alongside my boyfriend against some of her men after they spilt our drinks."

Onasi roared with laughter. "That's absurd! You weren't even a Marine and you fought her underlings! That's brilliant!" he said, descending into a fit of giggles. "Well," he said, attempting to regain his composure. "Pirate Lords are the most dangerous enemies the Empire has faced. They're not a match for our Admirals, but if all four Admirals were to face all eight Pirate Lords, I'm not certain who would come out on top. It would be close. At the moment there is only seven, one recently travelled through The Frontier and they're yet to find a replacement – my information states there's some code or doctrine about how one is selected. Regardless, Kitty is not going to be an easy target."

"So how do we take her down? If she can rival an Admiral, how do we stand a chance?" Alara asked, glancing to Commander Vao as she sat on his desk. "Normally we wouldn't. Even at our capabilities, Kitty would destroy both the

Captain and I, but we're not doing this alone. Of all of the Pirate Lords, Kitty Deliver is the easiest to fool, and the easiest to trap. She's soft, and isn't willing to allow unnecessary casualties. We'll isolate her from her crew, then use them to bring her in. As long as we trap her ship, she's stuck and will surrender in exchange for them," said the Commander.

Alara nodded along. "How do we get her away from her ship?" she asked. Onasi and Vao looked at each other then back at Alara. "Well, we originally didn't have an answer, but it seems one has presented itself," grinned Onasi. Alara stared blankly at them. "Wait, hang on..." she said. "Oh no no no no, a Pirate Lord? You want me to distract a Pirate Lord? There's no way!" Alara protested. Onasi's smile faded. "Come on, you know you want to," he pleaded. Alara glared at him and then looked towards Vao. Alara let out a long sigh. "Fine."

They sailed quickly across the seas, travelling day and night as they headed southeast towards The Gardens. The large stone-based islands of The Heart Archipelago gave way to rolling fields, farmland, and small villages as the seas became shallower, the weather changing from snow to light rain. With each passing day, Alara grew more nervous, her role long memorised, her strategy well-prepared, as she awaited the day she encountered Kitty Deliver again.

Eventually they docked at a small island called Hyacinth Isle, the last known location of their target. It was a simple island, full of simple people. Farms dotted the small land mass and a communal village with little more than a pub sat at the edge of the island. Alara followed the Commander closely as she led the investigation, asking villager after villager about their encounter with the rogue Pirate Lord. "Charming woman, very generous with her tips," said one young shop owner. "Beautiful girl, smile as wide as the heavens. She paid for my crops, even paid extra for monopolising my swedes," said a kindly old man, his grandson nodding in agreement. "Her men were a little rowdy, but they weren't threatening. Just a few boys with a bit too much muscle for brains," confirmed another villager.

"Great, just great," sighed Vao as she and Alara sat next a fountain in the middle of the village, sandwiches in hand, purchased from the local bakery. "I mean, I did warn you. Kitty was not exactly menacing once in the open. Most of her crimes are smuggling and escaping arrest. How... how did she get such a bounty? What did she do?" Alara asked, staring down at the colossal bounty on Kitty's poster. An amount exceeding anything she'd ever seen before: three

million pearl. Vao opened her mouth to speak, but she faltered. "It's not what she did... It's what she could do. I can't say anymore, it's classified."

Onasi crossed the market square, heading towards them with his hands in his pockets and his head down. He pulled out a cigarette, lighting it before looking over the pair. "No luck?" he asked. They shook their heads, Alara now long used to the lax attitude the Captain held. "I'm not surprised. You were asking the wrong questions. She's heading to Sunflower Island," he stated casually, offering a hand to Vao to help her up. She slapped it away, standing up on her own. "How do you know?" asked Alara, getting to her feet as she also disregarded Onasi's hand.

Onasi turned on his heels, beckoning for the pair to follow as he headed to the village hall. They walked past rows of empty stalls, the various vegetables usually due to be on display for this time of year missing. "When Kitty came through here she bought every major produce available. The Gardens supply the Empire with the majority of its produce; its shorter seasons, mild weather, and fertile lands allow for faster rotations of crops with higher yields than other Archipelagos. There is only one reason why she would buy this stuff, and it's not for eating," Onasi stated, stepping inside the hall.

"Oh, Captain, is there anything more I can help you with?" asked an elderly woman sat behind a desk, rows of books lining the walls. "Doris, my dear, could you please repeat what you told me to my colleagues?" he asked, leaning across the desk and meeting her gaze, his hair curling over across his eyes. She blushed, nodding quickly. "Ahem, normally we get a trader to take our produce to one of the main islands to resell. We either pay them to take our stock, although this has gone awry before, or they pay us and resell the produce to the Empire or a broker. It's arguably easy money, due to the high number of Navy ports in this Archipelago. There's a risk of bandits, but very few would try to steal potatoes."

Onasi turned to face Alara and Vao, cocking an eyebrow before turning back to Doris and thanking her. "So she's using this for easy money?" Alara asked. Vao thought to herself. "Seems probable, she's a merchant. If she was heading to a major island to trade goods anyway, perhaps a more exquisite item - one significantly more illegal - it is certainly possible she would use the chance to make a little extra cash, given the low risk," the Commander stated. Alara nodded in agreement. "How much did she pay for all of the produce? How much could she get from resale?" Alara asked Doris.

The old woman flicked through a large tome sat on her desk, the majority of the islands trades neatly noted down inside the ledger. It was then that Alara noticed her desk had a title upon it: 'Doris – Island Accountant'. The woman paused for a moment, working out the sums in her head. "From our island alone, anywhere from five hundred to two thousand pearl." Alara's eyes widened as she quickly turned to her superiors. "So, if she stops off at lots of islands on route?" The Captain nodded. "She could easily cover anywhere from fifty to a hundred islands before stopping off at Sunflower Island, the place she'd get the best deal. That's a lot of easy money," Onasi stated.

"Then we follow the trail, search islands that have had all their stock bought and try to catch her before she arrives there, or catch her there," stated Vao. Alara nodded in agreement, heading quickly for the door. "Well? What are we waiting for?" she asked, as the pair looked at her proudly. Onasi nodded, turning around to look at Doris. "Thank you my dear. For your service," he said, placing a red pearl on the desk. She smiled at him, "Visit again!" He winked at her before turning on his heels and heading for the door, Vao ahead of him. "Really?" she asked, as soon as they stepped outside. "What? She was very lovely." Vao scowled at him.

They departed immediately; the ship's Navigator, Lieutenant Hawke, plotting a direct course in pursuit, alongside his new assistant, Witchford. They stopped at every fifth island, ensuring they remained on the trail, whilst skipping across islands in an attempt to catch up to her. The days ticked by, tension continuing to build as Alara fed on the excitement of the hunt. Finally, with Sunflower Island less than a day's travel away, a call came out across the deck. "Captain! We're being flagged by another ship! It's Navy!" called one of the spotters from the crow's nest.

Alara looked out across the sea: a Navy ship was on a direct intercept. A series of flashes shone from the deck of the incoming ship - a message. "Stop! Danger!" it warned. Alara looked at Captain Onasi for orders. "Let's see what our siblings want. Remain at alert, prepare for anything!" ordered Onasi, the crew immediately raising the sails to slow the ship. The Navy ship pulled alongside, the various Navy sailors staring across the small gap at the Marines on The Lone Wanderer, some of their faces vaguely familiar to Alara. The ship was called 'The Watchman' and, as a gangplank was extended across the two ships, Alara quickly realised why she recognised the crew.

“Permission to come aboard?” requested Captain Beowulf Kai. Onasi nodded, Alara’s eyes wide, staring at the Captain as he dropped onto the deck. He wasn’t particularly tall, shorter than Alara, but beneath his uniform it was clear he was muscular. He was clean-shaven with fair skin, his hair was shaved short on the sides beneath his peaked cap, and his eyes were of the darkest obsidian, identical to that of his sister. On sober inspection, Alara quickly noticed he looked different from his sister, their faces were different: Astris had a more heart-shaped face, his was more square.

In an instant, his eyes scanned the entire deck, his eyes focusing on Alara before flicking to the Captain and the Commander. His own Commander, a tall dark-skinned man with a large axe across his back, dropped onto the deck behind him, remaining by the gangplank as Captain Kai headed towards Captain Onasi. “Onasi, right?” Kai asked. Onasi again nodded, crossing his arms as he looked down at the Navy Captain. “I asked you to stop because I’m currently hunting a Pirate Lord and could use your help.” Onasi turned on his feet, heading towards his quarters. “We are hunting her too, let’s discuss strategy,” said Onasi with an unusual sense of forwardness. Kai nodded, pausing as he stood next to Alara.

“Congratulations on the promotion, Lieutenant Commander. Is my sister here?” he asked. “Yes,” Alara answered, a strange sense of unease filling her as he looked past her. “Good, keep her away from the battle. She’s too weak,” he said, stepping forwards and entering into Onasi’s quarters, the doors shutting behind them. Alara let out an exhale, quickly realising she had been holding her breath. Alara looked at Commander Vao, but she just nodded, granting permission as Alara raced off to find Astris.

Seize the Seas Tales: An Unexpected Delivery

Kitty liked Sunflower Island, it was pretty and full of exciting people. You couldn’t buy everything here, but you could certainly sell a lot. She sat quietly by herself in the Dewdrop Bar, a small location not too far from the island’s main harbour. The place was empty, as she had requested. Only the bartender remained, and although he was trying his hardest to hide his nerves, he still shook as he poured her another cocktail – an oceancrawler’s tail, a blue coloured drink with a green bottom. She sipped it with one hand as she flicked through a pile of documents spread across the top of the bar. Most were detailing their losses and gains from their recent sales, but buried inside was a list of bounties. Newcomers to look out for, apparently.

Kitty doubted it, but the faint end of a name from one of the bounties caught her eye. "Is there anything more I can get you ma'am?" asked the bartender, with a nervous smile. "No, you can go. Thank you for the drinks," she stated. He left immediately, bumping into one of Kitty's crewmates as he ran through the doorway. "All good Cap'?" called the crewmate from just outside the door. Kitty ran her hand through her tabby-coloured hair, her green eyes glowing as she focused on the name. She uncrossed her legs, balancing precariously as she leant on the stool to slide the poster towards her. She grabbed the document covering it, a final sum of their profit - four hundred thousand pearl - before throwing it aside.

Kitty stared at the photo, a wide grin spreading across her face as Jayce Exarga looked up at her. She squealed with excitement, bouncing up to crouch on her stool as she picked up and analysed the poster. "He actually was an Exarga! How did I let him get away!" she yelled, her crewmate rushing inside to check on her. "Look! Look! It's that Jayce guy, from Tachus," she said, diving off the stool and landing next to her crewmate as she shoved the poster in his face. "Aye Cap'" he said quickly, not quite sharing her excitement. "Bah, fine, be that way. I think it's cool. It's a great starting amount, we should go find him!" she squealed, dancing as she bounced on her feet.

Another crewmate rushed inside. "Captain! Captain!" panted Davarick, the large man leaning over as he stumbled into the room. Kitty raised an eyebrow, turning the poster around to show him. "Oh nice, it's that guy. Oh right, Cap', bad news! Two Navy ships are approaching quickly. What do we do?" asked Davarick. Kitty frowned. "Navy... ugh, great. Right, get everyone back to the ship and then make for the East. I'll delay them," she ordered. The two crewmates nodded, rushing off immediately, leaving her alone in bar. "Looks like you'll have to wait, Exarga," she said with a smile, folding away the poster before stretching. "Only two ships? Who do they think we are?"

Chapter 34: The View from the Bottom

The Watchman and The Lone Wanderer sailed in tandem as they headed through The Gardens towards Sunflower Island. Captain Kai had elected to remain on board The Lone Wanderer, his Commander sailing his ship behind them whilst he, Captain Onasi and Commander Vao discussed strategy. Alara leant on the railing next to the ship's wheel, Astris leaning next to her as they both watched the closed door nervously. "I can assign you chores to do, if you're just going to hover," stated Lieutenant Hawke as he adjusted the ship's wheel. Alara pulled a face at him. "Technically, I outrank you," she retaliated, letting out a sigh before looking towards Astris as she fidgeted next to her.

"Maybe... but experience outranks everything. So, if you're going to hover, at least do so in a manner to not inspire others to copy you... or to leave a nervous mind to fester," he hinted, his eyes locked onto the horizon. Alara nodded, grabbing Astris' wrist and dragging her towards the ship's stern, away from the various onlooking Marines watching them from the deck below. "Woah, where are we going? Alara!" protested Astris, as she was forcefully and suddenly dragged away. Hawke smirked to himself as they left. "Foolish kids..."

A pair of Marines were stood at the ship's rear, watching The Watchman through a pair of binoculars. They both stood to attention as Alara approached. "Commander, is there something we can help you with?" asked one of them. "Take ten, I need the space," Alara ordered. They looked at each other before both nodding and departing quickly. Astris stood looking at the floor, as Alara leant on the railing looking at the ship's wake. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" Alara asked.

Astris faltered as she opened her mouth to speak, Alara eventually resorting to grabbing her arm again and pulling her to stand next to her. They leant in silence, Alara waiting until she was ready. "You know I was trained for the Navy. It was an expectation: a demand from my father," she began, playing with her thumbs as she spoke. "The Admiral?" Alara asked. Astris nodded, pausing again as she collected herself. "I... betrayed them. Betrayed my sister and my brother to pursue this, to be here. My father hates the Marines. Especially their leaders, Admirals Truth and Exarga. He thinks it's a waste of time, of resources, and goes against centuries of tradition. 'The weak get weeded out, why would you want to breed a weaker generation of soldiers from weak genes?' He'd say. 'The pathetic die, the strong survive.'"

"So, why are you so nervous? Surely he must see how well you're doing. Your brother doesn't seem upset by your choice," Alara said, gently taking Astris' restless hands. Astris shook her head, her obsidian eyes hidden behind her hanging fringe. "My father has tried reassigning me. By the abyss, I wouldn't be surprised if my brother's here with orders to take me to him. I... hurt both Beo and Cyr by not joining them. If I had, I'd already have my own ship - a crew, like them. Be a shining member of the New Era, a pride to the family... rather than a disgrace. Now they have to work harder to keep his tantrums in check. There's more... my mother- "

"That's enough!" echoed a voice behind them. The pair snapped around, turning to see a rather red-faced Captain Kai as he glared at Astris. The pair stared at each other, Astris shying away and hiding behind Alara. "Commander, I'd like a moment with my sister," he requested. Alara looked at Astris, the young woman nodding ever-so-slightly. "I won't be far," Alara stated, directly to Beowulf, taking Astris' hand behind her and squeezing it before walking away.

Alara headed inside the Captain's quarters, both Vao and Onasi were talking intently to each other, but they both paused as they quickly noticed her. Alara stood silently at attention, but Onasi quickly beckoned her over with the wave of a hand. "I apologise for the exclusion. The plan is simple: you will seek her out, buy some time for us to get into position, then we use her crew as a bargaining chip to bring her in. It's not an original or detailed plan but, given who our target is, this is our best bet," Captain Onasi stated, without a single sense of doubt. "Great..." Alara muttered, desperately thinking of what she could possibly say to distract Kitty.

Alara repositioned herself to get a better look at the map of Sunflower Island, resting on a table before the three of them. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed Astris walking quickly past the open door and, moments later, Captain Kai wandered in, his eyes to the floor as he rubbed the back of his head. He raised his head, quickly spotting Alara, clearing his throat and fixing his posture, as he approached the group. "Are we all set?" he asked, looking at the group. Onasi nodded. "We are. Let's catch ourselves a Pirate Lord!"

They sailed quickly towards the huge landmass known as Sunflower Island; countless ships were sailing in and out of the main harbour, heading off in all directions across the horizon. Alara stood nervously on the aft deck, several squads of Marines all looking towards her, waiting for orders. Only Wulf and Riley stood among the group, the rest of the squad deemed too at risk for such

an encounter by Alara's own report. Astris however, despite being greenlit by Alara for this group, remained excluded. Alara looked towards Onasi, waiting for a speech, but he stood still where he was on the aft deck with Vao and Beowulf, his eyes on the island.

"There!" he said, pointing vaguely in the distance. Alara grabbed her binoculars, scanning the rough direction. It was hard to see, but Alara immediately recognised the flag of the Great Seacat, a white cat with an eyepatch and collar sat on a crate with a black background. The crate itself had a skull and crossbones marked upon it. "They're leaving! Mark an intercept!" ordered Onasi. Alara scanned the docks, the area was full of people, most carrying crates and other cargo, but sat on a lone crate, at the end of the pier the Great Seacat had just departed from, was a young woman.

She had shoulder-length, steel-grey hair, muddled with strands of brown and black, like the fur of a tabby cat. Despite the relatively warm sunny day she had a long coat on, the back coming down to her knees as she sat on it. Straps lined the arms, and it had a high collar, but even with the high collar, Alara immediately spotted the familiar choker of Kitty Deliver: it was green, with a bell hanging from the middle. She was smiling, her canines slightly hanging over her lip, her green eyes flashing in the sunlight as she stared directly at Alara. "Captain! On the Pier!" yelled Alara, Onasi, Vao and Kai all immediately looking towards it. Kitty waved, her hands covered in white fingerless gloves, before she stood up and walked towards the island's town.

The Great Seacat sailed quickly away into the distance, the Watchman helplessly watching as it got further and further away without its Captain, but The Lone Wanderer docked at Sunflower Island. Alara rushed off with her Marines, heading quickly into town as they attempted to salvage their plan. "What could she be thinking?" Alara asked herself as they ran, the island's local forces joining them as they began to lock down the island's main town. They rushed around, questioning the confused locals at every twist and turn, but as they rushed past a small bar located in an alleyway, Alara faltered. "Commander?" asked one of her Marines, as she watched a small cluster of cats nap outside of the doorway. She glanced at the sign: 'The Lost Stray'.

"Tell the Captain, I've found her. Get into position, lock down the streets and wait for further orders," Alara ordered quietly, the Lieutenant nodding and the Marines moving quickly to execute her command. Alara entered the alleyway, glaive in hand, and headed towards the bar door. It was open, the faint sounds

of a music box playing from inside. She took a deep breath, calming her nerves as she crept inside, heading down a small set of stairs into the underground bar.

Kitty sat there on top of the bar, her legs gently kicking as she leant backwards with her eyes shut, listening to the music. It was an old song: a tale of a lost love and a shared dream. Alara pointed her blade towards Kitty, moving slowly towards her as she stepped across the wooden floor of the faintly lit room. "You're under arrest, Kitty Deliver! Come quietly, your crew have left you!" Alara ordered. Kitty laughed. "And if I say no? Will you stab me that giant butterknife?" Kitty asked, her eyes still shut.

Alara stepped closer, holding her blade a hand's width from Kitty's face. Her eyes slowly opened, staring past Alara at the opposite wall, until they slowly turned to look directly at Alara. Her green eyes glowed, the faint light emitted from them reflecting in the metal of Alara's blade, as they burned like fire. Alara staggered, her stomach twisting and an uncontrollable shiver running through her as she met Kitty's gaze. "Well?" Kitty asked, a smug grin on her face. "Arrest me." Alara stood frozen in place as she stared up at Pirate Lord Kitty Deliver. She was unapproachable, it felt like Alara was staring up at her from the bottom of a mountain, every muscle in her body was held in place by an invisible force. Alara tried to breathe, her lungs unable to move as Kitty stared at her.

Kitty slowly raised her right hand, flicking Alara's blade with her green nail, before lowering her hand back down to the bar. Alara's glaive shattered, the entire wooden pole splintering along with the metal blade as Kitty released her. Alara fell backwards, gasping for air as Kitty resumed kicking her legs. "Anyway, now that that's over, can I get you a drink?" Kitty asked, reaching behind the bar and grabbing a pair of whiskey glasses. Alara stared at her destroyed weapon in horror before looking back up at Kitty; her eyes still glowed, but they were nowhere near as bright. "I am sorry, Jayce introduced you a while back, but I can't actually remember your name."

Alara cautiously got to her feet, Kitty beckoning for her to sit on the bar top next to her. Sensing little choice in the matter, Alara sat next to her. "Alara," she said. "Ah, that's right! Vanathur, right? The daughter of those VAs. Congrats on becoming a Marine, and a Lieutenant Commander at that, impressive stuff! It's always nice to see people come into their own," she said, placing down the two glasses before reaching into her coat pocket and pulling out a folded piece of paper. She handed it to Alara, spinning on the bar counter to get a better look at the available drinks.

Alara unfolded it, raising an eyebrow as she looked down at Jayce's bounty poster. "Could have been you in that photo with him," Kitty said, as she rummaged through the various bottles, eventually settling on a strong whiskey before reaching over the ledge into a fridge. "Still, I'm glad to see you're both doing well. Even if on opposite ends of the same coin. Are you still dating?" she asked, pouring a sizeable portion into both glasses before adding milk. Alara stared at her. "How did you know we were?"

Kitty grinned. "Your reaction was very funny when we first met, either you liked him or... anyway, is he single?" she asked, sincerely. Alara frowned as Kitty offered her the drink. "No, we are still together," Alara stated, taking it out of confusion more than acceptance. "Shame, I'll just have to see if I can sway him when we meet," Kitty said with a wink. Alara downed her drink, taking the bottles, before pouring herself another mixture. "Steady, there's lots more I have yet to show you today."

Kitty faltered, her eyes searching random walls of the room as she glanced around before letting out a soft sigh. "I suppose even when you've committed no harm, people still can't avoid trying to ruin your day. Unfortunately, time's run out, Alara, and I promised I wouldn't destroy this bar. I would suggest retraining your men on how to properly sneak. Anyway, I promise not to kill any of them. No broken bones, threats to their families, blah blah blah... Enjoy the show," she said.

Alara blinked, opening her eyes to find herself alone in the bar, nothing remaining of Kitty but a rush of air. Alara leapt off the bar, racing up the stairs to the doorway and emerging into the alleyway. She glanced to her left. The stunned Marines who had blocked off the area were all pointing past Alara. She nodded and ran quickly into the open street. Kitty stood in a defensive stance, bouncing on her feet as she held her hands up like a boxer, her eyes glancing around at the large circle of Navy sailors and Marines that had surrounded her.

A small section parted and Captains Kai and Onasi stepped forwards with Commander Vao trailing behind them. Onasi held a pair of revolvers in his hands, slightly longer in length than the ones Astris used, and both with scopes on top. Beowulf held a rapier, its blade long and thin, especially when compared to the thicker sabre that Vao held in her left hand. Kitty turned to face them directly, lowering her hands ever so slightly as she looked over them. "Is this it? Two Captains and a Commander? Come on, I deserve better than that," Kitty complained.

"In all honesty, you're right," said Onasi, rubbing the back of his head nonchalantly with his pistol. Beowulf glared at him. "Regardless, Katherine D'liva, surrender or we will have no choice but to take you in by force," stated Captain Kai, stepping forwards. Kitty sighed, turning her hands around and looking at her nails. "You're never capturing me again. You can't kill me, you can't contain us, but I'm up to showing this new one a few tricks," she said, pointing at Alara. "Clear the area, I don't want any accidents," she ordered, taking off her coat and discarding it. Onasi nodded. "Marines, cordon the area, five hundred metres!" he ordered, Kai repeating the order to the sailors.

The Marines and Navy ran off, following their orders immediately as Onasi, Kai, and Vao spread out across the area. Kitty shook her head, looking towards Alara. "No casualties, right? Learn this lesson well today, use it to come up with your ideals. Decide whether to become a subjugator, a liberator, a soldier... or maybe even a good person," she added sadly. Kai rushed forwards, lunging with his rapier towards Kitty's eye, as her head was facing away. She turned to the side, the blade stopping just in front of her eyes.

"That's not nice!" Kitty growled, pivoting on her feet as she carried her right leg around her, before striking Beowulf in the chest. He flew backwards, rolling across the cobblestone street to get back onto his feet. Commander Vao rushed forwards to fill the space, drawing Kitty's attention as Captain Onasi fired off a pair of shots. Kitty moved in a blur, Alara quickly losing track of her movements as she covered the ground to target Onasi in an instant. They exchanged blow after blow, Onasi firing shot after shot at her from point blank range as he paired his shots with a series of strikes with his elbows and pistols. Vao leapt into the melee, Beowulf joining the brawl as they surrounded her.

Kitty's eyes flashed and her three aggressors shot backwards as she caught all of them with a single spinning kick. "You asshole!" she yelled, pointing at Onasi as she wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, a sizeable graze marking her face. The wound glowed a bright green, a clump of grey hair sprouting from the area before disappearing along with the cut. "You're not a Captain! The hell are you doing wearing the uniform of one, Commodore?" she demanded, pouncing backwards and crouching low with one hand on the floor.

Vao scowled as she slowly got to her feet, a slight trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth. "He got us demoted!" she yelled, rushing forwards with her sword in hand. "Great," Kitty complained, leaping backwards as Vao struck with her sword towards her head. "That means you're a problem too! Damned

cheats!" she yelled, diving to the side as Onasi fired off a quick barrage of bullets, reloading whilst Vao continued her advance.

Kai dropped down from the sky, his blade piercing deep into the floor where Kitty had just been standing. She hissed at him, pouncing backwards as he lunged towards her. "New Era as well, I hope you're watching Alara!" she yelled. "Get her now!" yelled Onasi, the trio rushing forwards with increased desperation. Kitty raced forwards, tilting her head to avoid a point-blank shot from Onasi, punching him twice in the stomach, before delivering an uppercut. She carried her motion, pushing off his chest to slam her leg down on Captain Kai, his body dropping to the floor as she landed on top of him.

There was a flash of green and Kitty turned towards Commander Vao, grabbing her throat and wrist with her hands as the other two lay on the floor. Vao gasped as she hung in the air from Kitty's grip, staring in fear at the much smaller woman. The entire battle had been little more than a blur to Alara, her eyes unable to keep up with the fighting, but now she could see everything. Kitty's eyes glowed, but so did other parts of her body. She had whiskers, thin and spectral green on her face, her eyes glowing a bright green and yellow, her pupils little more than slits as she snarled. On top of her head, emerging from her hair was a pair of translucent green ears, pointed and shaped like that of a cat. Flicking quickly behind her, emerging from her skin at her tailbone, were nine ghostly tails.

"You can't beat me, not even if your Captain is ready to become an Admiral. You never could, I have nine lives, you have one," Kitty said, kicking away Vao's sword as it clattered to the floor, before she dropped the Commander. Vao clutched her throat, gasping for air as she looked up at Kitty. "I take my leave Captains, Commanders. Don't try this again," Kitty said, walking over to her coat and putting it on, her ears and tails fading away. Onasi crawled across the ground towards his pistols. "Run Alara!" he told her, as Kitty kicked the weapons away. "She's fine!" yelled Kitty. "We're going, okay?" She shook her head, taking one last look at Alara and rolling her eyes, the pupils returning to normal. "Do better than these guys. Please," she stated, crouching low before leaping up onto a nearby roof and rushing quickly away.

Kai punched the floor as he slowly got to his feet. "Dammit! We failed," he yelled, staring at Onasi with disgust as he began to laugh. "We didn't fail, we're alive! Not just that, we fought Kitty Deliver and lived to tell the tale. I call that a win," countered Onasi as he lay on his back, Vao offering a hand to him to help him

up. He slapped it away with a smug grin, waiting for her to re-offer. She walked away. "We could still catch her!" Alara proposed. "She's got to still be somewhere on the island, right?" Onasi shook his head as he got up, walking with a limp as he headed towards his pistols. "For someone like her, she can easily get back to her ship. She's gone, but well done on holding yourself so well. Most people would crumble in such circumstances, it speaks highly of you. Let's get back to the ship, I think we've all earnt some shore leave."

Rumours spread across the ship and the island as discussions of Kitty Deliver and her battle with the Captains and the Commander reached common ears. Alara wasn't sure how, but somehow she had also become included within this topic of discussion. It had taken the entire rest of the day to convince her squad that she had not in fact fought Kitty Deliver, something they refused to believe given the state of her glaive. Yet by lunchtime of the following day, all seemed to have been forgotten.

Astris sat opposite Alara in a small café, the pair enjoying the busyness of the island and the break from the time at sea. Astris sipped her coffee quietly, checking over the menu as she thought on what to order. "Anything, right?" she asked. Alara let out a sigh. "Yes, anything you want," she said defeatedly, in an attempt to buy Astris' forgiveness. Astris raised her hand and a waiter wandered over. "I'll have this, this, this, this and this. Please," she said smugly, revelling in Alara's quickly falling face. As soon as the waiter left, Astris pointed a finger at Alara. "This is just the beginning. You owe me big for side-lining me against Kitty. I should have been there, Wulf won't shut up about it," she said with a coy grin. "Next time, I promise," Alara attempted, counting up the total bill in her head, her stomach dropping as the number got higher and higher. "Hmm, not good enough. I think you owe me at least three more shore leave meals."

They returned back to the ship, Astris groaning from the sheer volume of food she'd consumed and Alara groaning as she rattled her tiny money pouch. "Ah, there you are Commander," said one of the Marines guarding the gangplank. "Captain wants to see you immediately," he said. Alara nodded, looking towards Astris. "Okay, we're even. Go!" she said, Alara smiling widely as she ran up the gangplank, the other Marines parting for her.

She rushed to the Captain's quarters, the door open and Captains Kai and Onasi talking inside, along with Commander Vao and Beowulf's Commander: Commander Vi. "Ah, there you are Vanathur," said Onasi as she stepped inside. Alara saluted, and, as always, he waved it off. "Yes, yes, at ease. Shore leave is

going to have to be cut short unfortunately, we have a new mission. We're heading north, to The Keeps. An Admiral wants us to lend a hand in an assault against a Pirate Lord's new fleet. Get yourself ready, and ensure you're brushed up on Naval combat - this is going to get dicey," Onasi stated, the others looking at Alara. "Yes sir," she said.

Captain Kai turned to look at Onasi, the pair shaking hands before Kai made his way towards Alara. He paused as he stood next to her. "I know it was your decision to keep my sister back. Thank you. And thank you for continuing to look out for her. I've got my eye on you, Vanathur. I look forward to hearing great things about you. Good luck, happy hunting," he said, stepping past her with his Commander in tow as they stepped out of the door.

Seize the Seas Tales: Family Ties

Astris watched Alara race off up the gangplank, a smile on her face fading as it was followed quickly by a darkened sense of envy. She shook her head, purging her thoughts from her mind, as she turned and looked out towards The Watchman, docked nearby. She sat down on a nearby crate, leaning backwards and looking up at the clear skies, her thoughts continuing to battle for dominion in her mind. "I'm going now," said her brother, as he split off from his Commander, walking over towards Astris and sitting down next to her. "You could still come with me. By the time we make port in the Capital, I'll have taught you everything you need to easily get a ship of your own. Father would support it, he'd be insufferable, but he'd support it."

Astris shook her head. "My place is here, with them, with her. She'll do great things and I want to be here, by her side," Astris said, turning her head to look towards The Lone Wanderer. "You could do great things. And if not, I'd rather know you're safe," he said, reaching over and placing a hand on her cheek. Astris leant away from it. "I don't need protecting. I'm not a little girl anymore, and I know why you and Cyrenna are so damned obsessed. I don't like it. I'm a person, I'm not Mother. Don't confuse me with her. I don't need saving."

Beowulf looked down, a deep look of shame written across his face. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Astris nodded, leaning over and resting her head on his shoulder. "Don't apologise. Talk to Cyrenna. You need to. She needs to. We can't blame each other," she said, Beowulf nodding, before sitting up straight and clearing his throat. He rubbed his eyes and stood up. "Yeah, yeah, you're right. I don't know when we'll next see each other. I don't know when I'll next see her."

"Write to her, you coward. We'll all be together for the next ball, Father will insist on it."

Beowulf nodded, turning on his heels to look away from her as he adjusted his hat. "You'll see them before me. Father requested aide for a battle, Cyrenna's on route and your ship is faster than mine so you're also heading there," he stated. "Father's asked for aide?" Astris asked, with a look of confusion. Beowulf shrugged. "It's his territory, it's against a Pirate Lord, and both Cyrenna and I were summoned along with the rest of the New Era. It must be him. It was detailed as an Admiral's request and Exarga would never ask for the Navy. Regardless, you know what he's like. Stay safe, Tris."

He turned to walk away, but Astris grabbed his waist, standing up and pulling him in for a tight hug from behind. He froze, trying to figure how to act. "Just accept it," she muttered into his back, and he relaxed, holding her arms, the pair standing there awkwardly until Astris released him. "We'll see each other soon. Okay?" Astris said. He nodded, glancing over his shoulder with a small smile. "You'd better be a Lieutenant by then," he said, before heading away to his ship. "Asshole," Astris muttered, shaking her head and heading back to The Lone Wanderer.

Chapter 35: A Falconer

The Rising Aces continued their journey west, the seas and skies hot, almost impossibly so after the cold of the Ice Floes, as they travelled through the new region. There were no islands, just colossal sand banks that created a series of hazards for the new crew. Every other hour they found themselves beached, forcing Jayce and the others to dismount, recapture the ship in its bottle, and then redeploy the vessel in deeper waters. Of course, they could have easily avoided it, but that would have required significant effort from the crew in the sweltering heat of the northwest.

Jayce sat cross-legged on the bow, looking ahead onto the horizon as the sun set once again. The wind was gentle, the skies clear and a golden-orange glow partially blinded him, but he didn't care that he couldn't see. His latest letter lay open next to him, and he had given it a wide berth, creating a seat, a space for the person it was from, even though she was missing. Jayce rubbed his arm, looking down, away from the horizon, as a steady chill began to cover him, the light fading. "I don't have an answer," Jayce said quietly, sending his words across the world. "I don't know how far this will go, or when I will be able to stop. I don't know who I will find, what I will face. Which enemies I will make. But... I know I need to do this. For her. For them. For me. I'm sorry."

"Who are you talking to?" asked Wicke, her footsteps unusually quiet for the colossal boots she wore. Jayce wiped his eyes, glancing at his wet hand with surprise as it dawned on him that he had been crying. "Oh, Wicke, uh, no one. Just airing my mind a little. Everything okay?" Jayce asked, spinning around to look down at her. She nodded, her flame-coloured hair dark and loose for the first time in a while. Her amber eyes glistened slightly, a look of adult concern coming from the early teen, as she looked up at the dark-haired, stormy-eyed Jayce. "If you need me, I'm always here," she said. "I'm going to sleep. Don't stay up too late again. Goodnight Jayce." She turned on her heels, walking quickly away across the open deck.

Jayce sat there a while longer, eventually sliding off his perch and walking across the ship towards the main living area. The others were fast asleep: a few snoring loudly – Bjorn, others looking as if they'd wake at the faintest cough – Vexx. They lay there in a huddle on the floor, a by-product of the cold nights and the current state of the old ship, wrapped in sleeping bags and blankets. Jayce quietly undressed himself, a few of his newer scars around his ribs causing him to wince as he stretched his body.

He looked over the Rising Aces - his crew, his family. There were six of them, including the small black cat: Little Witch. Wicke lay in the middle, whether by her own volition or by the choice of the others - Jayce was unsure. Even if she was the last to fall asleep, they always woke to find her buried in the centre. She lay on top of Bjorn, his giant polar bear baned form missing as he slept. His dark brown hair had grown back quickly over the last few weeks, forming a thick bouncy sponge around his head. Wicke's orange hair glowed against his dark brown skin as she lay on his chest.

Vexx lay towards the edge of the cluster. His small body curled away to the outside, but still close enough to rest ever-so-slightly on the sleeping Yuthura next to him. His short, messy hair was bright blonde. Jayce was almost certain he dyed it, but he was yet to ever see him do so. He was deadly still, and it was only on the closest of inspections that Jayce could see him breathing. Yuthura too looked as if she wasn't breathing - her chest barely rose as she slept - but the sheer foghorn-like sound she produced as she snored quietened any pretension that she wasn't. The old woman lay flat on her back, head tilted up and her pointy nose raised to the sky. A hand lay casually resting towards the small of Vexx's back, barely touching, but still touching in what Jayce could only claim as a gentle sense of affection from the ever-bickering pair. Her black and grey hair was hidden behind a night cap - her pale, wrinkled complexion covered in a gel-like substance as she slept.

Finally, there was Marisha; the auburn-haired woman lay on the opposite side of the pile, her head resting on Bjorn's arm as she tucked herself into him. She'd taken her eyepatch off for the night, the left side of her face covered in deep scars formed from burns long ago. A sense of reassurance came over Jayce as he looked towards her. She'd hidden it from them for so long, it was nice to see that she at least trusted them at night, even if she still insisted on covering most of it during the day. He smiled faintly to himself as he looked over his crew, his Rising Aces. "I'll do my best. For all of you," Jayce muttered softly as he slipped into his sleeping bag. "Shut up," muttered Vexx, as he kicked him.

After a charcoal-covered breakfast, courtesy of Marisha, the group found themselves looking forwards at their destination from the aft deck. Jayce stood behind the wheel, steering the ship carefully, as, for once, they took extra precaution to avoid the many sandbanks around them. "Wicke, remind me again what we are looking for?" Jayce requested, an immediate exasperated sigh emerging from Wicke in response. "A pair of sandbanks that merge into dunes - a channel that leads into Deadman's Run," she repeated, for the third time this

morning. Jayce nodded. "Like that?" he asked, pointing slightly northwest at a desert, parted by a long river, growing in front of them. "Yes," sighed Wicke, "Exactly that."

Jayce angled the ship towards the gulf, Bjorn and Vexx rushing off to raise all but the nearest sails to slow them down as they entered the narrow river. "Bjorn," yelled Jayce across the deck, as Marisha began to climb the crow's nest. "Tell me what's immediately in front of us! Marisha, tell me about any changes the river makes! Wicke, join Bjorn and watch the other side!" ordered Captain Exarga. "Aye!" said his crew, rushing off to complete his orders, whilst Vexx and Yuthura stood waiting at the ready for any further orders.

The river remained straight for a while, the waters shallow, but more than deep enough for the ship, yet eventually it began to wind, forcing the ship to a small crawl as they attempted to avoid beaching themselves. "Cap'!" yelled Marisha from the crow's nest a while later. "Yes?" replied Jayce, rapidly turning the wheel to avoid a sandbank. "The river ends!" she yelled down. Jayce sighed, straightening the wheel and locking their course. "Good job, brace yourself!" he called up to her. The ship sailed for a little while longer, eventually catching the sand as the river became shallower and shallower until it stopped entirely with a large lurch.

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Wicke, as they reassembled on the main deck. Jayce looked across the desert around them. Ships decorated the sands, themselves beached and abandoned by their crews – some looked relatively recent from the quality of their sails. Jayce pulled out his map, looking over the area marked as Deadman's Run. "There should be a few cities and settlements along the way. We'll walk it," he decided, receiving a lacklustre response from the more lazy members of the crew. "Come on, the longer we wait the less time we have to explore these ships," Jayce said with a wide smile, rushing off to grab his backpack.

They recollected on the deck not long after, their weapons ready, water bottles filled, and suncream applied. Jayce led the way, slowly climbing down using the ladder carved into the ship's hull before dropping with a slight splash into the hot waters of the shallow river surrounding their ship. When the others had joined him, Little Witch opting to remain on the ship this time, Jayce pointed the ship's container towards their vessel. He ran his fingers backwards across the runes carved into the glass. In an instant the ship was pulled inside, alongside

the small pool of water and sand surrounding it. Jayce looked inside the bottle: the ship lay resting on a bed of sand and water inside, just as he had hoped.

"That is only going to get more and more useful," Bjorn admitted, as he looked at the tiny ship in the bottle. "Isn't it just? If we want, we can split the crew at some point, so half is getting carried on the ship. For now, let's stick together," Jayce said, paying in particular attention to the panting Bjorn as he stood struggling with the heat. Bjorn nodded, his backpack laden with countless bottles of water. "Let's go," Wicke declared, marching off quickly towards the nearest abandoned ship.

She took the lead, gaining more and more ground as excitement got the better of her. She arrived at the nearest ship, a simple cargo vessel with cream sails and an unpainted hull, that lay on its side. She wandered around to the rear of it, disappearing out of sight before she quickly returned, running back to them, diving behind Jayce and gripping his back. "What the hell is that?" she demanded, pointing at a rotting figure as it crawled out from behind the ship, its skin crusty and dry, like kelp left on land. "By the ancestors!" muttered Bjorn, as the figure groaned and crawled towards them. "A zombie!" stated Yuthura with distinct surprise. "A what?" asked Jayce, as Vexx wandered up to the creature.

"An undead creature. It was a person, they probably died trapped here with their ship, but something brought them back to life," Yuthura explained. "Some mages like to use them as disposable muscle. Manual labour, and the sorts." Vexx crouched a metre away from the zombie, looking curiously at the creature. It swiped at him with its one remaining arm, but he just batted away the feeble attack, the entire arm tearing off and flying away. "Vexx, don't toy with it!" scolded Wicke. Vexx stood up straight, shrugging before lining his foot up next to the creature's head. It attempted to bite him, but he brought his leg backwards before kicking the head, the entire object detaching from the rest of the body and sailing away over a nearby ship. Vexx raised his arms triumphantly, but the others weren't amused. "Not funny," muttered Wicke, still cowering behind Jayce.

"Vexx, are there anymore?" Jayce asked, as Vexx glanced across the horizon at the twenty or so other ships. Vexx nodded. "How many?" he asked. Vexx smiled smugly at Jayce, crossing his arms. "You tell me. Use your Focus." Jayce sighed, trying to come up with a reason why he couldn't at least attempt getting the answer himself. He concentrated, a rush of waves building up his head before releasing as a single droplet hit the waters of his mind, the surface calming. He

opened his eyes, the world around him a shade of grey except for his friends around him, who glowed brightly. Jayce concentrated on the nearby ship, trying to see behind the wooden hull.

"Focus," Vexx said, stepping to the side of Jayce and looking up at him. He reached out with his hands, grasping Jayce's temples and angling his head to a specific point on the ship's hull. "The specialties aren't easy to grasp. You're defining a single stroke on a painting - to grasp one is hard. This is the one you'll use the most. Gaze, not just with your eyes," Vexx stated. "How many are in this ship?" Jayce stared, squinting as he tried to see beyond the wall of wood in front of him. "Two," said Marisha from behind them. Vexx and Jayce turned to stare at her, Jayce with a look of horror, Vexx with pure pride. "Correct. Go on Marisha! That's why you're my favourite student."

Jayce's shoulders dropped at he let out a long sigh. "Not fair, she only has one eye to look through..." he muttered, immediately receiving a hard punch on the shoulder from Bjorn in retaliation. "Asshole," Bjorn stated, Marisha laughing as she slapped the back of Jayce's head. "Actually, I used the other eye," she said, sticking her tongue out at him. "I seem to recall there was a bet going on as to which one of us was going to advance first," Marisha continued, as Jayce continued to shrink away. "Cough up," she said with a grin.

Jayce handed over his payment, taking out his swords and heading for the hull. "I'll get you on the next one. Fan out. Bjorn take Marisha. Vexx go with Yuthura, Wicke you're with me. Be careful, stick together. Grab anything that looks worthwhile and bring it outside. We'll load it onto the ship to take with us," Jayce ordered. "Aye!" called out the various members of his crew. Jayce stepped into the hull, Wicke chanting behind him before clicking her fingers and creating a source of light. A more fresh zombie charged him from inside the hull, but with a quick pair of slashes the creature fell away. The other didn't fare any better.

Jayce climbed to the top of the ship, entering back into a state of Focus and sitting down whilst Wicke rummaged to her heart's content. He pulled from deep inside himself, his eyes feeling out of his body as he concentrated on seeing beyond them. He glanced across the various ships, scanning them as he tried to see within, until finally, as he passed over a ship, his eyes stopped as he saw the faintest of outlines from within. He bore deeper within, the grey giving way as a new colour Jayce had never seen before took over his vision, his entire sight changing, evolving, as he saw through the physical hull to see outlines of creatures inside the ships around him.

Jayce grinned madly as he exited Focus, entering back into it and reattempting to utilise his Gaze. It worked, again and again. He blinked, his vision blurry and eyes stinging from exertion. "Ow," he muttered, rubbing his eyes as Wicke stumbled out from the hold with a large cloth bag full of items. "You okay?" she asked. Jayce nodded. "Never better," he said with a big grin, as he looked down at her. "Then get off your butt and help!" she whined, stomping back inside as he slid down to join her.

With the passing of a few hours, the group reconvened back together with a large pile of treasures from their adventure. The zombies had been numerous, but dried by the desert heat whilst also deprived of the element of surprise, there was little they could do to hinder the group. The haul ranged from trinkets, weapons, chests, books, and various other goods, a happy sight for all of them as they tried to figure out what their loot was worth. Jayce reached into the pile, grabbing a shortsword from within, the blade the length of his forearm. "Here," he said, handing the item to Marisha. "You need a new weapon, it's not your spear - I know - but you need something." Marisha nodded, attaching the weapon behind her waist. "Thanks."

Jayce emptied the ship back out onto the sands, using the bottle to then collect all of the treasure before collecting the ship and the loot back into the bottle. "Onwards," Jayce declared, pointing west and beginning the long march. They travelled across the sands for as long as they could, their steps growing heavier and heavier in the heat of the endless sun. More and more ships emerged from the dunes around them, long abandoned and derelict compared to the more recent ones they had encountered earlier. The number of zombies also increased, turning from pairs to small groups until finally, as the group stood tall at the top of a large dune, they saw their first swarm.

The zombies were countless, their skins shrivelled up and cracked under the heat of the desert. Limbs were missing and the groans collected together into an overlapping buzz as they shambled across the sands. "Where are they all coming from?" Jayce asked, as the swarm started its slow climb in their direction. Bjorn pointed onwards beyond them; a small city stood faintly on the horizon, a sea of abandoned vessels lining the faint remains of the riverbed leading in its direction. Bjorn reached into his backpack, emptying an entire bottle of water over his head as he panted heavily. "Wicke, they're all yours. It's too damn hot to fight them," he said.

Wicke looked up towards Jayce for confirmation - he nodded - and she stepped forwards beginning her spell. The familiar tattoos spread across her fingers and hands, quickly spreading up her arms and shoulders. "Hellfire!" she yelled, as a ball of blue flame formed in her palms before spreading out in a long plume of fire into the swarm. The already-dry corpses ignited under the intense heat, burning away to ash in only a few seconds as she concentrated on the spell. The fifty-or-so zombies disintegrated, their ashes mingling with the sands of the desert before blowing away. She dropped the spell, stepping back and wiping her brow.

"You didn't use your book?" stated Jayce, patting her on her hat. She shook her head, flicking herself on the side of her temple. "Ah oops, I keep forgetting about it. It only has one spell in it anyway and it's not very useful," she said with a frown. "Remind me what it does," Jayce asked, beginning the long walk down the dune. "Please don't," muttered Bjorn, having already been on the receiving end countless times. Wicke ignored him, pulling out her grimoire and starting to chant as she flicked to the only filled page in the book.

A spinning purple ring emerged from the front cover of the book, another one appearing on the back, spinning in the opposite direction. Two more then emerged each spinning opposite to each other on both covers, all the same colour: purple. Wicke finished her chant. "Echo," she said, her words repeating as a copy of her voice said the same thing. "That's about it," she said with a shrug. "If I upcast it there's more copies, but it doesn't do anything else so I'm not really sure what the point of it is." Jayce nodded, trying to think of when it would be useful. "You'll figure it out. Maybe look in that library of yours when you get time," he suggested, the teenager rolling her eyes. "As if I haven't already."

Jayce waved it off, picking up the pace as they neared the bottom of the dune. "We're not going to make it to the city by nightfall. We'll head for that cluster of ships and make camp," Jayce stated, the others groaning in acknowledgement but following closely behind him. Vexx slowed down a little as they approached, his arms raising ever so slightly by his side as he moved more cautiously. Jayce turned to look at him - he couldn't see any zombies with his Gaze and Vexx hadn't bothered to act cautiously even when there were potential enemies. "What?" Jayce asked, only to vault back as an arrow sailed past his eyes, a shadow falling over him as he looked up at a lone cloaked figure stood on top of one of the nearby ships.

"Who are you? More bandits?" demanded the figure, as he cocked an arrow and pointed it directly at Jayce. "Woah!" stated Jayce, raising his arms defensively and backing up, an arrow landing at his feet for his troubles. "Don't move!" ordered the figure, only for his bow to fly out of his hands as a strong burst of wind hit him from behind. He stood there confused for a moment as his weapon bounced off the hull of the ship before hitting the desert sand with a thump. "What?" he asked, glancing around before focusing his attention back on the group. Another burst of wind hit him from behind as Wicke extended her hands out, his body tumbling to floor as he fell off the ship. "Ouch," he complained, rolling onto his back and raising his arms as Jayce pointed his swords at him.

"Who are you? Why did you attack us?" Jayce demanded, flicking one of his swords in the direction of the man's hood, instructing him to remove the wrappings around his head. He crawled backwards, leaning against the hull and pulling down his hood, the majority of his head still hidden behind a bandana. His skin was dark, darker than even Bjorn's, and his head was smooth, shaven to an impeccable level. His eyebrows were tightly cropped, with direct lines cut into them. His eyes drew all of their attention: they were green, with a golden cross across his pupils and iris. He pulled down his bandana, revealing a tight jawline with a small lump of hair extending down from his chin.

"Damn," muttered Vexx, the figure immediately frowning as he stared at him. "Who are you?" asked Jayce once more. The figure shook his head, slowly leaning forwards and standing up. He was tall, slightly shorter and skinnier than Jayce, but not by much. "Who I am is of little concern," he said, with a deep and resounding voice that demanded respect. "Who are you, to be trespassing in these lands?" demanded the man, crossing his arms and stepping forwards as he recollected himself. "We are the Rising Aces, we go as we please," Jayce said, a groan coming from the others. "You attacked us. Why?" he asked.

"Are you not bandits? Thieves? Looters?" asked the figure, his eyes scanning the group until he focused on Wicke, glancing directly at the tome in her hands. "A Wizard? Is that how you disarmed me?" he asked, stepping past Jayce and walking directly towards her. Jayce lowered his swords, confused by the disregard the man had paid him. "Jayce," Wicke said nervously as she backed up, looking up at the stranger. The figure looked her over, then slowly he looked at the others, Vexx watching him curiously. He paused as he looked up at Bjorn. "Hmph, godfallen," he muttered, turning to look back at Jayce.

"Your group is intriguing, and... I need your help. The leylines are fading," he said, pointing vaguely off into the distance towards nothing. "If nothing is done, this entire region will fall into an endless drought, its dead doomed to wander these sands for the rest of time. The people are doing nothing, and I am trying to save them. Your girl - your Wizard - I request her aide, her magic to help solve this crisis. Will you help me? I can offer a great reward," he said, reaching behind him to pull out a large bag of money. Jayce looked at the money, glancing towards the others as they sent him numerous looks all saying the same thing, apart from one. Vexx nodded excitedly, Jayce struggling to hide his own eagerness as an adventure presented itself to him.

"We will do our best to help, but we need to know your name and, since you're local, we also need you act as our guide," Jayce said, putting his swords away before stepping forwards and extending a hand to shake. The man nodded, grasping his forearm in a tight grip. "Very well. I accept. Refer to me as Falconer," he said. Jayce tilted his head, the others sighing as they dreaded what Jayce had signed them up for. "Falconer? That's an odd name." Falconer smiled, nodding faintly before bringing his fingers to his mouth and letting out a long whistle. A shadow fell from the sky, dropping quickly with a screech before flying through the group. The small bird looped around them before landing on top of Falconer's shoulder.

The falcon had a beautiful black and white plumage, with a bright yellow beak and talons. "He will guide us, but for now we should make camp for the night, the sun sets quickly," stated Falconer, Wicke staring at his bird in wonderment. Jayce nodded in agreement, reaching behind his back for the ship. Falconer furrowed his eyebrows. "What is..." he began, only for his mouth to drop open as Jayce pointed the ship towards an empty space of sand, releasing the vessel with a crash onto the sands. "Oh my," he said, staring up at the ship. "I'm only growing more and more appreciative of the fact I didn't shoot you," Falconer said, as the crew began to climb the ladder onto the ship. Vexx chuckled a little. "Yeah, about that..." Vexx said with a smug grin, Falconer's face quickly falling as he looked down at the strange man, a deep unsettling feeling growing within him. "Welcome aboard."

Seize the Seas Tales: By Starlight

Falconer was astounded by the magic vessel that had appeared from nowhere. Even as he stood on the open deck of the ship - the grass beneath his sandals, the sails flapping in the winds above him - it didn't feel real. A ship in a bottle, carried

literally on the back of its Captain – genius. “It still needs some work and we’re waiting to find ourselves a Shipwright capable of getting it up to standard, but this is home. Make yourself comfortable, Marisha will make us some dinner whilst there’s still light,” Jayce said, pointing in Marisha’s direction as she reached inside their freezer for some fish. “Hope you have a strong stomach,” said Wicke with a smirk, as she started to search through their loot.

Falconer raised an eyebrow with curiosity, but the curiosity almost immediately faded as he observed Marisha cook. He poked his half-raw meal idly, as he watched the others drink away the bad taste with strong-smelling booze, or a lot of water in Wicke’s case. “Fancy a sip?” offered Vexx. Falconer smelt the drink, quickly shaking his head. “A bit crude for my taste, thank you.” Falconer looked over the crew, reciting the names he had been told inside his head as he quickly paired key characteristics to their names. A hiss drew his attention, followed by a loud screech from his falcon as he watched the pair of animals square off over a pile of fish scraps. He chuckled gently, his falcon holding his feathers close to his body and lowering his head in submission in a surprising display to the small black cat. Little Witch grabbed a pile of scales in her jaw, waltzing away to sit by Jayce.

“What’s the name of your falcon?” Jayce asked eventually, the sun now set and a bright display of stars flickering into existence across the night sky. “Horus,” said Falconer. “I’ve raised him from an egg, he’s good at finding things.” “What kind of things?” Wicke asked, leaning over to pick up Little Witch, the cat still eating. Jayce flicked her hand away. “Whatever I need. We are connected.” Jayce raised an eyebrow. “He acts as a familiar of kinds, I know a little magic myself; and I can see through his eyes and together we can scout vast lands.”

Jayce nodded. “Your eyes, sorry if I’m being rude, they are quite unique,” Jayce stated. Falconer smiled. “A blessing, or a consequence of my younger actions. I can see the leylines of the world, my vision is... different. Sharper, yet blunter,” he said, looking down at the grass on the deck. “What are leylines?” asked Wicke. “The magical rivers of the world, the veins of the planet. Life stems from them and they fuel nature,” he said vaguely. “Some people can draw power from them, use the power of nature as their own – Druids, in particular.”

Wicke perked up, opening her mouth to ask more questions, but instead she held herself back, writing a quick note as reference to herself and sitting back. “And these leylines are fading?” Jayce asked. Falconer nodded, pointing again off into the distance. “One particularly powerful line runs straight through Deadman’s

Run. There are several focal points where a few settlements have been built.” “Coincidence?” asked Jayce curiously. Falconer shook his head, laying back and looking up at the stars. “It creates life, spawns oases - amongst others. From these waters people and animals gather, creating settlements. It’s a unique thing, a beautiful thing, that most overlook.”

Jayce looked up at the stars, an entire universe stretching before them. “It really is. We’ll do our best to save it. Get some rest, we leave early tomorrow morning. I’ve got first watch, Bjorn take second, Marisha third, Vexx you finish,” Jayce said, the others nodding in acknowledgment of his orders. Falconer looked back towards the crew, Horus hopping over towards him before laying down on the grass next to him. Falconer smiled to himself, frowning as he caught himself doing so, before laying down on the grass of the strange ship and falling asleep.

Chapter 36: Blood in the Sand

The overbearing flare of the blazing sun awoke most of the crew early in the morning. Falconer had already been awake long before the others, all apart from Vexx, who took last watch. They shuffled around across the deck, snacking on random items from their food stores, splashing their faces and bodies with water, and otherwise attempting to ready themselves for the day ahead. It was quite something to witness, an amusing sight to say the least: Falconer stifled a laugh as Vexx threw a bucket of cold water over Wicke, the girl letting out the loudest scream imaginable, before chasing after him with a blunt object.

Jayce smiled to himself as he leant on the railing of the aft deck, his eyes watching Falconer as the stranger observed his crew, his falcon circling high above the ship. "I don't trust him," Bjorn said, as he walked up the stairs to join Jayce by the wheel. "You think I do? We hardly know him and Vexx has already told me he's hiding something. But... I like him. If possible, provided we aren't betrayed and he's not already taken, I'm going to ask him to join us. We do need a Navigator," Jayce replied. Bjorn nodded, leaning on the railing next to him. "Maybe. Let's focus on surviving today first; preferably without an arrow in our back. Zombies, a drought, Druids... let's figure this stuff out. Right, Captain?" Bjorn asked, extending a fist. Jayce bumped it. "Damn straight! Let's get to work!"

They dismounted the ship, shrinking it and adding to the large collection of water bottles, weapons and other equipment they had prepared, as the eight of them, Little Witch included, readied themselves for the day ahead. Falconer had covered up his head again, his cloak covering almost his entire body and his bow hanging from his shoulders. "Are we all good?" Jayce asked his crew, the other members nodding as they finished applying sunscreen and securing their backpacks. He then looked towards Falconer, who gave a simple nod of acknowledgment. "Lead on," said Jayce.

Falconer began the long walk towards the nearby city, the others all following closely behind, keeping their eyes on their surroundings for more zombies. There were a few, but not enough to pose an issue, and, bored out of his mind, Vexx opted to dispatch them, usually with a spare magic stone or coral coin. Eventually the city began to grow larger and larger, and so did the number of zombies milling around. "You've been this way before, right?" Jayce asked Falconer, whilst glancing towards Vexx's hanging arm. "Yes, I passed through about a week ago," Falconer answered. Vexx's clenched fist relaxed, forming an open palm.

"Do you know what we're looking for?" Jayce asked, as he nervously looked at the large city they were approaching. Falconer faltered. "No, I do not, but I think I know where to start," he answered, Vexx keeping his palm open before half closing it. "Great," muttered Jayce, acknowledging the half-truth. "Are there any locals who can help?" Jayce asked. "Guards, mercenaries?" Falconer shook his head. "The city of Nemut is abandoned," Falconer said. "The people fled once the water ran out." Vexx made a fist. Jayce held his tongue, thinking to himself as he tried to strategize. "We'll figure it out as we go."

The city wasn't as big as Jayce had initially thought, it consisted of little more than four main streets surrounded by a large square wall, with a large city hall stationed directly in the centre. The streets were surprisingly empty, little more than a few groups of undead roamed around, but with the reach and power of Bjorn's strikes from his greataxe, discounting the speed and ferocity of Vexx, there was little to worry about. The houses were simple: they were large cubes made from sandstone, and it was clear from the weathering that these houses were old.

"Where are they all? I was expecting way more zombies," Wicke asked at last, as Jayce dispatched the final zombie from the main street with a pair of decapitating strikes. "They must have cleared out, taken to the sands in pursuit of food," Yuthura answered, as she leant against a wall drinking from a bottle. Jayce wiped his brow, catching his breath and nodding in agreement. "Makes sense. I think that's most of them, we should split up and look for clues," Jayce suggested, the others glancing nervously around at the numerous corpses. "Are you sure?" Wicke asked. "They're only zombies. If we stay in pairs and keep the city hall as a fallback point we should be fine," Bjorn stated, rolling his shoulder as he stood in the shade. "We are wasting time," stated Falconer, holding his bow in his hands and stepping inside the town hall.

Jayce looked at the others, shrugging before stepping inside after him. The place was in a state of disrepair, but only from sand that had come in through open windows; the rest of the place was immaculate, preserved, untouched. The city hall was simple, an open plan room with a platform for a speaker; a set of stairs located on each end of the room led upwards to an overlooking balcony that ran around the inside of the domed roof. "How long have these zombies been around?" Jayce asked, as he began to search around the building, walking past the various pews, and rummaging through cupboards hidden behind the stage. "I do not know, but this area started having problems just under a month ago. The neighbouring city - two weeks ago."

A zombie screeched as it leapt out of a gap from between two pews; it dropped in an instant as Falconer fired an arrow clean through its skull. "What were the signs?" Jayce asked, starting the climb up to the balcony, his swords pointed ahead of him. "The natural resources dried up. Plants died, water drained away." Jayce nodded, jumping out from the top of the stairs ready to strike, Falconer close behind him. There was no enemies. "Maybe it's just a freak event? A natural drought?" Jayce proposed.

Falconer shook his head, putting his bow away and leaning over the balcony to look downwards. "This region naturally dries and wets throughout the course of the year. Ships beach, but even in the worst of times the waters return within a week or two. The oasis that these areas are built on haven't dried in four hundred years, this is unheard of - unnatural. And, if you could see through my eyes you'd see the lands have been poisoned," Falconer stated mournfully.

Jayce nodded, walking around the edge of the ring. "Then, I guess we look for anything out of place," Jayce stated with a smile, running his hand along the railing, only to yelp and pull his hand back. "Everything alright?" asked Falconer. "Yeah," said Jayce, sucking his finger as he pulled out a large splinter. "Someone forgot to varnish the wood." Falconer nodded, looking down at the railing before frowning. He rushed over to Jayce's side, gently running his hand over the wood before stepping back and getting a better look. He walked around the edge of the ring, stopping every time the wood became rougher. "There are points - five - where the wood has been marked," Falconer stated, looking down from each of the points to the floor below.

Sand covered the stone floor of the city hall as they looked down upon it, the pair sharing a look before Jayce began to chant. He sent a strong gust of wind across the floor, the sand kicking up before blowing to the sides of the wall. "By the leylines," muttered Falconer, as the pair stared down at a giant circle carved into the floor, a series of strange markings overlapping throughout before continuing on the upper balcony. "Well, that's not normal," Jayce said, Falconer nodding in agreement. "Jayce!" yelled a voice from below, as Wicke raced into the room. "We've found something!"

They reconvened outside the hall, Bjorn stood leaning on his axe in the shade, whilst the others were hunched over a map they had drawn in the sand. "What did you find?" Jayce asked, he and Falconer walking around the group to look at the map. "Follow me," Wicke stated, running off quickly down the main road. Jayce shrugged and headed quickly after her, Falconer in tow. They arrived at a

small house not too far away from one of the main gates near the outside wall. Wicke led them around the back, pointing at the rear wall.

Carved into the stone, painted with a deep red, was a strange symbol: a vertical eye with six wings. "We found two more, but from their positions on the map we think there's five in total," she stated, as Falconer ran his hands across the strange markings. Jayce's eyes widened, Falconer snapping his head around to look directly at him. "Five?" Falconer asked. Wicke nodded, raising an eyebrow as she looked towards Jayce. "That's too much of a coincidence, right?" Jayce asked, Falconer nodding in agreement. "There were markings inside the main hall, carved into the floor in a circle, five distinct points overlapping the area," Jayce stated to Wicke. "A summoning circle?" Wicke asked. Jayce raised an eyebrow, and Falconer looked confused as well. "A ritual to create something. Yuthura makes them all the time," Wicke stated.

"Someone must be doing this then. Creating these circles, creating these zombies for something," Jayce theorised. "Has anyone been inside any of the buildings?" Wicke shook her head. "Then let's take a look, get the others and bring them here," Jayce ordered, Wicke rushing off quickly to follow his command. "Let's go," Jayce said, drawing a sword and opening the door to the building. They stepped inside, the room dark and musty. It was a small building, a one bedroom house with little more than a bed, a rug, a kitchen, and a desk. There were no zombies, so Jayce put his sword away and began to rummage through the room along with Falconer. They found nothing, letting out an irritated sigh as they stepped back onto the rug.

"Nothing," sighed Jayce, kicking the rug in irritation. Something made a loud thud, and both Falconer and Jayce immediately looked at each other, stepping off the rug and throwing it to the side. A wooden hatch had been built into the floor, a metal ring banging as it was disturbed by the rug. "Not quite nothing," stated Falconer, a small smile hidden beneath his mask. He crouched down, grabbing the metal ring and lifting the hatch off the floor, the large slab of wood hitting the ground with a resounding crash. A ladder led downwards into the darkness, a faint rush of air coming out from the hole.

Jayce looked at Falconer, Falconer looked back at Jayce. "We'll wait for the rest," stated Jayce. "Agreed," said Falconer, Horus sitting quietly on his shoulder. The rest of crew arrived quickly, both Bjorn and Wicke staring at the hole in horror. "No way," they complained, immediately shaking their heads and backing up. "Oh come on, where's your sense of adventure?" asked Jayce, lighting a torch

and dropping it into the hole. It fell a few metres before clattering on the sandstone floor. "It's not that deep," Jayce said. They shook their heads. "Who knows what's down there waiting to eat us!" stated Wicke, crossing her arms as Vexx pulled faces at her. Little Witch leapt out of her backpack and walked over to the large hole, sniffing at the air that came out it. She hissed, running quickly backwards to Wicke's protection. "See!"

Vexx chuckled to himself, stepping up to the hole and looking down. "What's the worst that could be down there?" Vexx asked, looking at the group before putting on a grin and dropping down through the hole. "Wait!" Jayce called out, too late to stop him. "Well, one way or another, we're going in. Come on, be brave! We survived the Dungeon, we can survive this," Jayce said, walking up to the hole and sliding in to grab the ladder. He took a deep breath, his heart pounding in his chest before he started to climb down. "Godsdammit Vexx..." Jayce muttered.

Jayce dropped to the floor, looking up towards the others as they looked down through the hatch, three-or-so metres up. "Come on," he called up, the others grumbling but climbing down, one after another, to join him. Jayce glanced around - Vexx was gone. They had dropped into a large tunnel, the cave heading in only one direction, the walls made of sandstone. A rush of warm air passed through them, carrying an unusual and uncomfortable scent. Jayce looked at the others, the group gathered around him, waiting for him to take the lead. "Fine, fine," stated Jayce, drawing one of his swords and walking forwards, beginning a minor chant as he did so. He clicked his fingers, a flame appearing on the tip of his index finger, he then tapped the end of his sword with his finger and the flame jumped onto the end of his blade, casting a bright glow ahead of him.

"I didn't know you could do that!" stated Wicke, her mouth slightly agape. Jayce smirked, turning around as they descended further into the caves. "There's lots you don't know, my dear student," he said with a grin. She stuck her tongue out at him in retaliation. The caves widened out, the ceiling a few metres tall and supported by large beams of bulbous rock. It was pitch black, Jayce provided the majority of the light with his magic, although the others had ignited torches of their own to combat the darkness.

A figure ran at them from the darkness, sprinting past them before skidding a few steps as he stared at the group in surprise. His hands and face were covered with blood, and Jayce saw an expression he'd never seen before from Vexx: fear. "The fuck are you doing here? Run!" Vexx yelled, a loud shrilling growl echoing

from the cave he had just emerged from. "Language!" scolded Falconer, not quite grasping the situation. Jayce stared at Vexx, stunned and unable to process the words he had just heard from Vexx's mouth. "Run!" yelled Vexx, pointing beyond Jayce before leaping forwards to defend the group.

Jayce slowly turned on his feet, his heart pounding in his head as he turned to see what Vexx was running from. A large creature slowly stomped into the light. It was the size of Bjorn, huge in height and vaguely humanoid. Its legs were shrivelled, but on closer inspection Jayce quickly realised they were just unaffected. Its torso was bloated, its muscles swollen to monstrous proportions, its arms so huge the creature opted to use them to walk instead of its legs. Its head lay surrounded by muscle, a small orb protruding from the giant body. It was covered in blood, the very skin of its body inside out and punctured by broken bone, creating a terrifying display of spiky protrusions. The hands of the creature had reformed, flesh melting together to form three giant, bony claws, but beyond it all, Jayce stared in horror at its face. The skin was smooth, there were no eyes, no nose, no ears, no hair, just a gaping, bloody hole that took up its entire face. Spiky teeth spread outwards from the inside, a long twisting tongue lashing around as it screeched.

Vexx rushed forwards, the creature twisting on its arm to hold its body up as it raised a fist before smashing down on the ground where Vexx had been. He leapt around it, attempting to attack from behind, only for the creature to reach around and swipe at him – Vexx narrowly avoiding the creature's claws as he pushed off thin air to bounce towards the cavern walls. A hand grabbed Jayce, pulling him backwards as the others began to run, Jayce staring in horror as Bjorn threw a torch past the creature, the light illuminating tens of the creature heading through the caves towards them.

They rushed back to the ladder leading upwards, Marisha heading up first with Yuthura in tow as Wicke, Bjorn, Jayce, and Vexx created a defensive line, with Falconer holding his bow behind them, to fight against the creatures. "Marisha, I need your sword!" yelled Vexx, her blade clattering to the floor next to him as she threw it from the top of the hole. "Where did they all come from?" asked Wicke, stepping back and beginning to chant, a ball of blue flame appearing in her hands before she threw a plume of fire down the hall. "Falconer," called Jayce. "Where are they coming from?" Jayce asked.

Falconer jumped back, stowing his bow as he began to chant; he crossed his arms, extending his first two fingers upwards and lowering his head. "Protect me!" he

called out, Horus taking to the air and flying quickly into the darkness. "Wicke, buy us as much time as you can!" Jayce ordered, lunging forwards with his blades and impaling one of the creatures that got too close, Vexx following up by leaping onto its body and slitting its throat with his borrowed weapon. "Here goes nothing," Wicke muttered, her eyes nervously watching the incoming enemies, Bjorn tearing them apart with his colossal axe long before they could reach her, whilst she continued to unleash her Hellfire around the various pillars.

She began a new chant, one she'd practiced before and one she had only grown in curiosity about. Hellfire remained active, her new spell hijacking the flow of magic within as she chanted. "Echo!" she yelled, a second ball of flame appearing in her other hand as the spell was copied, the new one slightly weaker but still a direct copy of Hellfire. She grinned, sweat dripping from her brow as she stepped forwards, Vexx, Bjorn, and Jayce moving with her as they pushed the creatures back towards a chokepoint where the tunnel narrowed. "Falconer! Hurry!" Wicke yelled backwards, her arms screaming at her and the heat of the flames beginning to burn her hands.

Horus flew through the caves, the small bird of prey twisting and spiralling through the tunnels as it bounced off the ceiling and walls past the numerous creatures. Falconer could see through his eyes, his own magic enhancing the otherwise blind bird through the darkness, as together they flew through the caves. A flash of green fire flew past them as the cave opened up. Horus looped around, heading backwards and quickly emerging into a large room. A huge workbench lay underneath a series of green torches, documents straddled the bench and glass tubes lay propped up around the room. Ritual circles had been painted onto the floor of the laboratory, but the entire area was covered in a thick layer of undisturbed sand, most of the green torches long burnt out.

"I've found it!" called out Falconer. "A laboratory - it's abandoned!" Horus glanced around the room, the faintest trickle of sunlight peaking in through a gap in the cave wall. Falconer blinked, re-entering his body and stumbling backwards. "Are we good to leave?" Jayce asked backwards, the creatures once again pushing forwards through the gap towards them. "Yes! Whoever did this is long gone!" Falconer yelled, firing off an arrow before stepping backwards and climbing the ladder. "You heard him! Wicke, collapse the tunnels!" Jayce ordered, stepping backwards alongside the others as the creatures slammed their huge arms down towards him. "Buy me a minute!" called Wicke as she began to chant.

They continued to back up, the creatures getting stronger and more dangerous with each slow and heavy hit, as exhaustion settled in. Jayce leapt to the side as one creature cracked the stone by his feet, he lunged forwards sticking both his swords into its neck before twisting and decapitating the monstrosity. Wicke concentrated hard, a ball of colourless energy pulsating in her hands as she repeated the incantation for Echo, placing every bit of her magical energy into the spell. "Shatter!" yelled Wicke, throwing the orb above the creatures down the cave tunnel. "Echo!" she followed, four more orbs forming around her as she upcast the spell. She threw them, the balls of energy heading quickly down the tunnel before hitting their mark. There was a pulse of energy, the entire group instinctively taking a deep breath as everything slowed and silenced, before the loudest sound any of them had ever heard erupted from deep within the cave, the entire ground shaking, the walls cracking and the ceiling beginning to crumble.

"Go! Go! Go!" yelled Bjorn, throwing Wicke up the ladder before following after her. Jayce and Vexx rushed after them, the ground shaking and a huge billowing plume of dust, sand, rocks and wind blasting its way from deep within the caves towards them. Jayce climbed quickly, Vexx leaping past him as the blast of wind flew past their feet, the pair slamming the trapdoor shut and pressing hard on it as the explosion slammed against the wooden door. "Everybody out!" yelled Jayce, as the ground continued to shake, the building beginning to crack and the floor giving way. The crew ran outside, Jayce glancing behind him as they ran for the city gates. The ground erupted, the city hall collapsing as it sank into the sands, the rest of the city of Nemut following as the countless underground caves collapsed. The sands fell around them as they ran, the devastation lapping at their feet until, as they began to climb the dunes surrounding the city, they collapsed, safe from the devastation.

They lay there panting, Horus screeching from high above them as he circled the group. The city was gone, there was little more than a few large pieces of stone emerging from the sand, but beyond that, there was next to no evidence Nemut had ever existed. "Do you think any made it out?" Wicke asked, as she lay flat on her back panting deeply. "No way in all of the abyss!" Vexx said with a grin, as he wiped his face with a damp cloth. "That was one hell of a spell, Wicke - I approve. Shall we see if the next city is as destructible?" Vexx asked. Falconer glared at him. "It was a joke! Anyway, Doc, what were those things?"

The group glanced towards Yuthura, the Doctor shaking her head. "I didn't get a good look. You told me to run, so I ran," she said, folding her arms. "But, if I'm right, we are dealing with a Warlock," she stated, looking back towards the destroyed city. Vexx nodded. "Inside out skin, eldritch abominations, unusually dangerous enemies. Sounds about right, great... Fucking fantastic!" Vexx said,

slamming his head back onto the sand as he threw his arms up. "Language! There's a child amongst us!" scolded Falconer, both Wicke and Vexx roaring with laughter in retaliation.

Jayce ignored them, turning instead to look towards Falconer. "If it is a Warlock, we are looking for someone dressed as a Priest. Did you and Horus see anything inside the cave?" Jayce asked, taking out a water bottle and taking a deep drink from within it. "A laboratory of some kind. There were notes and circles, but it looked long abandoned, two weeks at least, maybe more," Falconer stated. Vexx threw Marisha's sword back to her, giving a wink as thanks before looking over the group. "Then they're probably at the next city already. We should get moving as soon as possible, it's going to be a long walk," Jayce said.

"Pass!" stated Vexx. "I'm taking a nap on the ship." Jayce raised an eyebrow as he looked at him. "Me too," stated Bjorn, as he poured water over his head. Wicke raised a hand and Yuthura nodded as well. "Fine," Jayce said with a sigh. "You're doing some studying instead then," he said, pointing at Wicke. She frowned. "Yes you are," he added, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a list of topics, each one with a specific book title and author listed. "What! How is that fair?" she whined. "They'll be doing things too, don't worry. I have jobs that need doing," Jayce said, looking directly at Vexx.

"Bjorn pointed out that recently you've been a little slower when asked about certain topics..." Jayce lied. "And you're at an age where your education is extremely important. My teacher had me read book after book, you should as well. You don't want to end up like him..." Jayce added, once again looking over at Vexx as he lay on the floor picking his nose. Wicke looked at Vexx, shuddered, and then let out a long sigh. "Fine."

"Good, get reading. You have until the end of the week to finish half of the list. I'll test you afterwards. Yuthura, Bjorn, join her on studying Arcanum and Demon's Tongue – I get the feeling we need as many of us as possible to have at least a rudimentary understanding. Vexx, clean the toilets, then do whatever. Falconer, Marisha and I will continue walking. Falconer, how long until we reach the next city?" Jayce asked, the various members of his crew nodding in acknowledgment as they received their orders. "Basuma is a week away, at most, travelling at nightfall may speed us along, but the dangers are increased," Falconer answered.

"We'll do that then, I think it's worth the risk. We'll take a short break at nightfall, then continue until the morning. We'll find some shade and rest during the day, making use of the cold nights until we reach the next city. We know what we are hunting, it's down to us to stop the bastard," Jayce stated, standing up and releasing the ship. Jayce looked towards Bjorn. "They're in your hands. I'll see

you at sunrise." Bjorn nodded, tilting his head towards the ship and heading towards the ladder. "Don't push yourself. Tell me if you need to swap, Captain." Jayce nodded as he watched him climb, Yuthura following after him. Vexx just crouched in the sand before leaping high into the air to land on the ship's deck.

"Show off," Jayce muttered, patting Wicke on her head as she looked up at him. "I'm counting on you to find us the answers we need to unravel what this guy is doing. Do your best, that's all I ask." She nodded, smiling faintly before walking towards the ladder. Jayce aimed the enchanted bottle towards the ship, pulling the vessel and its inhabitants inside before corking the bottle and storing it safely under his backpack in the pouch he had specially created to hold the ship. Falconer shook his head faintly. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that. Can they breathe?" he asked, readjusting his backpack and turning to face Jayce. Jayce grinned before shrugging. "Probably. Yuthura calculated they have about a week's worth of air inside the bottle. A bit more from the plants on the ship. Anyway, onwards to Basuma!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A Long Walk

Marisha, Jayce, and Falconer walked quickly across the sands, giving the ruins of Nemut a wide berth just in case of any sinkholes. The sun bore down upon them, the air so dry it burnt the inside of Jayce's nose and mouth. They carried onwards, pushing quickly across the open dunes with Falconer leading the way, but after a while Jayce found himself and Marisha falling behind a little. "Are we sure we're going in the right direction? This isn't a trick, right?" Marisha asked quietly, her eye forwards on the back of Falconer's head as Jayce walked on her left. "You don't trust him?" Jayce asked.

Marisha shrugged. "Bjorn said that Vexx said he was hiding something. That's not an issue – who isn't in this crew? But... there's more going on," she said softly. Jayce raised an eyebrow looking towards her. "I'm not hiding anything, are you?" Jayce asked with a brief look of concern. Marisha turned her head to look at him, her orange eye squinting slightly as she cocked her head. "What?" Jayce asked. "You are hiding something. I understand, we've only known each other a few weeks," she said, raising her hands.

Jayce paused, taking a short breath before letting out a quick sigh. "I've mentioned Alara before, right?" he asked, stepping closer to catch up to her. Marisha nodded, her eye once again looking towards Falconer as he paused and glanced towards the sky, a strange metal object in his hand. "Your partner?" Jayce nodded. "She's graduated. Well, basic training and basic officer's training,

but she is now officially a Marine,” Jayce said with a faint smile. Marisha nodded. “Congratulations to her. Does this worry you?”

Jayce shook his head, glancing up at the skies as they began to darken. “She’s been given orders to hunt us – hunt me... I promised it wouldn’t happen, and now I’ve hurt her again. There’s nothing I can do about it, we’re doing something significant here. Something important... but my actions hurt her from halfway across the New World. She asked when this would end. I just don’t have an answer,” Jayce admitted. Marisha listened intently, initially remaining quiet long after Jayce had finished talking. She stepped to the left, bumping her shoulder into Jayce’s.

“Do you enjoy what we do?” she asked. Jayce looked at her, still in her blind spot. “Yes. Being out here, exploring, adventuring, sailing the seas... It’s the most free I’ve ever felt,” he answered, looking forwards towards Falconer. Marisha nodded. “Then that’s the answer. You care about her, she cares about you. You’re at different places right now, that’s okay. Worrying about her isn’t going to change the world, her worrying about you isn’t going to make her a better Marine.”

“I apologise for the interruption,” stated Falconer as he stood still. “I wouldn’t move from this spot.” Jayce looked at Falconer confused, but Falconer just held up a hand, reaching inside his cloak to pull out an arrow head. He pointed ahead, faintly in the sand was a small dip, a tiny dip connected to a very large circle. Falconer threw the arrowhead, the piece of stone landing in the sand before the entire area erupted. Four human-sized mandibles emerged from the sands, snapping with a loud crunch where the arrowhead had landed. The mandibles quickly sank back beneath the sands.

“Trapjaws,” Falconer stated, pointing across the stretch of sand ahead of them. Jayce entered into Focus, his eyes concentrating as he scanned the area. There were nearly a hundred of them, all spread out across the region. “Good spot,” Marisha stated as she mirrored him. Jayce glanced back towards Falconer, a pulsating grey fire enveloped his body, an identical fire surrounding Marisha as well as they both used Focus. The flames warped around Marisha, flowing towards her eyes as used Gaze, but Falconer’s was different. The flames around his body disappeared entirely, but his eyes glowed, the flames roaring intensely directly around his eyes. Jayce turned back to face the field of Trapjaws.

“How do we pass?” he asked, looking at the strange creatures. They had two pairs of overlapping black mandibles, the jaws twice the size of their smaller,

rounder bodies. "With care," Falconer stated, stepping forwards and walking carefully around the first one. "Probably best it's just the three of us. Wicke would fall straight in," Marisha said with a faint smile. Jayce chuckled quietly, nodding in agreement.

They passed through the field slowly, but they made it through without issue, eventually setting their sights on a lone slanted rock emerging from the sands. It was colossal, offering a protected area to shelter them from the wind as a storm began to blow. They took shelter inside, Falconer creating a small and temporary fire using a few supplies he had stored in his backpack. Horus sat quietly next to him, enjoying the heat of the fire as the temperature quickly dropped.

"You said we are all hiding something," Jayce said at last, as he looked towards Marisha. She nodded. "What's yours?" he pried. She laughed softly, rubbing her eye before looking down at her feet. "So brazen. Very well. Bjorn has probably forgotten this, but we were actually promised to each other. A long time ago," she said, pushing her hair behind her right ear. "Promised to each other? As in engaged?" Jayce asked curiously, Falconer keeping his eyes on the fire. Marisha nodded. "It was a lifetime ago, we were different people, but he was to be my soul-bond. This was before he left, back when he could transform."

Jayce let out a long whistle. "Wow, uh, just wow. What happened?" Jayce asked. "It's a long story. I wasn't treated well when I was a child. My mother, she had me to trap my father. A binding and living contract, a business move to get her more power. It was great, for her - but she never cared about me and when he was no longer of use she took me away from him," she said softly, bringing her knees in close to her body. "I was put to work, younger than Wicke is now, but I wasn't good enough... She gave me this," she said, pointing to the burns on the left side of her face, "and the 'one thing' I was good for was removed."

"Gone were the lessons, the attendants trying to please me to get to her, the connections..." Marisha rubbed her neck and wrists subconsciously. "I was sold. After a while, as I grew sicker and sicker from infection, a kind man took pity on me. He put me on his ship, single ticket, destination anywhere. I don't remember much after that, just cold, pain, loneliness. The Nomads found me, healed me, gave me a home, a family... and I was happy for the first time. Then Bjorn was taken," she said gritting her teeth. "My life once again thrown upside down, but I guess time heals most things and a decade apart definitely changed both of us. I thought coming along with you, his invitation, was an attempt to restart things,

but he's not said anything. And he's got his own problems anyway. So, there we go. Not a word to him, from either of you."

Jayce faltered. "Marisha..." he said softly, she glared at him, slowly pointing a finger in his direction. "Not a word. Promise me you won't tell him," she asked. Jayce nodded. She then pointed at Falconer, his attention having changed from the fire to them throughout the entire conversation. "Of course," he said softly. Marisha lowered her finger. "Good. Wake me when the storm stops. We still have a long walk ahead of us," she said, turning onto her side and resting her head on her backpack. Jayce nodded, turning to face the opening to their cave as the winds raged outside. "That we do."

Chapter 37: Evaporating Time

Basuma came into view early in the morning: a large city surrounded by round walls, its gates open and zombies swarming the streets. "We're too late..." Jayce said, his body drained as he fell to his knees in the sands. Falconer remained silent, his fists clenched and head down. They had been walking for six days, and Jayce was exhausted. The others had switched around, changing who travelled with him during the nights whilst he rested on the ship during the day, but the distance had got to him. His feet ached, his eyes were baggy, and it was clear he was at the end of his rope.

Yuthura pushed his head to the side, sticking a needle quickly into his neck. "Ow!" protested Jayce as he reached for it, only to receive a slap on the hand as penalty. His vision darkened and then quickly sharpened into focus as Yuthura pulled the needle out. "You need rest; this will help for the day, but stay at the back. Let them fight for you," she said, pointing over her shoulder at the rest of the crew as they stood assembled on the sands. "Yeah, yeah. I can rest when we've caught this guy," Jayce said, pressing on his knee and slowly standing. "Jayce, this is serious. You and Falconer have pushed yourselves hard and we're reaching a point where a mistake might be fatal. I don't know how you're still standing, even with what I'm giving you. And I certainly don't know how you're still standing," she said, pointing at Falconer.

He looked over his shoulder, stumbling slightly as he stood. "I'm more used to the lands. To pushing myself," he partially lied. Vexx clenched his fist, but Jayce was the only one who paid any attention. "Right, if you two dumbasses are going to play hero, then fine. Hold still. It's not technically an injury, but I guess I can try something more official," she said, rolling up her sleeves and pulling out her red stone. Yuthura stole Jayce's exhaustion, she then stumbled to Falconer and took his, promptly sitting down and shutting her eyes as a result. "Let's hope we don't need healing, thanks Doc," Jayce said quietly. "Marisha stay with her, Bjorn take her to cover over there, then join us. We know what we're looking for, we'll make this quick."

Marisha nodded, and Bjorn picked up Yuthura, the three of them heading for the cover of some dried-up palm trees around a large circle of dried mud: a dead oasis. "One remarkable Doctor you have," Falconer said, stretching and drawing his bow. Jayce nodded. "Let's make this count, he may still be here," he said, stepping forwards towards the horde of zombies stumbling out of the main gates. Wicke took the lead, casting Hellfire before Echo as she created multiple orbs of

glowing blue fire around her, her purple grimoire gently hovering in front of her with its pages open as she walked.

She burnt their way into the city of Basuma, the group heading immediately for the edges as they began to search for any markings left behind by the presumed Warlock. Wicke dropped her spells to help look, leaving Vexx to gleefully rush around, after several days of being idle, and slaughter his way through the various zombies stumbling around the back alleys between buildings. They didn't have to search for long, quickly finding a building painted with the unusual markings they had seen in Nemut. "Well, only one way to find out," Jayce said, stepping inside the small square house.

He cleaved the zombie inside in half, finishing it off by stabbing his blade through its skull, before heading immediately for the inconspicuous rug that lay on the floor. "Do you think these trapdoors existed before the Warlock arrived? Or did he make them?" Wicke asked Bjorn. Bjorn faltered, trying to think of an answer. "Our cities typically have caves running underneath. There was a time when this region was at war, before we joined the Empire; the caves were used as supply tunnels or evacuation routes. Hence why most of the outer cities are walled. Come on, we have work to do," answered Falconer, pulling open the hatch and climbing down. Wicke raised an eyebrow and shrugged as she looked at Bjorn, the baned equally surprised by the quick answer. "Fair enough."

They climbed down quickly, Vexx once again just dropping through the hole rather than using the ladder. "Falconer, can you scout ahead?" Jayce asked. He nodded, crossing his arms again and entering into a trance as he took control of Horus, the small bird flying quickly down the caves. "The creatures are here," he said, his eyes shut. "How many?" Bjorn asked, drawing his greataxe nervously. "Less, but still plenty. The laboratory has chambers - there's a creature, it's creating more of those monsters. He's not here, but the trail is fresh," Falconer stated, exiting his trance and drawing his bow before notching an arrow. He stepped to the side, tilting his body and taking in a deep breath before letting out a long exhale. He whistled, releasing the arrow in the darkness.

It sailed true, Horus waiting near a bend in the cave for his master's command. The arrow flew towards the bird, and it quickly flapped its wings, the arrow curving around the bend and continuing onwards straight into the creature Falconer had seen, its body dropping to the floor from the surprise attack. An all-too-familiar gargling screech echoed down the caves, followed quickly by the pounding of the creatures as they charged. "Nice shot," Vexx stated, as he looked

ahead. "I'm going to borrow your sword, Jayce," said Vexx, Jayce's sword already in his hand. Jayce looked down at his side: the sword he had received from Alara was gone. "Hey, careful with that one. It means a lot to me," Jayce said quickly. Vexx nodded, stepping into the caves.

Wicke began to chant, a glowing white orb forming in her hands before she threw it forwards. The orb floated, filling the air with bright light that blinded the group temporarily. "I'll leave them to you and keep this up for us," she stated, stepping to the back of the group and beckoning for Jayce and Bjorn to lead. "Thanks," Jayce said, drawing his other sword and stepping forwards. A yell startled all of them, one of pure elation.

"I've got you now!" cheered Vexx, lunging under the swing of one of the creatures before vaulting over a backwards swipe from its other arm. Vexx pushed off the creature, carrying the momentum as he fell and decapitating the monstrosity. "I've figured them out!" Vexx yelled, with a wide smile, as he charged towards a huge group of them, repeating the exact same pattern against creature after creature.

"He's been practicing all week, waiting for a rematch," Bjorn said to Jayce, stepping forwards with his greataxe and side-stepping a downwards slam from both arms of one of the creatures. He smashed downwards, the creature crashing to floor with the axe in its back. "He's not the only one," Bjorn added, as he pushed forwards to take on another. Jayce shook his head, stepping back and leaving them to it.

They made their way into the main cavern: the laboratory was decorated with corpses, most relatively fresh. In the middle, lying face down on the floor, was the corpse of the creature Falconer had shot with his bow. It was cloaked, a long pair of sinewy arms reaching from its shoulders to its feet. Its fingers were long and curled, equipped with large claw-like nails. It had no eyes, it had no mouth, and its jaw was sewn shut. Wicke stumbled her way to the main table, trying to keep her eyes away from the grisly sight. She picked up paper after paper, reading them quickly before throwing them aside. "I don't quite understand all of this. Yuthura would have a better understanding, but I'll do my best. Uh, ritual, gate, leyline, sacrifice..." she said as she worked, Vexx continuing to search the area for any more creatures.

"Ah, I may be wrong, but I think what he was trying to do was taint the main source. These leylines actually exist, he's attempting to use its power to open a gate somewhere - I think that means a portal. Some kind of sacrifice is needed,

but he needed to isolate the leyline - to find a 'Keypoint'. Do you have any idea what a Keypoint is?" she asked Falconer, shoving the documents in her bag. Falconer nodded. "If you think of a leyline as an artery, a Keypoint is where several overlap. That would be the city of Remur, my home. We must hurry, it's a few days away," Falconer answered, immediately calling Horus and heading towards the tunnel they came from. Jayce patted Wicke on the shoulder, giving her a wide smile before heading after him. "You heard the man. Wicke - level this place - we should stop as many zombies as possible from escaping."

Once more they ran from the collapsing city, Vexx grinning chaotically as he watched the city sink into the sands. They reconvened with Yuthura and Marisha, the Doctor now awake as they sat in the sands. "Destroyed another city, I see. Find him?" she asked. Jayce shook his head, Wicke reaching inside her bag and handing the documents over to Yuthura. "He's heading to the next city, we leave immediately," Jayce stated, helping Marisha to her feet, as Bjorn helped Yuthura. "Fine, Cap's staying on the ship," Yuthura stated.

"Absolutely not," countered Jayce. "It's my duty as Captain to carry the ship, and with it its crew. We'll take it easy, we've bought some time and we're right on his tail, but it's my responsibility, regardless." Yuthura glared at him, still clearly exhausted from taking both Falconer's and Jayce's combined exhaustion. "Very well, I can't stop you - even if I disagree. Frequent breaks, frequent swaps, or you'll find yourself a new Doctor. Am I understood?" Yuthura stated. Jayce nodded. "Okay, let's go."

The group once again separated, a few members boarding the ship whilst Vexx, Jayce, and Falconer took the first walk. "Uh," Vexx began shyly as he held out Jayce's sword. Jayce blinked, staring at the large chip in the side of the blade. "My sword," he muttered. Vexx placed it gently in his hands before stepping back and bowing his head. "It was a good sword, but it's not really designed for fighting. It's a ceremonial blade, sorry. I'll find a blacksmith and fix it for you," Vexx quickly promised. Jayce sighed as he held the weapon. "It's okay. I should have given you the other one. Don't worry about it, you used it more than I ever have in a single day. Thanks for being honest, and for giving it back in relatively one piece." Vexx nodded, putting his hands in his pockets and quickly jogging to catch up to Falconer who had already started walking, his bird flying high above him.

They swapped and stopped numerous times throughout the day, Yuthura taking every opportunity to check both Falconer and Jayce over before giving the go

ahead to continue. Night fell and they continued walking, stopping as the sun began to rise. Falconer remained quiet throughout the long journey, the days falling away slowly, and Jayce figured it was best to leave him to his own thoughts. Eventually they arrived, the city of Remur on the horizon.

The city was beautiful - at least Jayce assumed it normally would have been. The buildings were large and colourful, made of bright whites with blue, yellow, green, and orange roofs, but everything else was grey. The plants that lined the roads and surrounded the city were all dead, their leaves dried up, their bark discoloured. The streams and fountains across the city were dry and the city's great oasis was nothing more than a large bunker of sand. The people wandered the streets, their dispositions quiet and their looks wary, as Jayce and the others walked through the city.

Far to the back sat a palace: it was huge, with four large towers marking its corners, and a series of curving walkways overhanging the main keep. It was domed, with a golden roof that sat in the middle of the four pointed towers. Huge crimson banners hung from the countless windows along the walkways, a silver falcon imprinted upon them. Unlike the rest of the city, visible, living plant life could be seen outside, along with large fountains that sprayed high into the air across the surrounding gardens. The gardens quickly stopped, replaced by colossal sand dunes that had blown against the rear walls of the palace.

"This is where I leave you," stated Falconer, turning to face the group. "Thank you for your help. I'll finish it from here," he said, reaching behind him and pulling out a coin pouch before handing it to Jayce. Jayce stared at the money in his hands. "I don't want it. What do you mean you'll finish it? We're here to help," Jayce said, handing the money back, to the dismay of Wicke. Falconer shook his head. "I appreciate it, truly, but there's something I need to do alone. I'm sorry - try to put this behind you. You have been of great assistance. Farewell," he said, turning and quickly walking away.

"Well, that was fun. Shall we get drunk?" Vexx asked, looking around for the nearest tavern. "That was strange, wasn't it?" Wicke asked. Jayce nodded. "That was very strange. Well, with or without him, we should at least inform the locals what's truly going on. Then, maybe with a little backup, we can go and find this guy ourselves. I don't feel comfortable stopping here," Jayce said, pointing away from the direction that Falconer had headed, towards the palace. "Same here," said Bjorn, looking around nervously. "Let's go."

They made their way to the palace, walking straight up to the main entrance without any interruption. "Halt!" ordered a guard dressed in heavy leather and cloth armour. She looked Jayce and the others up and down before glancing to her colleague. "Who are you? What business do you have in the palace?" she demanded. Jayce looked at the smaller woman, her sword hanging in her hand, as she glared at the group from beneath her helmet. "We are the Rising Aces!" he declared, the rest of the group letting out an unsubtle groan. "We are here to discuss the recent drought and provide a solution to the problem," he added.

She looked at him, tilting her head slightly as she rested her arms on her hips. "No," she stated. Jayce blinked. A few moments passed as she looked nervously at the group, at Bjorn in particular. "Come again?" asked Jayce. She straightened her armour and cleared her throat. "No," she squeaked, "you cannot pass. I don't give you permission. How can you solve a drought? That's preposterous. I'm not letting you inside and putting the Queen at risk." Jayce shook his head. "Do you honestly think you can stop us?" he antagonized, stepping closer and looking down at her.

Desperately she looked back towards the other guard, a bemused look on his face as he watched the encounter. "What are you doing? Help me!" she asked him. "I think you have this handled," he said, stretching and stepping backwards to lean against the palace wall. "Look, we're here to help. We've already been to Nemut and Basuma - the cities are both destroyed. This city is next, but we have information that can help prevent that. Now, we can either continue arguing over this, which will inevitably result in you letting us in after a superior is summoned. Or you can let us in now and stop wasting both our time."

She gulped, backing up and defensively pointing her sword at him. The other guard sighed. "The Queen is currently in a meeting; you'll have to wait, but I'm sure she'll be interested in what you have to say. Come on, follow me." Jayce smiled at him. "Thank you." The group stepped past her, but the moment the other guard headed to open the gates she once again spoke up. "Your weapons! You'll need to leave them with me!" she stated. Jayce sighed, unclipping his belt and handing his swords to her.

"Do you want everyone's?" he asked. She nodded, smugly taking his swords before staring in horror as Bjorn handed her his axe – the colossal weapon nearly knocking her over. Marisha handed over her shortsword and Yuthura, her crossbow. The weapons piled up on top of the small, overzealous guard. "Do we get a ticket?" Jayce pried. "You better properly look after our stuff or there will

be problems." She frowned, as she struggled to stand with the various weapons. "They'll be safe. You may pass."

The other guard just sighed, not nearly as interested in dealing with the hassle. He led them through the palace, the various corridors lavishly decorated with rugs, paintings, and vases. Eventually they came to a huge set of green wooden doors, the guard stopping in front. "As I said, the Queen is currently in a meeting, you'll have to wait." Vexx ignored him, pushing open the doors and stepping through, Jayce and the others following behind. "Wait! Wait!" the guard desperately called after them.

The throne room was huge, the floors made of smooth stone with several large pillars holding up the ceiling. A fountain sat in the middle of the room. Arguing echoed around the room, a pair of figures surrounded by various guards standing and yelling at each other from next to the throne. "This is not a matter that is negotiable, you gave up any and all claim to interfere in this city's problems! I have a Priest dealing with it, and so far he has already ensured my palace has been healed from this bad luck!" yelled the Queen, as she stood up from her throne, looking down at a man dressed in a cloak and leathers, a bow hanging across his shoulders. She wore a long green dress, a shawl of colourful feathers wreathing her shoulders and extending down her arms. A crown sat on her head, embedded with gemstones and designed to emanate the head of a falcon, with a gold beak hanging over her nose.

"I have told you already, that is not good enough! The palace doesn't matter, the people come first! The Priest is missing, and is the source of the problems!" yelled Falconer, his hood down as he looked up at her. "You don't get to dictate how I rule this city, you abandoned this responsibility!" countered the Queen, stepping down the stairs from her throne towards him. "Do you think Mother would have wanted you to abandon the people?" Falconer asked quietly. The Queen faltered. "Do you think she would have cared? Isn't that why you left her on her deathbed?"

Falconer looked down and the Queen looked beyond him at Jayce. "Ah, guests. I apologise for the noise, this man was just leaving. How may I help you?" she asked, stepping towards Jayce and the others. Falconer turned and looked, his eyes widening as he quickly recognised the group. "Your Majesty, it's a pleasure to meet you. I didn't realise Falconer was your brother," Jayce stated, the Queen immediately gritting her teeth in a false smile as she turned to look at Falconer.

"That's what you're going by? The audacity!" she stated, glaring at him. Falconer shrunk away.

"I take it you are the adventurers he mentioned. I apologise on his behalf for dragging you into his imaginary affairs. The self-exiled prince doesn't quite know what he is talking about." Jayce looked at her; he then looked beyond her at Falconer, his shoulders low, his eyes to the floor. "I see," Jayce said. "I understand. I apologise for our intrusion, but we were curious about a Priest who has recently arrived here." The Queen frowned, but she nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, he arrived three days ago. Already the drought has begun to improve, as you can see."

Jayce nodded, looking around at the luscious plants growing in large pots around the edges, as well as the large fountain gargling in the centre of the room. "Right. Out of curiosity, did this drought start before or after the Priest arrived?" Jayce asked, the rest of the crew standing well back and observing. The Queen faltered. "I... do not know," she answered, a brief look of confusion flashing across her face. "Do you know where this Priest currently is?" Jayce continued. Her mouth opened slightly before closing. "I'm not certain I appreciate the way you're addressing me," she stated, crossing her arms.

"I see, well, I think I've heard everything I needed to know. I'll take Falconer off your hands, thank you for your time. Your Majesty," Jayce said, bowing his head. He then pointed at Falconer, beckoning for him to follow, before turning on his heels and leaving. The Queen stood stunned long after Jayce and the others had left the throne room. Falconer stepped past her. "May your reign be long and fruitful... Your Majesty," Falconer said, before walking out of the room after the Rising Aces.

Jayce stood waiting for him, his arms crossed and a bemused look on his face. "Prince Falconer?" Jayce asked. Falconer cleared his throat, looking away in embarrassment. "My name is Solomon. There are more names accompanying it, but I shed them when I chose not to take the throne," he said. Jayce nodded, patting him on the shoulder before turning around and heading back the way they had come. "That doesn't matter. Where do we start looking for this Priest, Falconer?" Jayce asked.

Wicke smiled at Falconer, shrugging before following after. The others looked towards him, all giving him various looks of acknowledgement, before following after their Captain - all except for Vexx. "I knew you were a prince. Only someone with specific taste would have called some of the best booze in the Empire

‘crude’,” Vexx stated, offering the dregs of one of his bottles. Falconer looked at the drink, raising an eyebrow before shrugging and finishing the bottle. “Not bad,” Falconer admitted. Vexx nodded, tapping him gently on his shoulder with his fist. “You’ll do. Don’t lie to them again.”

They re-joined the others, Jayce standing with his arms crossed as he watched the overzealous guard from earlier desperately rummage through a series of storage lockers for their weapons. “I know I put it here, I swear!” she said in a panic. “It was just a shortsword, right?” she asked, looking at Marisha - the others all had their equipment. “Yes, it meant so much to me,” Marisha said vindictively, the weapon hidden underneath her backpack. “I’m so sorry! I-I don’t know where it’s gone. How much did you pay for it? I-I can probably reimburse you.” Marisha shook her head. “It was a family heirloom,” she lied, the guard all but fainting.

Jayce struggled to hide a smirk, the guard turning her back to rummage once more in desperation. “You’re horrible,” Jayce whispered, grabbing her shortsword from behind her back and placing it on top of one of the lockers. “You started it,” retaliated Marisha. “Ah there it is!” Marisha stated, pointing to the top of the locker, well out of the small guard’s reach. The guard stared up at it in horror. “I’m so, so sorry! The others must have played a prank on me.”

Jayce held up a hand, stepping forwards and grabbing the weapon. “It’s okay, all’s well that ends well. Thank you for being so vigilant,” Jayce said, the guard sniffing as she nodded. “Come on, let’s go,” Bjorn said, unamused by the entire encounter. As soon as they were out of sight of the palace, Bjorn smacked Jayce and Marisha around the back of their heads. “Don’t do that again!” he told them, the pair grinning at each other. “It’s been a long walk. Let’s find this Warlock! Falconer, where do we start?” Jayce asked, turning to look at Falconer. He just shrugged, “I have no idea.”

Seize the Seas Tales: The One Left Behind

Damian was enjoying the Gardens: the weather was calm, the food simple but delicious, and the people were nice. Ottar and Corina had been working him hard, and it definitely showed. Compared to the small skinny boy he had been a few months prior, he was a whole new person. He felt strong, looked strong... he just hadn’t grown any taller. “Why are you moping this time?” asked Corina, as they sat in a café, a coffee in one hand, a newspaper in the other. “It’s just, I don’t know. I thought Jayce would have written by now – or... you know, come and collected me. Made me a member of his ‘Rising Aces’.”

Corina lowered her newspaper, adjusting her reading glasses as she looked directly at him, her hair tied up with its usual silver and pearl pin. "Damian, there are times to worry about these sorts of things; now is not the time. You have bigger goals in mind than being a crewmate, right?" she asked. Damian nodded. "Then you need to focus on those goals. By the time you see Jayce again, and it may not be for a while longer, you will be more than ready to convince him - if that is still your desire. For now, however, continue to work on your training. Finish unlocking Focus, as we planned, and then you can directly aide Ottar and I with our work. Is that fair?" she asked, leaning forwards in her seat and resting on her palm. "Yes Corina," Damian sighed, glancing at the image of Jayce and his crew plastered across the newspaper on the table.

Chapter 38: A Crushing Responsibility

"Well we need to come up with something, and something fast!" Bjorn said, pointing towards the drained oasis in the background. Jayce looked at Falconer, the man pondering to himself as he stared at the oasis. "Thoughts?" Jayce asked. "The leyline is there," Falconer said, pointing towards an empty area beneath the oasis. "If the Warlock is attempting to directly taint the Keypoint, they'll need to go there. Correct?" he asked Wicke. She looked towards Yuthura, Yuthura nodding in confirmation. "Yes," answered Wicke. Falconer turned to Jayce. "Then that is where we must start."

They rushed quickly to the oasis, Falconer leading them directly to the spot with his unique vision. The ground was solid mud - there were no buildings, no hidden entrances. "There's got to be something here, right?" Wicke asked as they looked around. "See anything, Vexx?" Jayce asked, watching him as Vexx stared at the ground. Vexx pointed at the floor. "Deep down - he's there alright," Vexx stated, before looking back at Jayce. His eyes looked normal, until Jayce entered into Focus. His pupils glowed a bright cyan, the whites of his eyes a deep black. Vexx blinked and the effect disappeared, his usual red eyes returning. "Well, how do we get down there?" Bjorn asked.

Jayce looked out across the oasis, his eyes glancing across every stone, every dead plant, every patch of mud, to the large space of sand sat in the middle of the oasis. He wandered over to the sand, looking down at it before stepping onto the patch. His feet went straight through, his body plummeting beneath the thin patch of sand. Jayce slammed to the floor with a thud, his vision spinning as he lay there dazed. "Ow..." groaned Jayce as he clutched his head, looking back at his hand to see no blood. He slowly clambered to his feet, staring up at the roof he had fallen through.

The drop had been a couple of metres, and as he stared upwards, he quickly spotted the faint traces of webbing stuck to the underside of the sand. "If this wasn't the work of a mass-murdering cultist, I'd be impressed," Jayce muttered, the patch of sand he fell through quickly getting blocked out by a curious red-headed girl. "Ah, there you are!" Wicke stated. "What are you doing down there?" she asked, looking backwards, and beckoning the others over. "I wanted a quiet place to nap in. Obviously, I fell. Tell the others to get down here," Jayce yelled up to her.

The others descended with a bit more care, dropping down to land on their feet rather than their backs, but once again they found themselves underground in a

series of tunnels. "This is getting a bit repetitive," muttered Wicke. Jayce shook his head. "Don't blame me. Stick close together, who knows what is down here," he said. Jayce chanted quietly to himself before he clicked his fingers, igniting the tip of his sword in glowing fire, stepping forwards into the darkness. The others followed closely behind him, their eyes scanning every crevasse they passed and every spooky-looking shadow.

Before long, the caves began to light up - a series of green glowing torches, mounted to the walls, illuminating the area. Jayce quickly extinguished his light, crouching low and moving forwards through the caves, peeking his head around corners whilst Vexx moved quietly behind him. "Take the lead," Jayce whispered. Vexx scooted forwards, glancing around as he moved quickly across the stone, the cave eventually widening into a huge cavern. The floor pulsed, beating like a heart, and the air vibrated with energy, feeling thick and tingly as the group moved forwards.

Vexx held back a hand, pointing ahead with his other hand. A large set of black stairs lead up to a platform, a giant beam of glowing green light extending from a large hole in the floor at the top. Beyond stood a giant set of stone doors: they were closed, and a giant image of a falcon was carved into the stone. "By the sands," muttered Falconer. "My ancestor's tomb. It's here. It's been under the oasis the whole time." Jayce looked at him, Falconer quickly shaking himself. "Bigger problems, understood."

The ground shook and a horrific screech echoed through the air, the giant beam of green energy twisting and convulsing as parts of it slowly turned red. "We're out of time!" yelled Jayce, rushing forwards. He ran up the stairs, his crew, and Falconer, on his heels. A figure stood behind the beam, a set of deep red and black robes donning his body, decorated by glowing glyphs that flickered in and out on the cloth, some glyphs even appearing and disappearing on his dark skin. Behind him, on the floor, a set of Priest's robes lay discarded, his disguise no longer necessary.

He stepped back surprised, as Jayce lunged forwards across the floor with his sword, a wide sweeping strike aimed directly at the Warlock's neck. "Where did you come from?" asked the Warlock, narrowly ducking the strike. He peddled away, scowling, his eyes wide as he quickly glanced across the group. "Protect me!" he ordered. A series of glass jars behind him shattered, tiny orb-like creatures falling to floor before writhing, their bodies swelling and twisting into large boulder-like quadrupedal monstrosities. Their skin was a deep red, veins

and arteries pulsating and threatening to tear through the tight, muscular flesh. They had no eyes, just large, gaping, circular mouths with long tongues hanging out of the void, blackish saliva dripping to floor. There were eight of them, all the size of cows, with triple-jointed legs, adorned with bony protrusions that had torn through the skin.

"Vexx!" Jayce yelled, as one pounced directly towards him. Vexx slammed into the creature, sending it spiralling backwards to the rest of its brethren. He rolled his head, his neck clicking before he extended his arms, his joints popping once again. "They're mine, kill this motherfucker!" Vexx said, lunging forwards as the other creatures turned from their injured sibling towards him. A whispering mutter came from the side, Jayce quickly facing the Warlock, an arrow flying past Jayce's eyes to imbed itself in the Warlock's shoulder. He continued to chant, his voice getting louder.

A pair of mouths tore through his cheeks, large sharp teeth clicking as they began to speak, once again in Demon's Tongue. "Wicke!" Jayce yelled, staring in horror as the shoulders and back of the Warlock began to bloat, the cloth tearing, before a pair of giant bat-like flesh wings emerged from his skin. His ribs too began to convulse, a smaller pair of twisted arms tearing out from his clothes. Wicke rushed forwards, chanting quickly. The Warlock blinked, a white film covering his eyes as they closed vertically, his sclera turning a blood red and beginning to drip. A second set of eyes opened above his own on his forehead, a final fifth eye emerging from his skin above and in between the new pair. His eyes rolled in varying directions, a glowing orange 'VI' emerging on his new set of pupils.

"Cease!" uttered one of his mouths, the other two continuing to chant. The glowing orb of blue fire forming in Wicke's hands evaporated, the spell countered. "That can be done?" Wicke stated in shock. "How?" she asked. "Questions for a later time, maybe," Bjorn stated, moving her to the side and charging forwards with his greataxe. "Keep trying!" Jayce ordered, charging forwards as well, as he entered into Focus, Marisha following quickly behind with her shortsword. The Warlock snarled with his main mouth, his wings flapping and pushing him backwards into the air, his smaller arms pointing towards the leyline as his left mouth continued to chant. The red contamination continued to slowly spread, as a large ritual circle, carved into the floor, began to glow a deep crimson.

Wicke began chanting, the Warlock's right mouth chattering again in order to counter her magic. The ceiling wasn't too high, but the Warlock was still out of

reach of all but Bjorn. He leapt at the Warlock swinging his axe wildly, forcing the Warlock to narrowly twist out of the way. "Baned monstrosity!" snarled the Warlock, as Bjorn grabbed his leg on the way down, dragging him down with him.

Bjorn slammed him onto the floor, the Warlock cracking the stone, but still continuing to chant with his multiple mouths, even as Jayce and Marisha slashed his body with their blades. He pushed backwards, desperately escaping from Bjorn's grip and taking to the air, a pair of arrows immediately sinking themselves into his wings. He hissed, a pair of black orbs filling his main hands: they glowed or, more rather, they did the opposite. The faint light of the room darkened around his hands, getting pulled in by the magic.

Wicke continued to chant, trying spell after spell, listening carefully to the exact words his right mouth was saying. "Keep at it, Wicke!" Jayce yelled. "Wear him down!" The Warlock raised his arms backwards before throwing them forwards, the orbs extending out into deep beams of darkness. Bjorn dove to the side, one of the blasts of eldritch magic narrowly avoiding him, the stone where it hit crumbling into dust. The other bolt flew directly towards Wicke, a screaming body of one of the monstrosities flying out of the darkness to intercept the blast. It shuddered in the beam, its skin splitting before it crumbled to ash. Wicke fell backwards, her eyes wide in realisation at just how close she had come to death.

The ground shook, an echoing scream once more filling the air, a third of the leyline now a deep bubbling red. Yuthura grabbed Wicke, pulling her to her feet before firing a vial with her crossbow onto the floor near Jayce, Marisha, and Bjorn. It shattered, realising a cloud of blue smoke, their building fatigue fading quickly as they inhaled the fumes. "Focus, Wicke!" she yelled, firing a syringe through the air directly towards the Warlock

Wicke nodded, beginning to chant again as she stared directly at the extra mouth. It once again spoke to counter her, and the moment her spell faded she spoke again, changing her gaze directly to the central mouth as more black orbs began to form. "Echo! Counterspell!" she yelled, copying the Warlock's own spell, the orbs fading. The Warlock's eyes widened, Bjorn seizing on the change and carrying the weight of his axe directly into the knee of the flying Warlock. The Warlock screamed, his body lurching as Bjorn severed his leg.

He flew backwards, the skin bubbling as he stared down and concentrated on it, the bleeding stopping and the flesh twisting to form a smaller, deformed replacement. Falconer seized this chance, rushing forwards towards the leyline

and looking directly at it. The ground continued to pulsate, the beating erratic but continuous as it pounded in his head. It was beautiful, a brilliant glow of viridian that twisted and flowed through the air, small spores of lime green energy flying off like the spray of a fountain.

"I'm here, what do you want me to do?" he asked, the fighting continuing behind him as Wicke directly began to counter the Warlock's own magic, whilst Bjorn used his height to allow Marisha and Jayce to get in glancing strikes, all whilst Yuthura threw vial after vial to aide with their breathing and fight off exhaustion. Vexx continued his own brutal battle against the monsters in the darkness; every so often a new chamber shattered, and another creature joined the fray. The leyline didn't answer, the pounding in Falconer's head getting louder and louder, a physical force drawing him closer and closer.

Falconer stared at the twisting glow, the red energy continuing to spread and mutilate the green light like a cancer. Falconer began to speak, his mouth chanting for him, his arms moving on their own in a smooth, waterlike motion, before he thrust his right hand directly into the leyline. It burned, his flesh vibrating before twisting and tearing, bubbles forming under the skin before popping as green sprouts emerged from the skin. The plants grew, enveloping his forearm and twisting into a wooden brace, his fingers getting swallowed before being replaced by a growing and pulsing bark, large green veins glowing throughout the surface. The amalgamation continued, his skin twisting and forming into bark as it spread up his arm, all the way to his shoulder.

Falconer screamed, an agonizing cry of pain that drew the attention of the entire group. His head lurched backwards, glowing light emerging from his eyes and mouth. The leyline twisted around him, the red fading away, replaced by its original green. "Doc!" Jayce yelled, vaulting to the side as the Warlock screeched and charged towards Falconer, Bjorn grabbing his other leg and slamming him backwards into the floor. Jayce slashed with his sword, his action mirrored by Marisha as they aimed for his wings, the blades tearing the appendages off the Warlock's back before Bjorn threw the Warlock away from them, his axe abandoned in favour of his huge clawed hands.

Yuthura rushed to Falconer's side, the wood continuing to spread, the armour and clothes on his arm melting away. "Falconer! Falconer! Can you hear me?" Yuthura asked, grabbing his other arm and attempting to pull him out of the leyline, the red almost entirely removed. He continued to scream, but his eyes rolled forwards, glancing towards Yuthura with a flash of fear. "It's okay! Hold

on! You need to fight it, control it!" Yuthura stated, desperately thinking of anything she could do to aide him, his body unmoving even as she pulled with every bit of strength she could muster.

Falconer changed his scream into a yell, his teeth gritting as he leant forwards, looking directly into the leyline and clenching his right fist. The open wooden fingers slowly began to move, following his command as his body shook. He reached forwards, the pulsing continuing rapidly in his body, until he felt something: a beating invisible object. His body moved on its own and slowly he squeezed the object, the beating slowing and calming, his entire body thumping as energy ran through him, throwing Yuthura off him.

"You, will, yield to me! Close!" growled Falconer, his fist closing entirely before he ripped his arm out of the leyline, falling backwards to the floor, a deep and heavy sweat flowing from his head. The light exploded outwards, a wave of green energy flowing in all directions through the group. They staggered but were otherwise unharmed, the light from the leyline disappearing. "No!" screamed the Warlock, staring through the group at the disappearing light, only to stagger as Jayce thrust his blade through his chest. The Warlock's extra eyes closed, and he stared down at the blade in his chest, his other mouths fading and his one remaining mouth open in a stunned gasp. Jayce pulled his blade out, pushing the Warlock backwards. The Warlock stumbled backwards, his feet scrambling to keep himself upright as he slowly looked towards Jayce. "You... can't... win..." he said, falling forwards and slumping to the floor.

Jayce rushed backwards towards Falconer, the others following as they looked down at him as he sat holding his wood-encrusted arm. "By the gods! Are you okay?" Jayce asked, looking down at him. Falconer nodded weakly, Yuthura stabbing his leg with a needle. He shuddered, his glazed eyes focusing on Jayce. "Ouch!" he protested, rubbing his leg as he looked at the Doctor. "Did we win?" he asked. Jayce looked at where the leyline had been. "You tell me." Falconer nodded, looking past them at the bright, glowing beam of iridescent light twisting out of the floor, the true form of the leyline. It was stronger, larger, more beautiful than he had ever seen it before. "I think we did. We won..."

Vexx raced over to them, his body drenched once again in blood, only this time it was black and more viscous. "Did I miss it?" he asked, only for his eyes to widen as he looked at Falconer's arm. "That's... new. Also, you guys did ensure the Warlock is dead, right?" Vexx asked, turning and pointing at the Warlock as

shakily he stepped to feet. "Damn!" stated Jayce, redrawing his sword, only to stare in mild horror at the Warlock.

His knees shook, his arms pressing up against something invisible above him. "My Goddess! It's not over, I can still win!" he cried in desperation, his knees slowly giving way under him. He fell to the floor, his entire body flat on the stone surface, his eyes wide. "Please! Please!" he screamed, his words turning into an agonising cry as an invisible force continued to press down on him. Jayce grabbed Wicke, pressing his hands over her eyes and ears, as a loud crunching sound echoed across the cave. Everyone but Vexx turned away, unable to watch as the crunching was followed by a loud splatter as the Warlock was pressed into the stone.

The group turned back in horror. "That can't be done to us, right?" Vexx asked, his eyes wide as he looked upwards. "No, they surrendered their bodies to their patron. She has no power over us," Yuthura stated with a shudder. The ground shook, the group stumbling around. "What now!" protested Marisha, only for the floor to split next to the tomb and a geyser emerge, spraying water everywhere. Several more emerged around the large wall, water quickly filling the room. "Run! Back the way we came! Now!" Jayce yelled, pulling Falconer to his feet and racing back down to the stairs towards the cave they had entered through.

The group ran, as fast as their legs could carry them through the caves, the ground continuing to rumble, the walls splitting and water rushing out. Jayce turned to look behind them as they ran, only to get hit by a blasting torrent as a huge wave of water crashed into him. He was knocked off his feet, the others also getting hit by the huge blast of water, their bodies carried in the current like ragdolls, bouncing off walls as they were thrown and pushed down the tunnels. Jayce gasped for air, only to instead swallow water, his lungs screaming at him. His vision began to darken, but a sharp burst of light blinded him as he was thrown through a hole in the ground into the air atop a huge geyser, the others flying with him.

They hit the sands around the oasis with varying degrees of softness, ranging from Vexx landing casually on his feet to Jayce on his face. He pressed the ground hard, lifting his sand-covered face off the floor and spitting out a huge spray of sand and water. "Too close!" Jayce yelled, before spitting out leftover sand. "Everyone alright?" Bjorn asked, looking around the group as he sat up. There were varying replies, but everyone was there. The ground continued to shake,

Jayce glancing around towards the city, numerous citizens rushing out of their houses to see what was going on.

Jayce turned around, glancing towards the oasis. Geysers kept emerging from the ground, water rushing out in colossal blasts, the bed of the oasis quickly disappearing under a new surface of water. The dead plants around the edges, grew quickly, their grey leaves turning green once more and new plants emerging amidst the old. Beyond the oasis, the main channel that ran straight to the city, began to fill up, a green-blue water quickly filling the waterways, the beached ships rising up to float on top. The sprays of water quickly began to form a large cloud above the oasis, the skies darkening before releasing the water in hot rain across the desert city. The group sat there smugly, smiles wide as they were soaked in the hot water they had helped bring to the city.

The rain eventually faded, the group unsure of how long they had sat there, the oasis now refilled, the water channels filled and the plant life restored. "We did it..." Jayce said quietly. "We completed a quest!" he yelled, the others groaning before smiling to themselves. "The Rising Aces are heroes!" Jayce said. Yuthura held up a hand. "That may be pushing it a bit too far," she said, shaking her head. "I disagree," said Falconer, getting to his feet and looking at his new arm. "You are heroes, all of you. The city may never know it, but thank you, on their behalf. Heroes deserve rewards, so," Falconer said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small medallion, an emerald falcon imprinted on the metal.

He flicked it over to Jayce. "This will get you into the treasury. Head left and up the stairs, it's to the rear of the palace. It will disable the wards and will allow you entry. There are numerous artifacts within, ancient relics of a bygone age. Help yourself, better they are used by people I know will respect them than sat gathering dust in a museum. There is also a ready supply of treasures, take a portion that warrants your reward – you've earned it."

Jayce looked at him, getting to his feet before approaching him. "You make it sound like this is goodbye. I'm not sure what you have planned, but if you want... there is a place with us, we could use a Navigator," Jayce offered, extending a hand. Falconer shook it with his wooden one. "I'll give it some thought, but I must confront my sister. Bury the past, so to speak. I'm sure we'll meet again. It's been an honour, Rising Aces," he said, turning on his feet and walking towards the city. He whistled and Horus flew down from the sky to land on his shoulder. Jayce looked at the others, Wicke looking down at her feet and the others also looking disappointed. "Come on, let's get out of here," Jayce said.

They headed towards the channel, Jayce releasing the ship out onto the waters next to a pier. "Right, Bjorn and I will go get our reward then we'll continue onwards, the next city should be in a better situation. We'll find a Shipwright, get the ship repaired and have a rest. Okay?" Jayce asked, looking over the group. They nodded, climbing up the ladder to get the ship ready to move. Jayce looked at Bjorn. "Do you still not trust him?" Jayce asked. Bjorn shook his head, looking out across the sands at a lone bird flying through the skies. "He's earned my trust. He'll earn it even more if his family come through and pay us," Bjorn answered. Jayce laughed. "Come on then, let's get paid," he said, twirling the empty enchanted bottle in his hands.

They headed to the palace, a pair of familiar guards standing by the entrance. Jayce looked down at the female guard. "Do you want our weapons?" he asked. She burst into tears. Bjorn slapped the back of his head, hard. The other guard just shook his head. "I take it the geysers in the oasis were your doing?" he asked, looking at the pair suspiciously. "It may have been," Jayce answered. The older guard nodded. "Then whoever did it has this city's thanks." Jayce smiled at him, stepping past the guards and entering the palace. They followed Falconer's directions, walking past numerous guards who looked at them curiously. None stopped them, except for a pair of patrolling guards near the treasury itself.

"Who goes there?" asked a tall woman, dressed in heavy armour with a large golden spear. "The Rising Aces," Jayce answered instinctively, wincing internally as he quickly realised that it could have later consequences. "Who?" asked the other guard, a similarly-dressed woman with a silver spear. "Uh, we were told to come here. We have this," Jayce answered, pulling out the medallion. The guards looked at it with surprise, before quickly bowing their heads. "We didn't realise you were guests of the house. Our apologies, carry on," said the senior guard, stepping to the side and letting them pass. Bjorn and Jayce kept walking, moving slowly as they kept their eyes on the guards behind them, waiting until they turned around a corner.

They walked straight up to the treasury. There was large keyhole in the ornately decorated metal doors, but what drew both of their attention was the overlooking metal head of a falcon, its beak open with a hole in it small enough for the medallion they held. "It's got to be, right?" Jayce asked. Bjorn shrugged. "Only one way to find out." Jayce pulled out the medallion, placing it in the falcon's mouth. It fit into the slot with a click, the deeper sounds of mechanisms working within the wall, before slowly the doors slid open.

Jayce and Bjorn stared at the hoard with their mouths open. Piles of pearl lay scattered across the room, varying in all kinds of colours, even including a mint that neither of them had seen before: a platinum coin worth a thousand pearl. To the right sat stacks of gold, silver, platinum, and other precious metals, surrounded by piles of sparkling gemstones. Beyond that, displayed in cases, were various weapons: bows, spears, swords. There was also a full suit of armour, an unusual design that Jayce didn't recognise. "He said to help ourselves, didn't he?" Bjorn asked, looking at the fortune in front of him. "What happened to your 'reputable' reputation?" Jayce asked with a chuckle. "Look how much money there is, screw that!" Bjorn said with a grin. Jayce shook his head. "We'll leave them plenty, let's move the things we want onto that pile and get out of here," Jayce stated, pointing at the stacks of metal and gemstones.

He and Bjorn moved the relics over to the stack, placing the weapon cases and the armour stand onto the pile, then they headed over towards the mountain of pearl and grabbed handfuls of the coins before throwing them to the other side of the room. Satisfied with their haul, they then stepped back, just outside of the treasury doors, Jayce pointing the ship's bottle towards the pile before running his fingers backwards along the runes. With a loud rush of air, the entire right side of the room was pulled inside, down to every last coin. Immediately an alarm rang out, the doors slamming shut in front of them. "Uh oh, I thought he gave us permission?" Jayce asked. Bjorn looked at Jayce, pausing for a second. "Wasn't he in exile?" he said at last.

"Thieves!" echoed a voice down the hall. "Get to the treasury!" Bjorn and Jayce bolted, racing away in the other direction. "How do we get out of here?" asked Bjorn, close on Jayce's heels as they ploughed through a pair of guards running around a corner. Jayce rolled, getting back up to his feet, and pointed towards a walkway leading to a tower. "There! Trust me!" Jayce yelled, scrambling forwards as he entered into Focus. "Always!" Bjorn said after him. The guards ran after them, spears flying through the air towards them but falling short or flying over the ledge of the walkway as Jayce and Bjorn charged forwards.

"Cover me!" Jayce yelled, beginning to chant and move his hands. Bjorn ran in front, tackling a pair of guards and slamming them into the walls of the walkway, before falling behind as Jayce took the lead, tattoos wreathing his arms. "Jump!" he yelled, leaping through the glassless window towards the desert, their ship not far off into the distance. Bjorn yelped as they fell towards the sands, Jayce sending a blast of wind up towards them to slow their fall before he threw the rest at the large dune that had barricaded itself against the palace. The sands blew

away, creating a significantly less than comfortable drop for the guards that leapt after them. They hit the ground with a crunch, yelling out in pain as Bjorn and Jayce continued running away, quickly heading towards the pier, alarms ringing in the city behind them.

They dove into the waters of the channel, the ship beginning to move away from the pier, powering through the water towards the ladder. "Jayce!" yelled Bjorn, pointing quickly to several large reptiles quickly swimming towards them. "Ah!" yelped Jayce, grabbing holding of the ladder and scrambling upwards, Bjorn right behind him as a crocodile snapped at their heels, Bjorn kicking it hard in the nose for good measure as they climbed. They collapsed onto the deck, the ship sailing quickly away, their pursuers long behind them. "How did it go?" Wicke asked, as she looked down at the panting pair. Jayce rolled over, emptying the bottle onto the deck. Wicke's mouth fell open as she stared at the colossal pile of loot they had stolen. "One hell of a reward!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A Prince's Choice

Falconer stormed through the doors of the palace throne room, the Queen leaping up from her throne, and quickly marching down the stairs, her advisors stood before her. "I warned you not to return!" she yelled, the advisors leaping out her way before quickly heading towards the main doors. "And I told you what was going on!" Falconer stated, pointing his wooden arm at her. She stared at it in horror. "What happened to you? What have you done?" she demanded. Falconer looked at his wooden arm. "I saved this city. Despite my warnings, and your continued negligence, this city is still standing. This is the cost, and I would pay it a thousand times over. Can you say the same, Your Majesty?" he sneered.

She laughed. "You're a fool! The Church has saved this city. Don't pretend otherwise. Our faith in the Gods is what has ended this drought. Your experiments, your black magic, likely caused this problem to begin with. Get out of my kingdom. Show your face again and I will have you imprisoned for the remainder of your days." The various guards around the room, stepped forwards pointing their weapons towards Falconer. He looked at them nervously, backing up. "What were you expecting to happen? I'm the Queen, this is my kingdom. You have no claim, not anymore."

An alarm rang out, everyone in the room staring in shock. Except for Falconer who simply smiled, shaking his head. "I guess that's true. I never liked this city, and as grandfather once stated: we travelled far to get here, but it's only a desert. So, you can have the crown. I'll take something more important," Falconer said,

reaching into his pocket and pulling out a large whistle. “Stop him!” yelled the Queen. Falconer blew it, a loud echoing screech emerging from the device. Nothing happened, the guards all looking around nervously, until a giant shape flew into the room, grabbing Falconer by his shoulders before flying out through another window.

Chapter 39: Strange Encounters

The Rising Aces sailed quickly along the channel; the city of Remur falling behind them into the distance. Jayce stood on the main deck, a proud smile on his face as he looked at the huge pile of treasure before him – their stolen reward for a quest completed. “What do we do with it?” Wicke asked, as she stared at the fortune. “Ship’s rules state we split it between us. What do we do about the gemstones, items, and metals?” Bjorn asked, looking at Jayce. Jayce thought to himself, only for a voice to interrupt them from behind the wheel. “Captain! Something’s flying towards us!” Vexx half-slurred, as he hung off the wheel with a bottle in his hand.

Jayce ran to the edge of the ship, looking over the side to see behind them. A dark shape was flying through the air, it was large, and as it got closer and closer it only increased in size. A loud screech echoed across the sky, the large shape flying straight over the ship before circling around them. It was a huge bird, easily twice the size of a person, if not more: a colossal falcon, a rider on its back. Jayce smiled as he looked up at the figure - there were several bird cages connected to the large backpack that he wore. “Permission to come aboard, Captain?” asked Falconer, as he looked down at the crew, his giant bird hovering above the deck. “Of course!” Jayce yelled up to him, the bird immediately dropping to the deck of the ship.

Falconer dismounted, the others all staring at his huge bird and the other varying creatures he had in cages, Horus amongst them. “Care to explain what that is?” Jayce asked, pointing at the huge falcon. Falconer chuckled, placing the other cages down and unlocking them, several birds of varying species hopping out onto the grass. “This is a roc, one of my ancestor’s birds. Her own ancestor led mine back to the city. I figured she would be a useful addition to the crew, and I also didn’t want to leave her behind with my sister,” Falconer explained. Jayce looked at the other birds. “They will aide me with varying navigational tasks. The raven is good for thievery, if necessary. The owl - stealth. The gull - ocean navigation. Eagle – combat. Roc – travel. Horus – observation,” Falconer stated, pointing at the various birds.

“Glad to hear it, do they have names?” Jayce asked, only to get distracted as Little Witch crawled behind the gull. The roc screeched at her, the tiny cat jumping backwards and hissing. “The roc better not eat her,” Jayce warned, watching curiously as the giant bird looked at the feisty cat before bowing her head. Falconer laughed, the other birds looking at the roc before following her example.

"She's submitted, looks like there shouldn't be an issue. She will follow your cat's command," Falconer stated. Little Witch sat down, raising her head regally as the birds flocked around her before taking to the skies. "They'll get used to the ship with time. I hope they prove useful to you, Captain."

Falconer stepped back, placing his wooden hand onto the roc's head, the bird trilling as it pushed her head into his hand. "Her name is Wren, mainly for her habit of singing. It may be a good idea to create a roost or pen for her, at some point, if possible. She'll bring us good luck," Falconer stated, glancing around the ship before his eyes widened and his mouth fell open. "I said take a reasonable amount, did I not?" he exclaimed, as he stared at the pile of treasure. Jayce laughed, rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah, we may have got carried away. On the other hand though, at least it's not your sister's anymore. Besides," Jayce said, walking over to the pile and pulling out a red and gold bow before pointing to a set of armour laying neatly on the floor. "If there's anyone who could use this stuff, it's you. These were the original Falconer's, right?" Jayce asked.

Falconer nodded, nervously taking the bow in his hands before looking down at the armour. It was green, gold and red, with a long broken cape that split into multiple sections to form cloth feathers. The armour was scaled, pieces of leather were plated over each other with a cloth underlay, creating an ornate and regal design that looked opulent, yet still combat worthy. A set of gold and green bracers were added for the forearms and there was a cap, designed to fit over the head and nose whilst leaving the jaw exposed - it's eyes filled with red lenses. "Put it on, it's yours. Wicke will get you signed up, read you the rules, and then you'll officially be our Navigator. Welcome aboard Falconer," Jayce said, extending a hand to shake. Falconer gripped his forearm, nodding. "I look forward to working with you, may the sun shine brightly upon us."

Jayce nodded to Wicke, the young girl quickly dragging Falconer away to explain how things worked. Wren flapped her wings, taking to the air and flying high above the ship, the other birds all finding various perches on the various masts, except for the owl, who had hopped down the stairs to one of the lower decks to snooze. The sound of clinking drew Jayce's attention towards Bjorn and Marisha, the pair sat by the hoard with several cloth bags open next to them.

"What are you doing?" Jayce asked curiously, accidentally knocking over a small pile of coins to Marisha's dismay. "Sorting the loot: the gemstones and metals will be saved for magical uses or for selling at a later date. The rest should be split equally. I've set aside two shares worth for ship repairs and supplies. That okay?"

Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded. "Sounds good. It will be nice to have something to actually spend for the first time in a while," Jayce said with a smile, as Marisha sorted the pearl into piles of different colours. "Save a third, never know when you may need it," she advised without looking up. Bjorn and Jayce looked at each other before shrugging.

It took a very long time to sort it all. Jayce attempted to help, only to have a ruby thrown at his head after once again disturbing Marisha's methods. The total haul, not including the gems, metals, and items, came to more than seventy thousand pearl – each member of the crew receiving a dividend of eight thousand pearl. Celebrations were had, but Falconer quickly interrupted Jayce, taking him aside and pointing to the main map.

"This channel curves into the ocean, there are other access points to the latter cities, but I think it would be best to continue straight on foot. The ship is low on supplies and there is a small town between us and the next city. The walk isn't too long; only a few days. What do you think?" Falconer asked. Jayce pondered for a second, before he nodded in agreement. "I like being thorough, be a shame to miss an interesting location because we took the easy route. Inform Bjorn where we need to stop. You've already more than earned your keep. Thanks Falconer."

Falconer nodded, walking away in search of Bjorn. Jayce returned to the others, looking at the pile of gemstones, metals, and items. He entered into Focus; the items glowing brightly in his Gaze: they were magical. Jayce reached down and picked up a spear, a beautiful platinum weapon with a two-bladed tip, a blue gemstone in the middle. "Marisha!" Jayce called out, she turned and looked at him, dropping her glass as he threw the weapon to her. "Yours!" he told her. She stared at the spear, unclipping the shortsword from her belt and throwing it away. "Thank you, I wasn't sure what the plan was with it. I-I didn't want to assume. Thank you Jayce, it's beautiful," she said quickly.

Jayce grabbed the various other items - a belt, a pair of bracers, a necklace - distributing them to varying members of the crew, until finally only a longsword remained. He unsheathed it: it was silver sword with a wide grip. Etchings had been made into the metal in Arcanum. Jayce looked down at the sword he had received from Alara, the blade still chipped, and the handle worn. He swapped them out, holding the old weapon in his hands before walking up the stairs to the captain's quarters. He pushed open the old door, stepping into the large room. It was empty, still awaiting a remodel. Jayce laid the sword carefully on

the floor. "Thank you, you served me well. Stay safe here, I'll reclaim you someday," Jayce said softly to himself, before he walked out of the room and shut the door.

Jayce stepped outside onto the aft deck, both Falconer and Bjorn were stood next to the ship's wheel looking at a map. "Am I interrupting?" Jayce asked, as he walked up to them. They both turned to look at him. "Captain," they both said, before looking at each other. "No, not at all. We're about half an hour away from our drop off point. Supplies have been sorted, the crew is aware of the plan – although there have been some protests," Bjorn stated, angling himself to show Jayce a modified and hand-drawn map of the local region. "Wicke and Vexx?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded. "Of course..." Jayce sighed. "Is the channel suitable for using Gust?" Jayce asked. Falconer nodded.

"Normally I would advise against it, the wake could be detrimental to the environment, but the channel has been drained for the last few days, so it should not cause any significant harm. It's your choice, if we want to save time then we should," Falconer stated with extreme conciseness. Bjorn nodded in agreement, bringing a small smile to Jayce's face. "Then let's do it!" Jayce stated, stepping back and beginning to chant, tattoos spreading from his fingers to his hands. "Brace for Gust!" yelled Bjorn across the deck, the various crew members bracing themselves. Jayce grabbed onto the wind, thrusting it forwards into the rear sail of the ship. The ship lurched forwards, carrying them onwards at breakneck speed.

It wasn't long before they arrived at their stop off point. Jayce's arms were sore, his joints aching from remaining in the same position for so long. Falconer pointed ahead, the channel turning to the left as the water headed towards the open ocean sat neatly on the horizon. They slowed the ship, gently beaching it onto the bank before disembarking and returning the vessel into its bottle. They then set off across the sands, Falconer taking the lead with a compass in hand, Horus and Wren both flying high above.

They travelled through the heat, long into the evening, eventually depositing the ship once again onto the sands and resting for the night. The morning came quickly, the crew setting off once again across the desert. It was uneventful, Falconer steering the group far around any potential dangers: a giant six-armed reptile called a karange fighting a giant sandworm, more trapjaws, even giant bubbling pools of quicksand, but eventually early into the afternoon something drew their attention. "What's that?" asked Marisha, pointing upwards at a

colossal cloud flying quickly in their direction, purple lightning flickering throughout the huge nimbus.

The group looked up, the cloud thundering with an echoing horn-like sound, as it flew over them, a powerful pulsing rumbling within. "A djinn palace..." Wicke muttered subconsciously. She blinked, confused by her own answer. "It's a flying city," Jayce clarified. "There's one over the Capital." They continued to stare at it as it quickly flew past, a shadow continuing to cover them. Vexx squinted, his eyes widening quickly before he yelped and ran off across the sands. The others looked at each other, before looking upwards, a large dark shape falling directly towards them. "Scatter!" Jayce yelled, the others already sprinting off in all directions.

Jayce ran to the side, diving to the floor as a huge chunk of stone smashed into the desert, sending a tsunami of sand in all directions in a giant explosion. "What the fuck was that?" yelled Vexx, prompting an immediate scathing glance from Falconer. "Language!" he scolded, pointing towards Wicke. She looked at his finger in disgust. "What the fuck is that?" she retaliated, prompting Falconer to stare up at the sky and mutter to himself in disappointment. Wicke and Vexx smiled proudly to each other, exchanging a thumbs up before quickly glancing towards the giant chunk of rock in the sand.

It began to move, a slow rumbling crossing the group as the giant lump of stone twisted, pieces extending out before slamming into the sand. It rose out of the sand, a pair of large arms pushing itself upwards, a pair of smaller - but still huge - legs tucking underneath itself as it hunched forwards. Its body was huge, the entire creature twice Bjorn's height and made entirely of dark grey stone. It had its back to Jayce, but slowly it turned to face him. It had no visible eyes, its head was tucked into its torso - a large plated collar made of spikes surrounded its head, and it had no visible mouth. A series of holes were made into its flat and spiky head, large cracks that contained only darkness, but as Jayce stared at the creature he felt it looking back at him, a deep grinding growl rumbling from within it.

"Wicke," Jayce said quietly, as he slowly backed away. "What is it?" he asked. Wicke drew her grimoire, opening it quickly, the book morphing into a thick and heavy tome: a bestiary. She took a moment, not even Vexx willing to move as they all stood around the strange creature. "It's a rokken," she said. Jayce continued to back up, the grumbling quietening whilst the creature still remained wary. "According to this, they're mostly harmless, akin in nature to elephants.

They feed on inorganic material: rocks, metals, gemstones, that they then incorporate into their bodies," she explained quickly and concisely.

Jayce glanced at the creature, spotting a huge glowing orifice on the creature's chest, molten magma moving around inside the gap. "They view us with idle curiosity, some theorise they think of us in a manner that we do with small animals like cats and dogs. They think we're cute. So forth and so forth, if threatened they can cause devastating damage. A small rokken is the size of a shoe, rumours are some islands are actually resting ones. It just warns not to provoke it," Wicke concluded.

Another shadow fell over Jayce, a gargling call echoing from high above. Jayce looked upwards, the rokken slowly doing so as well. A figure was slowly floating down from the sky, a human-shaped body dressed head-to-toe in plate armour, the armour gold with large horns and spikes emerging from the shoulders, forearms and helmet. The spikes glowed a bright blue, lightning sparking between the gaps between the armour. The armour floated down to land in between Jayce and the giant rokken. It had a narrow slit running from the mouth to the nose, a pair of skull-like holes made into the golden helmet. It had no eyes, the holes just glowed, sparking with a bright electric blue.

It garbled at Jayce, holding its armoured hands up between itself and him, making a series of rapid gestures. "I don't understand you," Jayce said to the strange entity. The sky knight paused, clearly thinking to itself before energetically pointing to Jayce's coin pouch as it hung from his belt. "You want money?" Jayce asked, reaching inside and pulling out a white pearl. The creature took the coin, reaching onto its belt and pulling out an ornate hammer decorated with glowing runes. It began to chant, some words vaguely familiar to Jayce as he observed it raise its hammer to the sky, glowing intricate lines spreading across the object. It floated over to the rokken, placing the coin on the side of the creature before hammering it, a glowing mark remaining on the coin.

It was then that Jayce noticed numerous glyphs marked into the stone of the rokken, some glowing, others not. The djinn floated back over to Jayce, handing the coin to him. "Do you understand now, islanders?" asked the djinn, its voice masculine and its words translated by the coin it held. "Yes," Jayce answered. "Who are you?" he asked. The djinn looked almost taken aback by the question. "I am I, the same as you are you. I do not understand," it stated, the other members of Jayce's crew relaxing as they watched the rokken sit down. "Do you have a name?" Jayce asked.

"Name? Names are for objects, like RK-227," it said, gesturing towards the huge rokken. Jayce frowned. "My people say otherwise, I am Jayce," he stated, gesturing to the other members of his crew and stating their names also. The djinn paused. "Then I request a name," it asked, its armour sparking with lightning. There was a faint smell of ozone emanating from the djinn, like a storm was captured inside the armour. "Tempest," Wicke suggested. The djinn looked past Jayce with quick irritation. "Do not interrupt your master, homunculus!" it said. Wicke frowned, confused. "Hey, if you don't like the name that's fine. Don't be rude to my friends," Jayce inserted, stepping backwards defensively. The djinn tilted its head with curiosity. "Tempest is an unusual term within my home: a bringer of doom, a harbinger of destruction, a threat to our way of life. How apt..." it said, looking off at the city flying into the distance.

"Ah," it exclaimed. "I accept this name. I require your assistance, islander. I was thrown off my home, exiled alongside this renegade for its habit of destruction... and for my impurity. I wish to return, to retrieve my research so I may continue my work, even within exile. I understand your kind is fond of negotiation, of trade, so I offer myself and this rokken to aid you in whatever tasks you assign us," Tempest said. Jayce looked at the others, Wicke quickly shaking her head. Jayce turned back to the pair, Tempest once again looking at Wicke curiously. "Do you allow your aide to speak for you?" Tempest asked.

Jayce crossed his arms, looking up at the tall, slender figure of the djinn as he floated in front of him. "I do. For the rest of our time together – not that I am promising anything, I request you treat any members of my crew or others you come across with the same level of respect you would give to me," Jayce stated. "Even that one?" Tempest asked. Jayce nodded, the rest of his crew now assembled together behind him. "Especially that one, even if she's rude, smells, or says something irritating," said Jayce. Wicke crossed her arms, glaring at the back of his head. "I don't smell..." she muttered, Vexx pulling a face that said otherwise. "Very well," stated Tempest, RK-227 grumbling in agreement, its words not intelligible, but a general feeling of agreement coming through.

"Okay, where is it you need to go?" Jayce asked, reaching into his backpack and pulling out his world map. Tempest floated towards him, his armour bumping into Jayce's arm, sending a jolt through his body. "My apologies," stated Tempest, more carefully extending to point a glove to the most western part of the map, directly in the unknown region known as the Rockies. Jayce looked towards Falconer. "Can we go there?" he asked. Falconer looked at his own map,

nodding in agreement. "It won't be easy, the ship needs repairs first, but we wouldn't be the first people to go there."

Tempest looked at the pair curiously. "If you would like my assistance, I could aid with the repairs of this vessel you speak of," Tempest offered. Jayce looked back at Tempest, curiously raising an eyebrow. "You can fix ships?" he asked. The djinn bowed, "I am a professor of the arcane, an Artificer. My existence is to create and to repair. I find it difficult to understand how a mere vessel could be of issue. Show me this ship and I will begin learning how to." Jayce reached behind his back, pulling out the ship and presenting it and its bottle to the djinn.

Tempest audibly gasped, carefully taking the glass bottle and looking at the markings etched into the glass. "How fascinating!" proclaimed Tempest, uncorking the bottle and pointing the ship to an empty part of desert. The ship landed onto the sands, the djinn immediately reversing the action before handing the bottle back to Jayce and pulling out a book. Tempest began etching inside, muttering before turning back to Jayce. "I accept. I shall repair your vessel and provide items for you and your crew; in exchange you will return myself and the rokken to our home," Tempest asserted, floating over to RK-227.

"I've never seen a djinn before," muttered Wicke as she stepped next to Jayce. "He's certainly strange. He? It?" Marisha stated, before thinking to herself. Jayce faltered, unsure of the answer. "I guess RK is neither. Tempest, are you male or female?" Jayce asked bluntly. Tempest floated around, looking at Jayce with stark curiosity. "I do not think I understand," Tempest answered, pondering. "I don't think it is applicable. My kind are androgynous. Both, yet neither. We differ greatly in a sense from you, we long found other means of reproduction. But, if I were to choose one: male, although I have no preference, nor will I take offence to however you refer to me. I am just me," he answered. "RK-227 will not either. Its kind are asexual after all. He, using your terms, has no need to think of anything other than food," Tempest explained. Jayce nodded, looking at Marisha before shrugging. "Good enough for me," he said.

"We're on our way to the next city. Once there, we will stop and obtain supplies for the ship. Is there anything you need for the walk ahead?" Bjorn asked, the djinn looking at him with great curiosity. "I do not. I need no food, no water like your kind, neither does RK-227, although I would advise ensuring it is fed, it has a habit of snacking on property that does not belong to it," Tempest answered, RK grumbling in acknowledgment, before bowing his head down low as Wicke approached him. She placed her hand on his stone body, the large creature

vibrating softly as he grumbled. Slowly he extended an arm, scooping Wicke up onto his giant back before raising to full height. She grinned from her seat, high in the air, down towards Jayce. "Come on then! Let's go!"

Seize the Seas Tales: The Oni

Tempest spent the remainder of the day crafting. He replicated the enchantment he had placed on Jayce's coin, creating an identical item – each tied to a piece of string, for each member of the crew. He then hammered a symbol onto the stone body of RK-227, the giant rokken marked with the same enchantment. He floated alongside them, staying close to the group, the sun reflecting almost blindingly off his armour. Falconer led the way as usual, flying every so often atop Wren to get a better look at their surroundings, with Wicke following behind the rest of the group as she and Marisha sat atop RK.

Bjorn had remained quiet for the majority of the walk, his eyes watching the new additions curiously whilst Vexx walked closely next to him, seemingly without a care in the world. "What?" Vexx asked at last, as he looked up at Bjorn, now the third largest member of the crew, including the giant bird and the walking boulder. "Do you trust them?" Bjorn asked, glancing ahead towards Jayce as he walked next to Tempest. "Yes," Vexx stated without hesitation. Bjorn stared at him, shocked. "What? They literally fell out of the sky from a flying city. Do you think that could have been planned?" Vexx asked, shaking his head. "He's got no other motivations bar returning to the city, and that's a giant rock. It's fine, a weird pair and a weird addition to the crew, but who knows? A few magic items here, an overhaul of the ship there, and I think we are all good." Bjorn grit his teeth. "You make a fair point," he admitted. Vexx rolled his eyes, punching Bjorn in the arm. "As always."

The group made camp, resting up for the night amidst a large cluster of giant rocks. Without hesitation RK began to snack, rolling large boulders away to a safe distance from the group before raising his fists high and shattering the stone. He then picked up the pieces and placed them into the hole in his chest. Wicke wandered around the group with a camera, taking photos of the various members whilst utilising the setting sun. She placed Falconer next to Wren, Horus sat on his shoulder whilst he looked directly into the camera. "What are you doing?" Jayce asked eventually, as she finally made her way to him.

"Taking photos," she stated, not offering any further explanation. "Smile," she said, stepping back and taking a photo. "Can you take one of me on top of RK?" she asked, handing the camera to Jayce and running over to the rokken. She

clambered up his back, sitting down on his shoulder and leaning onto his head whilst flashing a cunning grin at the camera, her hair illuminated by the sunset. Jayce took the photo, RK lowering Wicke down to the ground before resuming his feast. "Thanks," she said, taking a small round sphere out of the camera and placing it into one of her pockets before walking away.

Jayce followed her, watching as a lone signet albatross landed on the sands. She placed the sphere inside a letter, placing it in the albatross' pouch before she untied a coin purse from the bird, pocketing it and waving goodbye to the creature. It took to the skies, flying quickly away into the distance. Jayce shook his head, heading back to the group before laying down and going to sleep. The morning came quickly, the bright sun waking the majority of the crew for the day ahead – the usual heavy sleepers groaning and grumbling as they protested the awakening.

Tempest hadn't moved from the spot he had hovered in. "Morning!" Jayce said to him, looking up at the djinn. "Yes, it is," answered Tempest, not quite understanding the greeting. Jayce ignored it. "Did you sleep well?" he asked, standing up and looking at the rest of the group as they slowly prepared themselves. "I do not sleep in the same sense you do. I enter a trance, a means of reconnecting with my past experiences. But yes, it was partially pleasant and was uninterrupted," stated Tempest. Jayce nodded, pausing as he tried to think of a suitable answer. "Great. Uh, carry on."

They ate some food, simple rations to give them energy for the day. Tempest opened up a slot in his armour, dropping a small, round, purple seed inside, his lightning changing colour to purple before fading back to blue. They then left, leaving the rocks behind and returning to the sands of Deadman's Run. Wicke once again rode on top of RK-227, a book in hand, a flask of water in the other. She got some jealous eyes, RK actively refusing to let anyone else ride on top of him, Marisha's one time use now expired.

Eventually, a settlement popped in view through the haze of the desert heat. It was small, a town of only twenty-or-so buildings. They were wooden - a unique design dissimilar to anything the group had seen so far in Deadman's Run, with large patios all facing a long and open main road that passed straight through the town. A large building, painted a bright white, stood out immediately, the words: 'General Store' painted above the main entrance. Jayce looked at Bjorn, the baned already reaching into his bag to pull out a list. A scream pierced the air from up ahead, drawing their attention to further along the road.

A series of gunshots rang out from a building marked as a 'Saloon', the sounds of fighting raging inside. Jayce rushed forwards, only to slide to a stop as the swinging doors to the building flung open, a body tumbling through the entrance into the street. He was bloodied, and as he lay face down on the floor he slowly began to crawl forwards. The doors opened again behind him, a huge figure slowly emerging through the doorway. Jayce and the others stared at the ogre: he was huge, four metres tall, with a large mace in one hand, an axe head tied to the bottom of the handle. He dragged behind him a large sack: it dripped as he hefted it, several large objects bouncing around inside, a large red smear left on the floor behind it.

"Help!" cried the man, as the ogre dropped his mace onto the floor. The giant creature, his fur a deep black and red, compared to the bright yellow and orange that Onyx had been, reached down with his huge hands, placing one hand on the man's shoulders before grabbing his head with the other hand. Jayce stood frozen, watching in horror as the ogre pulled him apart, taking the head and placing it inside his sack. "By the ancestors," muttered Bjorn, as he stared in horror at the ogre. "Can we recruit him too?" asked Vexx, snapping Jayce back into reality.

The ogre wore a large cloth vest, his shoulders were covered by spiky red pauldrons, and he wore bracers on his forearms; his stomach and chest was completely exposed. Around his waist he wore a huge black rope, knotting around at the back into two large loops. His legs were covered with tight cloth trousers, the ankles tucked into wooden leg braces. He wore a pair of wooden sandals on his feet, his feet wrapped in cloth. A red ceramic mask hung from his neck, its face twisted into that of a demon. The fur on his face had been painted white, marking a skull on his head. His central horn extended back across his head before it split and curled, forming a pair of large horns either side of his head that pointed upwards. And as he turned to look at the group, Jayce spotted his eyes: they were black, his pupils bright red.

He paused, sniffing the air before reaching into his vest and pulling out a thick stack of papers. He flicked through the pile, every so often glancing up at Jayce and the others before continuing to search, until finally he stopped. "Your bounties are small, little pigs. Unfortunately for you, I'm not one to pass up an easy meal," he said with a deep growl. Vexx lunged forwards, racing across the sands before Jayce had even drawn his swords. He vaulted off the floor, carrying his momentum as he spun, his leg flying outwards and his foot catching the ogre directly across the jaw with all of the force Vexx could muster.

The ogre stared at Vexx as he remained there, his foot a few centimetres away from the ogre's face. A smile spread, and he grabbed Vexx, his hand large enough to grasp around his entire chest, as his other hand reached for his mace. "Shit!" muttered Vexx, the ogre gently throwing him upwards before smashing him full force with the blunt mace. Vexx flew over the ground, hitting the sands and tumbling before he slid to a stop, a large burrow left in his wake. "Vexx!" Jayce yelled, drawing his swords and rushing forwards with Bjorn alongside him.

Bjorn slammed his axe towards the ogre's exposed chest, Jayce slashed with both his swords, and an arrow flew straight towards the ogre's eye. All three attacks bounced off, stopped a few centimetres away from the ogre's body. The ogre raised his mace, faltering as he spotted Wicke quickly chanting, a blue flame forming in her hands. He reached behind himself, drawing a large axe and throwing it at her. Wicke yelped, stumbling backwards and falling over. The spell dissipated, and she convulsed, yelling in pain as the stored magic inside her released.

Jayce glanced back, Bjorn shoving him aside as the ogre once again raised his huge mace. Bjorn braced himself, turning away, but the ogre grunted, the ground thundering as RK slammed into him. The huge mountain of stone sent the ogre stumbling backwards, away from Jayce and Bjorn. The ogre growled, staring at the huge rokken as he weighed up his options. Jayce entered into Focus, staring at the ogre - a barrier surrounded his body. Jayce blinked and Vexx appeared in front of the ogre in a flash, his hand glowing brightly in Jayce's Gaze as Vexx threw his fist into the ogre's jaw.

The ogre's head twisted, ever so slightly, Vexx's fist embedded deep in his face. Vexx crouched, pushing hard off the ogre's chest to land in front of Jayce and Bjorn. He looked otherwise unhurt, but as Jayce glanced backwards, Yuthura lay on the floor, her head held in Marisha's lap. The ogre glanced across the crew, Wicke getting to her feet and shaking herself off. The ogre snorted, a tiny trickle of blood emerging from the corner of his mouth. "You're not worth the effort! Grow fat little piggies, the Oni will feast on you when he's ready," he stated, putting his mace away and walking towards the bag full of severed heads. He picked it up, giving one last glance at the crew, Vexx and RK still stood firmly in front of the group, before he began to walk into the desert, heading in the direction of the ocean.

They watched him leave, refusing to look away until he became a tiny dot on the horizon. "What in the abyss was that?" Jayce asked. "Did he say Oni?" Bjorn

nodded. "As in the bounty hunter? He exists?" Wicke asked, wiping the sand off her clothes. "Evidently, an ogre at that. Vexx, Yuthura, are you two alright?" Jayce asked, quickly turning to face Yuthura as she slowly got to her feet. "Takes more than that to kill me," she said, Vexx's face stony as he remained silent. "Vexx?" Jayce asked. He nodded, letting out a long sigh as he leant back and looked upwards. "I was outclassed. That's not good – I thought we'd have much longer before that occurred," he admitted, before he leant forwards and pointed at Jayce. "Starting today we begin a new training regime, this is getting serious now. Dammit, even I need to train now! How did this happen?"

Jayce smiled weakly, his attention quickly turning to the corpse by his feet. "Who do you think he was?" Jayce asked, glancing nervously towards the saloon, more bodies partially obscured inside. "Who knows, better them than us!" Vexx stated. Jayce shook his head, stepping forwards and pushing inside. There were bodies everywhere, all headless. Blood dripped from the walls, corpses lay scattered amongst the broken furniture, and a woman stood frozen behind the bar, blood dripping from her face as she stood with her head covered in it.

"Is he gone?" she whispered. Jayce nodded and her eyes rolled into the back of her head, her body slumping to the floor behind the bar. "Damn... ten, twelve, thirteen bodies. Shall we go somewhere else?" Vexx asked as he looked around, Yuthura making her way around the bar to check on the woman. "We'll clean up. It's the least we can do. Let's take the bodies outside," Jayce suggested, Bjorn nodding as he grabbed a pair of corpses and dragged them through the doorway. The bartender stood up with the aid of Yuthura, grabbing a bottle off the shelf before she wandered through a doorway to the back.

They dragged the bodies outside, Wicke casting a series of spells to slowly start cleaning the room, whilst Tempest fixed the furniture. Jayce looked at the pile of bodies, Yuthura drawing a large circle in the sand around them. "What do we do with them?" Jayce asked. Yuthura glanced towards him, pulling out her small red stone. "We don't know their names, we have no means of identifying them. I'll return them to the ground," Yuthura stated, looking towards Falconer for any objections. "We come from this world, we die in this world, it is a continuous cycle. This is for the best," he stated.

Jayce let out a sigh before nodding. Yuthura began to chant, holding the stone over the large circle, the lines in the sand glowing red before the bodies broke apart into white particles, reforming into a large chunk of dark stone. "I was thinking sand," Falconer stated, only to step to the side as RK grabbed the large

piece of stone and placed it into the hole in his chest. "Wait, no-no-no-no... never mind," Falconer said with a sigh, watching the chunk begin to melt inside the rokken's chest. "I guess this is close enough," he said defeatedly, any trace of the crew now removed from the world.

They returned back inside the saloon, the place repaired and cleaned. Vexx sat in a booth, an expensive bottle of liquor in his hands as he took deep sips from the drink. "She said to help ourselves," Vexx stated, pointing to various bottles he had taken and placed in front of himself. Jayce shook his head. "We won't stay long. Bjorn get the supplies we need, Marisha go with him." The pair nodded, walking out of the saloon. "Does this mean we now have to deal with bounty hunters?" Jayce asked Vexx. He shrugged, sliding a bottle across the table to him. "If so, then we should do everything we can to avoid the Oni, because if he targets us, the other two will as well," Vexx stated quietly.

Falconer raised an eyebrow. "The other two? What other two?" he asked. Jayce picked up the nearest bottle, uncorking it before taking a deep drink. He wiped his mouth. "The Willow and the Ronin. Together with the Oni, the three of them are the best bounty hunters in the world. And from what we learnt today: if they want to kill us, it will be a fight tougher than anything we've faced before," Jayce said quietly. Vexx raised his bottle to the air. "Then here's to learning how to kill them before they kill us."

Chapter 40: Respite

The crew stocked up and departed, the locals not in a mood to entertain after the massacre most of them had witnessed. The Rising Aces continued until they re-joined the channel, now winding its way back into Deadman's Run. They boarded the ship and sailed, eventually arriving at the city of Utarune. It was a large and beautiful city built into the side of a mountain. A gold and white palace sat at the top of the city, overlooking the region. Water cascaded down the mountain, flowing through the palace before being diverted into numerous aqueducts throughout the city. One led directly to a bathhouse, steam rising out of the many windows of the colossal red and white building. Others led further into the city, towards the slanted marketplace and the communal districts before they all eventually connected to the channel built to pass through and beyond the city.

They docked the ship, disembarking before a crane moved the ship onto a dry dock. Bjorn, as always, handled the details, paying in advance for two weeks of docking. "Well," Jayce said at last, as he looked at the assembled crew. "Two weeks, that's how long we've decided to take a break for. Enjoy yourselves, stay safe and stay together – at least until we've learnt this city. Keep an eye out for bounty hunters. For the first few days, report back here at eighteen-hundred, just to show your face and to make sure we're all okay. Bathhouse, then dinner tonight at seven. Maybe buy some clothes, dress up, we should enjoy ourselves – we've more than earned our break. See you soon," Jayce concluded, the others nodding before eagerly departing into the city, leaving just Vexx, Wicke, Bjorn, and Tempest.

Jayce looked towards Bjorn. "I'll arrange for the materials Tempest needs for the ship using funds from the treasury," Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded, the baned turning and walking away. "Where do you wish for me to begin?" Tempest asked. "It's up to you. If you need more time we can always give it to you, but prioritise daily living. I know we're all going to be looking for places to sleep off the ship, but it would be nice to have something to come back to," Jayce stated. Tempest bowed his head. "I shall begin with the various glyphs and runes on the ship. I will do my best to meet your expectations."

The djinn floated away, and Jayce pulled out the ship's container from beneath his backpack, an endless field of boulders sat on a bed of sand inside, a miniaturised RK slowly smashing and collecting the pieces. "This will keep him occupied for a while, I don't want him trying to eat the city," Jayce said, putting

the bottle away before turning to Vexx and Wicke. "To the marketplace?" Wicke asked. "Let's go already!" Vexx said, walking quickly away from the ship.

They made their way through the city, past countless citizens and travellers, towards the marketplace. It was endless, tent and stall after tent and stall, all displaying endless varieties of trinkets - some magical in design - foods, furnishings, and even weapons. Guards stood dressed in gold at every corner, and, as Jayce looked around, he quickly spotted more overlooking the area, rifles, or crossbows hanging by their sides. "Well, this is where I leave you," Vexx said, turning on his feet. "I've got people to meet, things to do, but I'll see you later at the bathhouse. Keep out of trouble," he said, stepping quickly backwards and disappearing entirely from sight. "How does he do that? He's gone already!" Wicke stated, standing on her tiptoes to try and spot him. Jayce laughed to himself. "Who knows. Where should we begin?"

Wicke led the way, displaying a concerning level of eagerness at spending her money. She searched stall after stall, ignoring anything that wasn't magical, Jayce's Gaze allowing him to easily identify anything that was. "Young miss! Young miss!" cried a seller, drawing her attention, a large sack of items hanging over Jayce's back. "You look like a young woman more than aware of the wonders that magic can provide our world. Behold, enchanted stones scavenged from ancient ruins deep within the mountain. Here," he said, handing a palm-sized white stone to her, a glowing rune carved into the stone. He stepped backwards, bringing the stone to his mouth and whispering into it - his voice emanated from the stone in her hand. "These allow anyone, you and your man for example, to communicate over vast distances. Imagine what you could do with such an item. Only forty pearl for the pair."

Wicke stared at Jayce, reaching immediately into her coin purse. "Twenty pearl," she countered, holding up two red pearl. He looked at them, then looked at her as she gave him a wide smile. "Hmm, you drive a hard bargain, thirty and we can call it a deal," he returned. They left the seller, another trinket in the sack and a broad smile on Wicke's face as she continued to lead the way. "I'm calling it there," Jayce said at last, shaking his head and putting his hands up, his back aching and fingers raw. "We'll head back to the ship, check on the progress and then go get some clothes. Okay?" he said to Wicke as she pouted. She nodded. "Fine. Let's go."

They returned to the ship: huge crates of materials were piled up on top of the ship's deck, and Bjorn stood talking to several workers. "You're back quick!" he

called over to them as they approached. "Jayce got bored!" returned Wicke. "Fine, you can carry this!" Jayce said placing the sack down on the floor and beginning to walk away. "Hey, hey, I was kidding," she said quickly, grabbing his arm. Bjorn wandered over to them, looking curiously at the giant bag. "What did you buy?" he asked, opening it and looking inside at the huge pile of junk. "Anything and everything she saw that was vaguely magical," answered Jayce, picking up the bag and handing to Bjorn, the baned holding it casually as if it weighed nothing. "How much did it cost?" Bjorn asked curiously, heading to the ship's ladder and beginning to climb. "You don't want to know..."

Jayce looked around as he stood on the main deck. "Where's Tempest?" he asked Bjorn. A gargling cry coming from the living room drew all of their attention, a bright orange glow emanating from the various windows. They rushed forwards, pushing open the door to find Tempest stood in the kitchen, a huge flame emerging from a rune on the stove. He turned a dial and the flame lowered, changing in size and colour. "Tempest?" Jayce asked. The djinn turned, pressing the dial – the flame disappearing. "Captain, wonderful timing. I have made much progress. All preliminary experiments and modifications have been made. I shall begin mass reproduction and repairs of all glyphs and runes. Let me show you the progress."

Tempest led them throughout the ship, showing off a working toilet, a working bath, a working shower, the kitchen, locks, and a couple of other supplementary effects scattered throughout the vessel. He finished by leading them below deck, towards the doorways that lead nowhere. Above one, the glyphs printed on the wall glowed brightly. "Well?" Jayce asked. Tempest grabbed the handle on the wall, pressing it down and pushing open the doorway. They found themselves staring into a room, the walls and ceiling white and completely blank, but where there should have been nothing – the other side of wall solid wood – there was a room.

"Woah," Jayce said, stepping inside and looking around. "What is this?" he asked, Wicke and Bjorn stepping inside as well. "Extra-dimensional space," stated Tempest. "The glyphs are modifiable," he added, reaching above the doorway, the room turning from a cube to a sphere, the walls and ceiling growing and shortening as he made changes. "I will restore the others. If possible, could the crew make requests as to how they wish their rooms to look," Tempest requested, Bjorn and Wicke staring at the space in wonderment. "Of course! Excellent work. What happens if the glyph is disabled whilst we are inside?" Jayce asked.

Tempest stepped back, raising his hand to the glyphs above and swiping. The doorway vanished, Bjorn, Jayce and Wicke still inside. It took them a moment to grasp what had just happened. "Are we dead? There's no way out, right? Tempest could just never activate it again... couldn't he?" Wicke stated, Bjorn and Jayce staring at each other. A moment passed, but then the doorway reappeared, and the trio let out a collective sigh of relief. "As long as material from our dimension is present, the room retains its form, as well as anything inside. I will create a system to allow for other means of escape in the case of an anti-magic field," Tempest clarified, the group quickly stepping out.

"It will take time to restore the many glyphs, the runes will be much faster," stated Tempest, as he led the group up the stairs to the main deck. "What's the difference?" Bjorn asked. Tempest paused, spotting the sack of trinkets on the deck. He floated over to them, opening it up and spilling the items onto the deck. "Glyphs are semi-permanent, easily modifiable, and imprinted or etched lightly onto spaces or objects. Runes are permanent and are carved into objects before enchantment. The runes on the ship wore away with time from lack of use, they just require the correct tool to repair; the glyphs need deciphering and recasting, I have completed half the process," Tempest clarified. "What are these items?" he asked, looking at the group as he picked up an object.

"I bought some magical trinkets, I thought – given your ability to reproduce magic items – they might be useful. They're for you," Wicke said quietly. Tempest faltered as he looked at her. "I see. I will make as good use of this as I can. You have my gratitude, hom... Wicke," said Tempest, catching himself. Wicke nodded before looking up at Jayce. "Feels bad judging my spending spree now, doesn't it?" she said with a smug grin. Jayce rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Keep up the good work, we'll be back again before the evening," Jayce said. Tempest bowed, continuing to look through the various trinkets as Jayce, Bjorn and Wicke disembarked.

They headed back into the city, buying themselves some clothes: Jayce and Bjorn, a pair of smart shirts that carried beyond their waist, as well trousers and shoes, whilst Wicke bought a blue cocktail dress and a sapphire necklace. After continuing to explore for a bit they once again returned to the ship, the rest of the crew there already. Tempest floated over to Jayce, a handful of coin necklaces in his hands. "Captain, Wicke's gifts proved most fruitful. I am far from completion from my analysis of all of their effects, but I have numerous things to report. First of all, all glyphs and runes have been replaced or repaired. There are now numerous quarters available for the crew. I have also further enchanted the

glyphs to protect them from harm, as well as inscribed a gate on the inside, such that even if affected by an anti-magic field, the door shall remain functioning.”

Jayce took the necklace Tempest handed him, looking at it curiously, a series of runes now replacing the glyph of the others. “Secondly, I have made modifications to the translators I originally provided you.” Tempest floated backwards, crossing the deck quickly before holding up one to his helmet. “As you can now see, I have integrated means of communication into the necklaces. I am not certain on the range, however these communicators can be used to communicate directly with a specific member or to the entire crew,” Tempest said, floating back towards Jayce, handing one to Wicke and another to Bjorn. Jayce stared at the item in stunned shock.

“For specific communications, press this rune and think of your target. Otherwise the message will be sent to everyone with the device. I have created extras for any additional crew, or other members you can think of,” Tempest stated proudly. “I don’t know what to say, I’m speechless. This is incredible,” Jayce stated in sheer awe. Tempest nodded, holding up his hands. “Hold your praise. Thirdly,” he began, reaching to his side and pulling out a small cloth bag.

It was tied with a drawstring, with glyphs marked onto the side of the bag. Tempest opened it: a black void was contained inside. “Behold,” he said dramatically as he pointed the bag to a crate placed on the deck. He pressed one of the glyphs, there was a rush of air, and the crate was pulled inside. Tempest pressed another glyph, depositing the crate back onto the deck. He then proceeded to reach inside, all the way up to his shoulder. “I call this a Bottomless Bag. I based the designs off the bottle you use to carry the ship, with some minor modifications of my own, utilising the glyphs used to make the rooms. I hope you don’t mind, I took some time to create enough for the crew, as well as one for the ship’s treasury,” he said, pointing to a small pile of cloth bags near the door to the living quarters, one bag made from a silver material.

Jayce looked at Bjorn, the baned smiling widely as he placed his necklace around his neck. “One hell of a Shipwright. I look forward to seeing the results of all of your work, Tempest,” Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded in agreement, taking the bag gingerly and tying it to his belt before wearing the necklace. “Tempest... you astound me. If there’s anything you need...” Jayce stated. Jayce sensed Tempest smiling, or at least what constituted for the expression, beneath his helmet. “I only require time. I will continue to work and will contact you if I require anything.” Tempest floated away, handing out the other bags and necklaces to

the rest of the crew before he disappeared inside the ship. Jayce shook his head to himself. "Right! Grab your outfits, make-up, whatever else, let's go!" Jayce declared, placing his clothes inside the Bottomless Bag before heading for the ship's ladder.

The crew made their way across the city, climbing towards the bathhouses on the northwest of the city. Excited chatter echoed around the group, the promise of a proper wash illuminating their moods. They arrived before long, Jayce finding himself pressed to the front as their leader as they looked at a well-dressed attendant by the door. She looked over the group, frowning before curiosity got the better of her as she looked directly at Jayce. "Hello, welcome to the Utarune Bath's. How may I serve you today?" she asked. Jayce put on his best smile. "We'd like to use the baths," he said.

She looked him up and down, his clothes torn and his face and body dirty. The rest of the crew, all except for Vexx, weren't any better. "VIP package," called Wicke from behind. "All inclusive," added Vexx, prompting Jayce to look back and glare at them. "Right," she said slowly. "The more luxurious packages we have available might be a little steep, so I'll run you through basic use. You get access to the main communal baths, the showers and the locker rooms. Nice and simple..." she said, her voice trailing away as Jayce pulled out a gold pearl. "Actually, I think we will go for the all-inclusive. We are the Rising Aces after all."

She stared at the coin before looking over the group wide-eyed. "Oh, uh, my apologies, sir. I'm sorry for not immediately recognising who you were, the Raising Ices, of course! Please allow me to get things sorted for you. Do you wish me to clear the bathhouse for you?" she blabbed, stepping backwards and bowing. "Rising Aces," Jayce corrected. "No, it's not necessary to clear the place, just don't let anyone else in until we're done." She nodded, looking back and quickly summoning another attendant. "Please allow us a few minutes to get everything ready, normally we get these sorts of things booked in advance. Can we get you any drinks?" she asked, Vexx immediately barging Jayce out of the way. "Of course," he answered quickly. "What do you have available?" he asked. "Anything we can provide you," she said with a smile, as a few other attendants came over. "Anything you say..."

It wasn't long before Jayce, Vexx, Bjorn, and Falconer all found themselves laying in a huge bath, the water hot, the air steamy, and a variety of drinks stationed around the edge of the giant pool. The walls and domed ceiling were tiled, large

mosaics created beautiful scenes of the palace, of an oasis, as well as various local wildlife native to the region. Marble pillars patterned with specs of gold held up the roof and a large wooden wall separated the men's baths from the women's; Wicke, Marisha, and Yuthura all enjoying their own luxuries not too far away. Jayce wasn't too sure if it had just been quiet, but very few other patrons were using the facilities, and the ones who were sharing the bath were all sat on the far side, glaring at the group.

Jayce wasn't too sure what he thought of the place, it was nice, the water was comfortable, and a male attendant had been assigned to each of them, waiting for any order to be given, whether a massage, more drinks, or snacks. The owner herself had come to visit them before entry, offering every available service they had to the group for the large fee they had paid, one hundred pearl per person certainly wasn't cheap. He enjoyed it all. What he wasn't so certain of was the fact that they were all naked in the bath. Bjorn seemed far more uncomfortable than Jayce, Vexx far more comfortable – he practically paraded around, whereas Falconer seemed unbothered.

"Baned filth," echoed a voice from across the room. Jayce slowly turned his head to face them, Bjorn ignoring it, whilst Vexx watched Jayce for his reaction. "Come again?" Jayce asked, across the pool. The man sneered, the others looking at him before looking at the quartet, their eyes flicking from Bjorn to Falconer's arm. "Baned filth," he repeated. "A monster like that shouldn't be kept in civilised company, the animal should be kept outside. It's tainting the sanctity of these baths."

Jayce stood up, the water lowering to a little above his knees, Bjorn quickly looking away whilst Vexx smirked childishly. "You dare," Jayce said, pointing at him. "Do you have any idea who we are?" he asked. The man stared blankly, the other members getting out, opting to avoid getting involved. "We're the Rising Aces and the only reason you're still in here is because we chose to allow it. Shut up, or we will throw you out," Jayce stated, pointing directly at him. A shudder passed through the man, a look of fear covering his face as he stood up and backed away, grabbing a towel and heading quickly towards the changing rooms.

Jayce frowned, sitting back down. "I didn't realise I'm that intimidating," Jayce said, with a confused smile. Vexx laughed. "You're not, I gave you a hand," he said. "What do you mean?" Jayce asked, quickly noticing a new ruby earring hanging from his left lobe. "Focus - another aspect is called Panic. It triggers a

flight or fight response, or a freeze response if the creature on the other end is really unlucky. I'll try and teach it to you. It's quite fun," answered Vexx. Bjorn stared despondently across the water. Falconer nudged him. "Ignore that fool, you're godfallen, descended from great heroes of old. It's a gift, and has given you a mighty body," Falconer stated. Bjorn smiled faintly, nodding before standing up. "Woah there big guy, give us some warning!" joked Vexx.

They remained in the waters until their bodies wrinkled, Bjorn heading over to receive a massage from an attendant, Jayce and Vexx joining him a while later, whilst Falconer stepped inside a sauna. All throughout they were brought snacks of grapes and berries, and drinks of luxurious wine – chosen personally by Vexx. They finished up by heading over to a small and deep pool in an off-shooting chamber before jumping in, the water icy cold. The entire experience had been sublime, worth every pearl. They changed into their evening clothes, smart shirts, trousers and shoes, accompanied by their weapons and various pieces of jewellery the group had purchased. Falconer wore bangles and rings on his fingers and arms, with golden eyeshadow on his face. Vexx had his new earring, as well as a gold and ruby necklace, whilst Jayce wore a new watch, chosen specifically by Wicke as a present for getting her north. He wore it with pride.

The boys stepped outside, waiting for the girls to get ready, their backpacks neatly contained within their new Bottomless Bags. It took them a little longer but eventually they emerged. Wicke wore a new blue cocktail dress, it stopped at her knees with a slightly wavy skirt. She had a sapphire necklace on, and a pair of sapphire studs sat in her ears. Wicke didn't normally wear make-up, she had experimented from time to time - but this evening she had applied eyeliner and a bit of red lipstick, as well as presumably a few other pieces that Jayce didn't quite understand.

Marisha wore a tight form black dress, a pair of accompanying heels adding to the outfit. Her light brown hair had been cut earlier, now stopping just above her shoulders. She too had put on some make-up, leading into more of a curling flick from her right eye, her left eye covered by a new black and maroon eyepatch, connected to a headband hidden in her hair. She had maroon lipstick on and a new amber necklace and earrings. But beyond the pair of them, it was Yuthura who drew everyone's attention.

She wore a long purple dress with a large split running up her leg. She had heels, a small handbag – the Bottomless Bag cleverly tucked within - and amethysts adorning her fingers in the form of rings, her neck with a silver and black metal

necklace, and hanging from her ears as well. Her hair was long and hung over her head on one side, the black still splashed with patches of grey, and her make-up was flawless. She didn't look younger, the wrinkles were still there, the cold, hard, serious look still glared through her purple eyes, and scars still covered her body, but she smiled, the usual serious look hidden, albeit only temporarily as the group stared at her. "You never seen a woman before? Close your jaws and let's go," she said, her smile re-emerging as she offered her arm to Vexx, the smaller man taking it.

They walked through the city, people stepping to the side of them as they headed to a restaurant they had scouted earlier. Guards watched them curiously, rogues observed them from alleyways – quickly changing any conceptions after they watched Bjorn stomp past. They stepped into the restaurant, the servers immediately taking them to a private room, pre-booked and already arranged. They sat around a large circular table with a beautiful centrepiece created from an arrangement of gold and black candles that sat in the middle. Various drinks were brought in, mostly wine and cocktails - Wicke was excluded, but Jayce allowed her to try his various drinks whilst she ordered virgin cocktails for herself.

Meats were brought in on platters, accompanied by numerous vegetables Jayce had never seen before. "Fresh from our farms within the great mountain's caverns," stated the head chef, as she checked on the group. It was exquisite, the food melting in their mouths and almost too tasteful after weeks of fighting to consume their meals from Marisha's experimentations. Jayce watched her slip a note to the chef, the woman nodding before disappearing and returning with a recipe scribbled down on a note. They ate and ate and ate, conversations flowing as easily as the drinks. "To a voyage worth taking!" Jayce stated, raising his glass into the air, the others mimicking his gesture. "Cheers!" they cried, as dessert was brought out: a variety of sorbets and cakes.

As they began to eat, Jayce looked over to his left at Wicke before looking at Bjorn on his right. "I almost forgot," Jayce said. "Tempest has asked all of you to come up with some ideas for your rooms. Get thinking, I don't think we're far off from having a fully operational ship." The group looked at him, ideas quickly flying at him. "How do we decide who gets what room?" Wicke asked. Bjorn slid his empty plate to the side, his pastry devoured in an instant, before he reached into his Bottomless Bag and pulled out a large document. He unfurled it, revealing a set of schematics of the entire ship, all floors marked and labelled. "You just have that on you at all times, huh?" Jayce said with a smirk. Bjorn chuckled to himself.

"Always worth knowing how much cargo space you have - besides, it makes it feel... real. Ours."

Jayce nodded, Wicke standing up and walking around to get a better look, Vexx doing the same. Vexx laughed, a steady sway rolling through him as he leant over the side of Bjorn. "A stacked hand," he said with a grin, pointing to the outline of the main deck. "Come again?" Jayce asked, subtly taking Vexx's wine glass away from him. "There's another ace," he said, highlighting the ace of spade shape the main deck made, thanks to the rear viewpoint and the curvature of the deck. "A stacked hand," he said with a wide smile. Jayce looked at Wicke, before glancing at Bjorn, the pair both looking at him with small grins. "The Stacked Hand?" Jayce asked.

"I love it," Wicke said, quickly reaching into her bag and pulling out a pen before scribbling the name onto the top of the schematics. "That's our ship," Bjorn stated. "The Stacked Hand?" asked Marisha, standing up and walking around to get a better look, Falconer and Yuthura watching them but continuing to eat their desserts with a bit more grace than the others had afforded. "Sounds great!" she said, resting on Bjorn's shoulder, his body flinching as she touched his neck. "I call this room!" Wicke inserted, quickly pointing her finger to the doorway nearest to the main bathroom of the second deck.

"We can sort it out once we get to that point," interrupted Bjorn, picking up the schematics and folding them away. "The Stacked Hand needs furnishings, cannons, and probably a few other things. So it may be in our best interest to add a bit more to treasury from everyone," suggested Bjorn, only for Vexx to reach into his pocket and slam down on the table a pair of platinum pearl coins. The crew stared slack-jawed at the exorbitant amount of money Vexx had casually placed in front of them. He stumbled back to his chair, Bjorn, Jayce and Wicke all staring at him.

"Where did you get that?" Jayce asked, as Bjorn slowly slid the coins into his bag. "I visited the local prince," Vexx stated casually, reaching across the table and taking back his wine glass from Jayce before refilling it. "I've got more," he added, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handful of the coins. Jayce's stomach dropped. "You didn't kill him, did you? Or rob the palace, right?" Wicke asked wide-eyed, a hungry look in her eyes as she looked at the money. "Of course not... I just showed him a good time. Had a bit of fun, just an afternoon of pleasure," Vexx stated casually as he looked at his fingers – his nails manicured and new rings on his fingers. "You whored yourself out to a prince?" Bjorn asked,

erupting into laughter as Vexx shrugged nonchalantly. "I wouldn't say that - he gained, I gained. This was an additional benefit."

Jayce rubbed his face, struggling to hide a smile. "Well, you've got to share this with the crew!" stated Wicke, reaching to grab a coin as it rolled across the table. He grabbed it before her. "Any money earned from additional activities, side hustles, whatever, is yours to keep," Jayce declared, quickly spotting cogs whirling in Wicke's head. "That does not mean doing what he does!" stated Falconer. "Or robbing people," added Jayce, all too familiar with the sort of chaos Wicke and Vexx would attempt. "No fun... how come he gets to?" whined Wicke, sinking into her chair. Vexx flicked her a coin, her mood switching in an instant.

Their evening concluded with the crew stumbling towards the nearest inn they could find, the various members splitting up into the numerous rooms. Jayce found himself alone, a large bed before him. He fell onto it, his face buried in the sheets, his body sinking into the mattress. It felt alien; it had been a lifetime since he had used an actual bed, it didn't feel real. He lay there for a few moments, his eyes beginning to close on their own. "Not yet," he muttered, standing up and undressing, before stumbling to the bathroom, a toothbrush in hand.

He stood there, leaning onto the sink as he looked at himself in the mirror, his body toned and muscular, his eyes tired and his pupils dilating and shrinking. He ran his fingers across his neck, arms, and ribs, his scars large and noticeable. His hair was messy, a little longer than he liked, despite Yuthura offering to cut it as the crew's hairdresser. He had a little bit of stubble, despite shaving only that morning. He sighed, shaking his head before splashing his face with water.

He looked back up, Alara standing in the mirror behind him. He blinked and she disappeared. "She's not here..." he muttered. He wiped his face and brushed his teeth, heading back and climbing inside his bed before shutting his eyes. "Jayce..." said a tired voice from around his neck, his necklace speaking to him. "I know you're probably asleep already, but I just wanted to say... thank you. For everything you've done for me to get here, everything you continue to do, for being my Captain. Today was the best day of my life... good night," said Wicke. Jayce smiled as he leant back, touching his necklace as he thought of her. "Good night Wicke. Sleep tight."

A moment passed and another voice came through. "Jayce," said Bjorn. "Thank you for today, for everything. It's been an honour - a privilege. I look forward to the future adventures we will have together, and the stories we shall tell at the

end of it. Good night, Captain," he said. Jayce sighed, chuckling slightly to himself. "Good night, Bjorn." Another voice came through, followed by another, then another. As Jayce once again tried to sleep, the room spinning as he lay on his back, another voice came through. "Anyone for round two?" asked Vexx. "I know a few more places that are still open. It's still early!" said Vexx. "Fuck off," Bjorn said quietly.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Stacked Hand

The days fell away, Jayce returning every few hours to check on the progress of The Stacked Hand, until he realised that every time he did, he found himself giving another delaying order to Tempest. Instead Jayce took to exploring the city with Wicke, training his Focus with Vexx, or reading. Wicke had taken it upon herself to design the ship's flag, something she was remarkably good at, as every day she showed him more and more designs. Eventually, as they sat on a bench together, he found himself holding four pieces of paper, countless designs sketched onto the sheets, front and back.

"Well?" she asked, Little Witch in her arms. Jayce stared at the countless designs: they were all really good. "This one," he said at last, circling the design with a pen. "That one? Why that one?" she asked, looking at the design curiously. It was a skull and crossbones, the bones having a pair of skeletal hands extending upwards. The right hand glowed with blue fire, the left contained a playing card between two of its fingers: an ace of hearts. The skull had a tattoo marked across its left eye, an ace of spades that replaced its eye socket. "It's simple, easy to remember, and the flames give it a bit of cool colour." Wicke sighed, taking back the other designs. "Your choice..." she said quietly.

A pair of young women walked past them, one covering her mouth as she whispered to her companion. "It's the Rising Ace and the Ace of Diamonds," whispered the girl. They passed quickly, Jayce looking at them, confused, before looking at Wicke: her eyes were anywhere and everywhere apart from looking at him, her face red. "Do you have any idea what that was? Ace of Diamonds?" he asked. "No," she answered, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat. "No," she said, her voice much deeper than normal. "Wicke..." Jayce said softly.

She sighed, reaching into her bag and pulling out several bounty posters. Jayce flicked through them: it was the Rising Aces, but the photos had changed and there were four more posters. Jayce stared at Wicke's poster, her bounty unchanged, unlike Bjorn and Jayce's, which had both increased by two hundred pearl. She was sat atop RK, the sunset illuminating her hair and a smile on her

face as she leant on her hand. "Wicke..." Jayce repeated, looking at the new nickname she had been given: 'The Ace of Diamonds'.

"Falconer's sister got him a bounty, but they used a horrible image and used his prince name. So, I submitted a tip – correcting his name. The Guild asked if I had any more tips... next thing I know, I send some new photos, told them we had a djinn and a rokken. I excluded their names of course – they need to offer me some real good money for those," she blabbed. Jayce rubbed his face as he flicked through the stack. RK and Tempest both had question marks instead of names, their bounties only a hundred pearl each, but they both had titles: 'Ace of Metal', 'Ace of Stone'. Yuthura had been titled the Ace of Hearts, Bjorn - the Ace of Clubs, Vexx - the Ace of Spades. Falconer was the Ace of Feathers and Marisha, ironically, was titled the Ace of Cooks. Even Little Witch had been given a bounty: the Ace of Cats, with a paltry bounty of ten pearl. Jayce was the still the Rising Ace.

Jayce hated to admit it, but every photo Wicke had submitted looked fantastic, and he really liked the monikers. "Don't do it again without permission from Bjorn or I, understood?" he said, pretending to scold her. She bowed her head in shame. "Understood," she repeated. Jayce shook his head, only to jump as his necklace spoke on the open channel, Wicke's echoing the words. "It is done," said Tempest.

Jayce and Wicke, as well as every other Ace, rushed through the city back to the Stacked Hand. The ship sat in the water, next to one of the main piers. It's hull had been treated, the wood now a more golden brown colour than it had been before. Large coloured lines had been painted onto the hull, running all around the ship before connecting together at the bow, a bright blue and a deep black. Painted in gold on one of the thick black lines, on either side of the ship as well as the stern, read the words: The Stacked Hand. The masts had been repaired and varnished, the wood smooth to the touch as Jayce and the others climbed onboard. The sails had been restored, the colour now a much more brilliant white, whilst still made from the same stretchy material.

Jayce overheard Wicke talking to Tempest, plans of placing the ship's flag onto the foremost sail reaching his ears. The grass beds of the main deck had been tended to, the grass fresh and bright. All along the main deck were several cannons, eight in total, all large and brand new, the faintest markings of enchantments placed onto the metal barrels. Towards the front of the ship, Jayce spotted a new nest box for Wren, the large roc already laying down inside it. The

colossal broken cannon was missing, but a rotating stand had been build, overlooking the front of the ship, awaiting completion another day. The elevator had been restored, a hatch allowing for access to the lower decks; Bjorn already had some local boys loading cargo.

Jayce made his way up the curved stairs to the top of the living room, the banisters coated and waxed, the wood the same colour as the rest of the ship. The wheel was restored, a beautiful gold ornament marking the top, a new compass replacing the old cracked one. Jayce climbed the final set of stairs to the top of the captain's quarters. A flowerbed had been built, a variety of herbs and plants beginning to grow in the soil and a bench sat looking backwards towards the stern.

Jayce descended the stairs, pushing open the door to his quarters. The huge windows shone brightly, the glass restored and crystalline. The room was barren, except for a glass case hanging from the wall, his sword displayed inside. The bathroom had been renovated, a large tub, a shower, a sink, a toilet and mirror all inside. Runes provided running water, whilst also allowing for the temperature to be changed. As Jayce turned to leave he spotted a small black ring hanging from a hook. He put it on, the ring buzzing as it fit onto his finger. Jayce waved his hand, the door locking in front of him. "Woah," he said, unlocking it. He clenched his hand, the windows tinting and the room darkening. He clenched his hand again, the tinting disappearing. "That djinn..." he muttered, stepping out and continuing his tour.

Jayce headed into the living room - the kitchen had been completely refitted. Every kind of cooking equipment Jayce could imagine had been bought, all stored neatly in racks for use. He quickly noticed engraved tankards, each labelled with the crew's names, waiting for use. The map table had been restored, a large detailed map of the New World covering most of it. The pantry sat full to the brim with long-term supplies. There was a fully stocked fridge, a fully stocked freezer, wine racks, kegs, anything Jayce could ever imagine needing.

Several sofas had been bought, a variety of Wicke's gadgets displayed on a shelf or stored in a cupboard for the crew to use to entertain themselves. A noticeboard had been placed on the wall, the latest editions of the crew's bounties displayed proudly for all to see. A large bed for Little Witch had been bought, a variety of toys waiting for use alongside a borderline assault course for her entertainment. Jayce carried on out through the rear door to the rear deck. The circle of glyphs

sat partially restored, Tempest still unsure of its purpose or its original design. The hoists had been repaired, a row boat hanging from one, the other still empty.

The various toilets and bathrooms had all been restored - all clean, sparkly and new. Jayce couldn't help but wonder how long that would last, ever more grateful for his own private bathroom. He made his way below deck, the second map table also restored and containing a fresh map. Jayce spotted the others wandering around, looking at the rooms they had requested, their doors all displaying their names. He stepped inside a room marked with a red door, emerging into a huge open space. Weapon racks mounted the walls, dummies stood on the far side, and a variety of mysterious glyphs sat marked onto various walls - a training hall. Jayce carried on exploring - there was another communal room, a small kitchen built in for snacking and resting, but otherwise the entire deck was designated to the crew's personal quarters.

Jayce passed by a doorway, the door white and gold. He pressed it open, finding himself in a circular room, another set of doors leading elsewhere. The floor was warm, the air full of steam. "Wicke..." Jayce muttered, knowing immediately who would have requested such a room as he pushed open the door labelled: 'Men's'. He found himself inside a changing room, a black cloth curtain hung across the doorway leading to a near identical replica of the bathhouse. There was a colossal bath, the water overflowing into deep grates. A cold and deep pool sat to the side, showers nearby. There was a sauna, a steam room, a waterfall. The entire place was huge, and Jayce quickly realised there was another for the women as well.

Jayce stepped outside in sheer disbelief as he continued onwards, taking the stairs down to the next floor. The pens remained, still unused apart from Falconer's birds. He passed the medical room, apparatus and medical equipment lining the walls, alongside medical textbooks and various supplies. There was a pair of beds to lie down on, a magical projection looking outside. Jayce continued onwards, passing Wicke's library: books lined the huge shelves, each marked with the glyphs that allowed access to the Infinite Library, albeit the options limited unlike Wicke's access. He passed the quartermaster's stations: large storage lockers contained pieces of equipment, various supplies, and day-to-day items, either lining the walls or locked behind grates. There was a request box mounted to the wall.

Jayce carried on walking past a large room that smelt of mulch. Pots of various plants lined the walls, all illuminated by an artificial source of magical light - the

room a renewable source of medical herbs. He passed a large workshop full of magical items, a place for Tempest to work. He continued onwards arriving at the navigator's room. Various maps had been bought and stored, the room a mess and Falconer already hard at work as he plotted a route for them. Jayce left him to it, heading back to the stairs and continuing downwards to the hold. Large crates were being moved off the elevator, stored in specific spots under Bjorn's orders. The hold was large, with more than enough space for any kind of cargo they could wish to transport. Jayce hopped onto the elevator, riding it alongside the workers back to the top deck, before stepping off onto the deck of his ship: the Stacked Hand.

Chapter 41: A Witch's Secrets

On Meredea's advice, Arthuria laid low for a few days. She followed her daily duties - cleaning the palace, gardening, looking after youngsters - and she ensured she stayed well away from the Witches and their Crypt. Arthuria understood the reasoning - she had stood out - but still it was agonising. Arthuria's frustration only continued to build, day in, day out, but - after she almost drew her sword on an obnoxious Priest who had walked into her - Meredea realised Arthuria needed a distraction.

"Come on," she said, Arthuria tilting her head curiously to the side. "Follow me." "Where are we going now? I thought we were going to get some food," whined Arthuria, as she shuffled after Meredea, hugging her stomach. Meredea rolled her eyes. "You'll live another hour. This will be interesting to you, I promise," she said, heading out of the palace in a direction unfamiliar to Arthuria. Meredea led the whining teen towards the south of the Isle of Sanctity, strolling quickly to the edge of the island.

As the defensive walls began to build up around the edges, the number of buildings fell away, replaced instead by large cannon emplacements, but hidden amongst the defense stations was a large spherical building. It was a church: its roof round and unimposing, but the building was still surprisingly large for its position in seemingly nowhere. "What are we doing here?" asked Arthuria. Meredea opted to ignore her, instead she walked inside, through a set of large wooden doors. "Great, always nice to be informed," Arthuria called after her, a few Navy sailors and Sisters looking at her curiously. She let out a sigh before she quickly followed inside.

Arthuria's mouth fell open as she stared at the building from the inside: the brick on the outside grey and dull, the inside painted with an entire spectra of colours, only highlighted by the stained glass skylight. Scenes of religious events decorated the walls, familiars and symbols of the Sisters' Goddess, Aluna, looked down on Arthuria from above. The entire floor was a mosaic of the Goddess, her hair a flowing green decorated by pink flowers, her skin the night sky dotted with stars, and her eyes a pair of crescent moons. Beyond the entire room, what drew Arthuria's eyes most of all was the iridescent beam of light falling from the skylight.

"Welcome to the Chapel of the Eleventh Goddess," said Meredea, drawing Arthuria's attention. "One of the main roles of the Sisters is as a Cleric: a healer. We borrow our power from the Goddess and use it to aid those in need. Today,

"I'm going to teach you how to do that," stated Meredea excitedly. Arthuria stared at her, a moment passing before Meredea deflated. "What? Do you not want to?" she asked. "I kinda already can heal. I appreciate it, but can't we just go eat?" answered Arthuria. Meredea frowned, a scathing look of disappointment clouding her face. "Well... I suppose so. Still, if you need to heal as a Sister and you start casting like a Paladin, people will get suspicious. So, let's try it."

Arthuria let out a long sigh. "How does it work?" Meredea smiled broadly, beckoning for Arthuria to follow her. She led Arthuria directly to the beam of light falling down from the skylight. Given the weather outside - snowy and overcast - there shouldn't have been such a strong ray of light, or even one at all, but as Arthuria approached, her intrigue was only heightened. The beam was actually several, all intertwined and flowing like strings, a great weave of light. A Sister was stood next to it, her hands manipulating the iridescent strings, but, as she saw Meredea approach, she backed away with her head low.

"It's beautiful," Arthuria said absent-mindedly, as she looked at the light. Meredea nodded. "It's a connection to the beyond, a direct means of accessing the Great River where all magic flows from and flows to. Place your hands in it." Arthuria took a deep breath, stepping closer and slowly slipping her fingers between the strings. She felt them brush her fingertips, even through her gloves, her fingers tingled, the strings vibrating around her hands. "A Cleric borrows power from the divine, we are given our magic from the Gods and their chosen. If you're lucky you will be chosen as well. It may take some time, so feel free to return here. Touch the Great River and you may feel their grace."

Arthuria half-listened, her vision flickering as she ran her hands through the weave. Her eyes shut on their own, the darkness replaced immediately by a rolling vision of floating islands, grassy plains, rainbows, lights, rivers, and waterfalls. A cloaked figure dressed entirely in white faced her; they had no features beyond arms, legs, and a head. No eyes, no hair, their head completely smooth and expressionless as a veil flowed down to connect to a larger cloak that swirled around their figure. A long arm extended out from the oddly terrifying creature, its hand forming three large claws.

Glowing rings formed around its arm, the creature continuing to reach forwards to Arthuria. She wanted to pull away, every instinct in her telling her to run, but instead, as she grit her teeth, she mirrored it. A rush of energy flowed past her head, a mirrored set of rings forming on her own arm, and she began to chant, words she had never heard before flowing from her mouth. A glowing scroll

formed in her hands, white writing moving around on the papyrus, the item floating gently out of her reach. She lunged forwards, grasping it tightly; Arthuria blinked, she was back in the chapel, the scroll in her hands and a clear memory of the lines she needed to recite to cast her gifted spell.

“That- that normally takes a few more tries to work... Well done, I think,” said Meredea, as she gently took the scroll from Arthuria, opening it and glancing at the page. The writing moved in a manner nearly identical to the tomes Arthuria had seen before in the Crypt. “Hmm, Cleanse. An interesting spell, good for removing impurities, poisons and the like. We’ll add this to the collection, it’s one of the rarer spells,” Meredea clarified, handing the scroll off to another Sister, who took it quickly away to a side chamber.

“How can you tell? You can read that?” Arthuria asked, with a confused look. “God’s Tongue? Oh, I thought Paladin’s were taught... only Proctors? I can get Athena to teach you, she’s the best at it. Ah, oops, she’s not available. I’ll figure something out for you. Anyway, once you’ve learnt how to translate the scrolls, I’ll show you the collection. Let’s head back,” stated Meredea, heading towards the chapel exit. Arthuria took one last look around, the new incantation echoing inside her head, but eventually she just nodded to herself and took off after Sister Meredea.

As they walked back towards the Sister’s Convent, Arthuria spotted a pair of gloveless Sisters making their way quickly towards the Holy Palace. Meredea wasn’t particularly paying close attention to her, and after stopping, Meredea continued to walk onwards. Arthuria turned on her heels and headed towards the palace. She couldn’t be certain, but something within her told her that they were Witches – they carried themselves differently from Paladins, looking down on people as they walked, as opposed to an authoritative stance that the Paladins held. She walked quickly, slowing down only once the main guards had come into view. She followed them from a distance, ensuring that she was heading along with confidence, rather than simply trailing them; no one paid her any attention.

Her curiosity was answered as they entered into the Daughters of Shade chambers. The pair had disappeared, but they were no longer of any concern to Arthuria; instead she continued walking with purpose, slowing down every time she came across a patrolling Witch. Subconsciously, as their own confidence combated Arthuria’s presence, they often found themselves stepping to the side to let her pass, not even realising what they had done. She headed down the main

stairs, continuing into the huge room filled with statues, before pressing the familiar owl token and passing through a large sliding door.

Eventually, she found herself once again within the grand library, the giant ritual circle still being slowly painted on the floor in blood. Arthuria's head raced, her eyes glancing nervously at everyone she could see, waiting for someone to call her out. No one said anything, no one paid her any attention. Arthuria crossed the room, heading towards one of the numerous sets of stairs descending even deeper. She went to hesitate, quickly throwing caution aside and heading downward as she realised any errors at this point could get her killed.

The stairs were steep, but eventually they began to smooth out, Arthuria's mind absently questioning how the numerous Witches traversed the Crypt in heels as she descended. The path opened up, recreating the bubble-like chambers in the Witch's sector of the Holy Palace, but it was a labyrinth – countless paths led in all directions, all filled with numerous Serving Girls and Witches. Arthuria pushed onwards, she couldn't afford to stop, not whilst she was surrounded by so many eyes.

A soft crying echoed through the halls, her legs moving on their own as she followed the sound. She passed through a stone passageway, emerging into a large room full of cages hanging from the ceiling. Arthuria's eyes widened as she stared upwards - they were full of slaves: humans, ocean crawlers, goblins, shadows, even an ogre. They looked ragged, skinny, some lifeless, as they leant against the bars. "Need anything, Sister?" asked a Witch sat on a stool by the door. She looked bored, a wand hung lazily in her hand and, as she waved it around, a few of the closer prisoners flinched or cowered as the tip pointed in their direction.

"No. I was looking for my Serving Girl, she's wandered off," lied Arthuria. The Witch chuckled, relaxing quickly as she believed Arthuria to be a fellow Witch. "They do that, that's why I put a piece of glass in my one's shoe. She's learnt not to wander without permission, I would recommend doing the same. Or threaten her with becoming a member of the Pantry," she added, waving off in the direction of the cages. Arthuria forced a smile. "I'll do that," she said, turning on her feet and heading towards the exit. "Good luck finding her! If you need any ingredients, do come back! I'm getting bored here and it's been a while since I've pulled out an eye," she said, with a terrifyingly cheerful smile.

Arthuria left quickly, her mind trying to process what she had just encountered. "Ingredients? A Pantry?" she wondered, continuing her walk. Arthuria turned a

corner, walking out into a large cavern with a long stone bridge crossing a chasm. A trio of huts sat on the opposite side, all resting beneath a large dark tree. The entire area was illuminated by a silvery light, reminiscent of the moon, but with a soft haze added within. The tree glowed; large windows were built into the bark, illuminated by a golden light from within. The huts were simple and were made of wood with thatched roofs, light too came from within their various windows, but they were purple, green, or silver. Arthuria shivered as she stared across the chasm, the fall endless, the bottom invisible.

She turned away, walking along the main path towards one of the other corridors, back in the rough direction she had come. "Definitely not that way..." she muttered, only to immediately regret her choice as the strong smell of blood flooded her lungs. She struggled not to retch, biting her tongue instead and holding a straight face as she glanced to the left and the right. A huge farm sat buried deep within, numerous animals were kept in small pens waiting to be butchered. She recognised several more unique variants from far across the New World; large boxes marked with the World Guild crest, a small snake stamped underneath, answered her immediate questions as to how they had arrived in the Capital.

To the right were piles of corpses, most human, some fresher than others. Large stone slabs lay in the centre of the numerous rooms; various Witches were dissecting the corpses and placing their organs into clear jars. The bodies were then connected to large machines, the spider-like devices draining them of fluids until all that remained were dry skeletal husks. Arthuria watched in horror as a pair of Serving Girls - no older than twelve, thirteen at most - then dragged the corpses to a metal hatch before pulling on a lever, the bodies dropping out of sight through the floor.

Arthuria's feet moved on their own, a deep set of panic building up within her as she carried on quickly through the numerous chambers, past rooms full of giant cauldrons - countless bottles full of colourful liquids lining the walls - past sleeping quarters full of young girls, dressed in rags, lying on bedrolls. Arthuria shut her eyes, trying to clear her head as she rounded a corner. "Ah," yelped a familiar voice, as Arthuria trampled over a Serving Girl. Arthuria pounced backwards, staring down at Morgana as she sat on the floor, a surprised Witch stood by her side.

"What is the meaning of this? What are you doing down here?" asked the Witch, looking at Arthuria and slowly reaching into her belt to pull out her wand. "I do

apologise," Arthuria blabbed quickly. "I came down here to speak to Morgana, I was told this was where I could find her." Arthuria reached down, helping Morgana to her feet. "Arthuria?" Morgana said in surprise. "What did you want with me?" she added quickly, stepping backwards out of the way of the Witch as she pointed her wand at Arthuria. "I wanted to... invite you to lunch," Arthuria half-lied, her back-up plan quickly getting shoved to the front. "Oh, how nice," Morgana said quietly, taken aback by the answer. The Witch behind her sighed. "I didn't realise you had made friends, Eight. Good, connections can be powerful. I don't particularly need you for anything right now, so, fine. You have my permission," said the Witch.

Morgana's eyes widened as she looked between the pair. "Thank you. Wait here Sister, let me get my purse," Morgana said, quickly walking off down one of the chambers towards the bedrooms Arthuria had passed. The Witch looked at Arthuria with deep curiosity. "Take it from me Sister, this one is not of any particular calibre. I wouldn't waste your precious time with her, but if you decide to do something like this again, please send a Serving Girl to collect her. This area is dangerous, and easy for an overcurious Sister to just disappear in... Enjoy your lunch."

The Witch departed, and Arthuria glanced around to see if anyone else was watching her. Seeing no one, she let out a long exhale, her heart pounding like a drum in her chest. "Sister?" asked Morgana, prompting Arthuria to jump out of her skin. "Oh, you startled me. Ready?" asked Arthuria. Morgana nodded quickly, pointing ahead. "You startled me! I'm sorry you had to come all this way, I had no idea you were interested in lunch. I..." She shook her head. "Never mind, follow me."

Morgana led her through a few more chambers, the pair eventually coming to a flat stone wall decorated with an ornate carved cat. Morgana traced her fingers along the tail, the wall sliding away to reveal a narrow chamber. It could fit a few more people than just the two of them, four or five at most, but it was just a circular tube, a hole going nowhere. "Step on," instructed Morgana, stepping onto the stone floor, Arthuria following her before Morgana pressed a rune on the wall. The door closed behind them, the floor rumbling before they started to move upwards. "Stay away from the edges, there's enough of a gap to slip through – you'll be grinded into paste. It's a nasty way to die." Arthuria obliged, staying as close to the middle as possible as they rose upwards.

The elevator carried them for a while, eventually stopping far above where they had started. The walls opened for them, the stone grinding together and light quickly blinding the pair. They stepped outside, the cold air of the snow-covered Capital rolling straight through them. The doors slowly closed behind them, Arthuria turning to face the statue of an old emperor. There were no obvious markings, no obvious doors, but they emerged from the base of a statue, one of countless across the island. "Are all the statues elevators?" Arthuria asked curiously. Morgana nodded, pointing to a small rune carved into the stone. "This opens them, all of the statues have them," she stated, only to blink and place her hands over her mouth. "Pretend I never said that," she added quickly. Arthuria laughed. "Noted, follow me I know a place."

Arthuria led her across the island, the pair walking quietly in silence as they both tried to figure out what to say. Morgana opened her mouth to speak several times, but each time she held back, uncertain of her role as she followed after Arthuria. Eventually they arrived at the main road. Morgana shivered as she hugged her arms, her cloth dress doing nothing to hold back the cold. "Where are we going?" Morgana chattered, Arthuria quickly noticing how cold she was. Arthuria wore her underarmour underneath her habit, the clothing was insulated, and she had gotten used to the far colder Ice Floes.

"Sorry, you should have told me you were cold. Wait here," she instructed, stepping quickly into a nearby shop and returning a minute later with a pair of large pink woollen mittens and a matching scarf and earmuffs. Morgana stared at the items as Arthuria thrust them into her hands. "Here, it's not much, but it might help a little. We're not far," she said. Morgana reached into her pocket and pulled out a small drawstring coin pouch. "Ah ahh," chided Arthuria, "I invited you out, I'm paying. Put it away." Morgana held the items closely in her hands, looking up at the older girl with wide and blurry eyes. "Thank you," she said softly, placing the earmuffs on her head before wrapping her neck with the scarf.

They continued walking, quickly arriving at a small bakery on the corner of a junction. Its windows glowed brightly, the glass was fogged up, but it still displayed a variety of breads and pastries. Arthuria pushed open the door, a small bell chiming above her as she stepped inside, holding the door open behind her for Morgana. There were several tables and chairs placed around the room, away from the main shop, but they were all empty. "Hello!" called out a small old man from behind the counter. Arthuria smiled at him, slowly nodding a greeting. Morgana gave him a small wave. "Can we get a table?" Arthuria asked. His small eyes widened. "Oh my, of course! Please choose any seat you like."

Arthuria pointed to a small table near one of the windows, walking over to it and sitting down, resting her staff against the window. Morgana sat down opposite her, once again reaching into her pocket to pull out a coin purse. Arthuria reached forwards and flicked her nose, Morgana yelping and rubbing it in response. "I'm paying, last warning. I get a discount here anyway," she stated, Morgana grumbling as she relented. "Choose anything you want. I highly recommend the sourdough, or if you want something sweet, the triple berry pastry swirl is to die for," advised Arthuria.

They walked up to the counter, Arthuria flashed her loyalty card, receiving a sweet twenty-percent discount for her troubles, and they quickly began to peruse the many options. Morgana selected a simple and cheap gingerbread, Arthuria quickly ascertaining she was hesitating over the slightly above average prices. In retaliation, Arthuria ordered multiple items from the higher end of the menu for herself. "As I said, choose anything you want, we can always take it with us." Morgana did not repeat her error, the pair returning to their table with a wide assortment of savoury and sweet treats.

They tucked in, Morgana slowly nibbling on the corner of a chocolate hazelnut croissant, the dough still steaming, and the chocolate melted. Arthuria held no hesitation, immediately shoving a whipped cream coated pastry into her mouth. Morgana laughed softly, pointing towards her nose as Arthuria wiped her face with a serviette, missing a large portion on the tip of her nose. She relaxed, the tension fading as she took a large bite out of her croissant. "So, why did you want to meet up?" Morgana asked.

"I thought it would be good for you. And I can't deny I was curious about what you said about power. I hadn't really thought of it that way - not that I agree. I want to know more about you, Morgana. Who are you?" Arthuria asked, leaning on her glove-covered wrist. Morgana's pale skin turned a deep red. "Who am I?" she asked. "No-one special, really," she answered. Arthuria chuckled, shaking her head. "Now I doubt that. How did you join the Church? Any family? Dreams?" Arthuria pried.

Morgana put down her pastry, Arthuria immediately sensing her begin to close off. "Ah, hang on. Want a drink?" Arthuria attempted. Morgana nodded a reply. "Hot chocolate?" she asked quietly, her golden eyes lighting up slightly. Arthuria glanced at the mostly sweet pastries she had chosen. "Sweet tooth huh? I respect it," she said with a smile, standing up and walking to the counter. She returned with a small espresso and a colossal hot chocolate smothered in whipped cream,

marshmallows, sprinkles and cocoa powder. Morgana stared at it in stunned shock as Arthuria placed it on the table before her. "Woah," she exclaimed, picking up a spoon and digging in.

She started off strong, Arthuria sipping her coffee as the fifteen-year old devoured the toppings, eventually slowing as she came across the actual drink buried underneath. "I left home a few years ago; it was just me, my mother, my half-sister and her mother, but when my mother got ill and died, I didn't really have a reason to stay. I didn't feel welcome and there was some family I needed to find. I'm still looking, but I think I've missed my chance of finding them." Arthuria nodded. "I'm sorry."

Morgana shook her head. "There's nothing to be sorry about, you didn't do anything, and she was ill for a long time before she died. So, stupidly, I took to the seas, with next-to-no belongings, no plan, just my eyes on the Capital. A twelve year-old was an easy target, so I was captured and sold for a price I'm still proud of," she said with a soft laugh, running her hand through her hair as she looked down at her lap. "You were a slave?" Arthuria asked. Morgana nodded, subconsciously rubbing her wrists. "Yeah, like most of the others in my faction. Still, I was treated pretty well. Taught a bit of magic, given an education, but eventually I was chosen by the Daughters of Shade - well, me and many others were. Sorry, it's not the cheeriest of lunch topics."

Arthuria extended a hand across the table, resting it on Morgana's forearm. "There's nothing to be sorry about. You didn't have control over these circumstances, and it's what got you here, right? It's the destination, not the journey in the end - you either make it or don't." Morgana laughed, shaking her head. "That's a bit pessimistic, Sister. Have I rubbed off on you already?" Morgana asked. Arthuria smiled, her eyes watching Morgana curiously from behind her blindfold, the youngster looking anywhere and everywhere apart from her face. "I guess you're right. I meant just because something happened, it doesn't mean it has to matter. So what if you were enslaved, would the current you ever let that happen again?"

"No," stated Morgana, her golden-yellow eyes meeting Arthuria's gaze. "Precisely. Take the you that you are now and aim to become something powerful. Something powerful that does good, does things for others. Invites people to lunch rather than staying in a Crypt, for example," Arthuria hinted. Morgana rolled her eyes. "You're very sneaky Sister. I respect it. How did you end up a Sister? No offence, but you seem... different from the others," she asked.

Arthuria faltered. "Do I? Ah, I should probably practice some more. A friend asked me to join, I couldn't tell her no. So here I am. It's pretty good. The people are nice, respectful."

"But you're on the bottom," stated Morgana, picking up a cheese-filled bread roll. Arthuria tilted her head curiously. "I mean, no offence again, but aren't the Sisters just the supplements? The other groups are so much more powerful, even if they are arguably evil," she said, speaking with a mouthful of cheese and bread. "Evil? How so?" asked Arthuria. Morgana nodded, sipping her hot chocolate. "Well, Warlocks have this eldritch Goddess, Priests seem to do a lot of shady and questionable things, Paladins kill anyone they don't like, and well, hehe, the other Witches... The Sisters don't have any of that, you're all so... perfect, do-goody, and it makes you victims. I mean, I could order you to do something. You're the bottom of the pile, right?"

Arthuria shrugged. "I guess so, but I get to talk to people on the surface without having to pretend I'm something else. And people like talking to me," she said ironically, only realising her statement as Morgana deflated. "I don't need to be on top, you shouldn't either. It's better to have people look at you with respect as equals, than in fear as inferiors, or condemnation as superiors. It doesn't matter at the end of it, the Church should be about doing good, not claiming power." "I don't know if you're just naïve, Arthuria, or one hell of a liar," said Morgana, staring out of the window, snow continuing to fall down onto the streets. "But I think in some way you might be right. A little bit, amongst the bullshit," she said with a smile. Arthuria laughed. "Fair enough, I'm sure you'll come around with time," she said, returning the smile before leaning on her wrist. "I'll think about it. I should probably head back. Can I take these leftovers with me?"

They left, heading back through the city towards the nearest out of sight statue that Morgana could find, a box full of leftovers hanging from a ribbon in her mitten-covered hands. She activated the statue, the doors sliding open for her. "This was nice, thank you Arthuria. Can we do it again sometime?" Morgana asked. Arthuria nodded. "Of course, though it's probably best if you come to me. You can reach me through the Convent. I'm happy to meet anytime, even if it's just for a walk," Arthuria offered. Morgana smiled, stepping inside the statue. "Next week?" she asked, shyly. Arthuria nodded. "Then, see you soon. Goodbye Sister."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Scolding

As soon as the doors shut, Arthuria turned around and headed quickly back to the Convent, her eyes watching the floating orb hovering above her. It had been watching her ever since they had reached the bakery, presumably listening to their entire conversation. It floated after her, Arthuria holding her composure as best as she could as she walked through the snow-laden island, but as she crossed the threshold of the Sister's Convent, it evaporated in a puff of invisible smoke, the floating eye returning to its beholder.

Arthuria let out a sigh of relief as she pushed her way through the large wooden doors of the Convent, her heart finally slowing as she collected her thoughts on the entire day. Slowly she stumbled through the corridors to the locker room, stripping off as soon as she passed a bench and waltzing straight into the showers, her blindfold off, her hair released, but her gloves still on. She leant against the wall, the waterfall-style shower falling heavily onto her head and shoulders as she looked up at the ceiling. The wailing of the Pantry echoed in her mind. The taste and smell of blood stained her mouth and nose. The cold feeling of the chasm, and the trio of huts beyond it, sent shivers through her, even as the hot water rushed over her body. And the stomach-twisting images of the endless dissected corpses blurred her vision.

Arthuria shut her eyes, her head leaning further backwards until she could hear nothing apart from her heartbeat and the rushing of water on her ears. She quickly began to grow cold, even as her skin turned pink under the scalding waters. She turned off the shower, walking across the tiles before stepping into the communal bath: the huge room, one giant bathtub. She slowly slid inside, the water up to her shoulders as she sat down, her long, wet, golden hair hanging over the edge, the tips touching the floor. It was gloriously warm, the water cloudy from the salt and other minerals mixed in, the steam smelling of flowers as it tickled her nose, removing the taint of the Crypt from within her.

"Ahem," came a voice from the doorway behind her. Arthuria slowly began to sink further into the waters, until a hand pressed down on her scalp forcing her under. She shot upwards, Meredea glaring at her. "Oh, hey. I didn't notice you," said Arthuria, as she wiped water from her eyes. "Yeah, you didn't," confirmed Meredea. "Do you know how lucky you are to be alive?" she asked, taking off her own clothes before stepping inside and laying down in the waters. "Um," began Arthuria. Meredea threw water at her. "You were this close to death," stated Meredea, pinching her fingers together. "Somehow, through the Goddess

of Bullshit herself, you managed to lie your way out of the deepest part of the Crypt. Even I struggle to not get noticed down there. If it had been any other Serving Girl you bumped into..."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry," stated Arthuria, sinking until her mouth grazed the surface of the water. "You don't know, but I hate that I'm both impressed and proud of you for it. There's a lot more for you to see down there, but I think you got the gist of who and what the Daughters of Shade are. You're on child duty for the next month, and even then you're not going back in there, I'll find other ways of showing you what you need to see," Meredea stated, with pride and an unusual sight of genuine anger. "I'm sorry..." muttered Arthuria, pulling her legs in and hugging them to her body as tears slowly formed in her eyes, the adrenaline fading and fear replacing her insides as the full weight of the day pressed down upon her.

In an instant, Meredea slid through the water to sit next to her, Arthuria's head falling onto her shoulder as Meredea took her hand. Arthuria began to sob, the overwhelming horror flooding her mind from all directions as Meredea held her. "I know, I know... it's horrible. It's okay to be scared, you're safe here. I won't let anything happen to you," she said softly, her skin unusually warm, as Arthuria rested upon it. "I've got you, you're safe," she repeated, continuing to hold Arthuria long after she had stopped crying.

Arthuria eventually leant away, wiping her eyes. "What now?" she asked. "You're on child duty, as I said. But I think I'm going to take you somewhere for a little bit, away from the Capital, until there's no longer eyes on you. You're to meet your leader after the first quarter, to make a beginning report," answered Meredea, slowly stepping up and walking over to get a towel. "First Quarter! How long am I to do this for?" Arthuria asked, standing up and staring at Meredea in shock, only for a towel to smack her in the face. "A year, maybe two or even three. Arthuria Pendragon is still very much in danger. Your copy is far away from here, facing assassination attempt after assassination attempt. And this mission means a lot to Jeanne. She needs you, just not yet. Get some sleep, we have a long road still to travel." Arthuria looked down at her glove covered hands, her fingers numb. "For the Order..." she muttered. "For Elder d'Arc."

Chapter 42: Into the Unknown

The city of Utarune had been good to the Rising Aces: the Stacked Hand had been completely refurbished, its stores refilled, cannons equipped, and crew happy. Jayce was almost disappointed to leave, but, as he ran through the long list of checks Bjorn had shoved into his hands, he couldn't help but grin, excitement running rampant through his body as he thought about their next destination: the Rockies. A whistle drew his attention. "What?" Jayce called over the edge of the ship, looking down at Bjorn as he stood on the pier talking to a well-dressed woman. "Get down here!" yelled his Quartermaster.

Jayce sighed, climbing quickly down the ladder built into the side of the Stacked Hand's hull before dropping onto the pier. "Are you the Captain?" asked the woman, a large green badge displayed prominently on her chest: a jade mask with a crescent taken out of it - the World Guild logo. "I am he," answered Jayce curiously. "Right, your Quartermaster and I were discussing potentially taking cargo to the city of Caedom. I'm offering ten thousand pearl for the successful delivery of four crates," she stated. Jayce's eyes widened and he glanced towards Bjorn. "What's the problem?" Jayce asked.

Bjorn leant down to whisper. "I think we can get a better deal. I didn't want to move without your say so," Bjorn whispered. Jayce nodded, giving an unsubtle thumbs up - the Guild trader rolled her eyes. "Since you're coming to us, I assume your expected trader has failed to arrive. Right?" Jayce probed. She sighed. "Yes, they have. You're the only crew I've come across heading to the Rockies. Can you take my cargo there, please? Its simple energised gypsum, harvested from the desert. Four crates, no fuss, no risk, and it's going to your destination anyway."

Jayce nodded, thinking intently. "Twenty-five thousand, we are doing you a -". "Done!" she stated, shaking their hands. "I'll have the crates loaded onto your vessel. The due date is in six weeks' time: Umbrumday, nineteenth of Vermis. I'll bring half your payment with the crates, the other half will be given on delivery. Please be aware, thievery is frowned upon by the Guild, and as such you will be barred from utilising Guild services as penalty if the items fail to be delivered. Unless they are replaced or are repaid at an upmarket value. Thank you. Pleasure doing business," she stated with a bow, before quickly walking away.

"That went well," Jayce stated. Bjorn nodded, stroking his chin as he watched her leave. "She took that price very well. Almost... happily, considering you more than doubled the amount," said Bjorn, shaking his head, before pulling out a list

and making an edit. "She clearly seemed desperate, perhaps she's just happy to have it on route. Anyway, are we ready to leave?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded, pointing to a few young men pushing a series of trolleys across the pier and beckoning them over. "Most crew are on board, we're just waiting on Wicke and Marisha to return from their last trip and for the last bits of cargo we're taking to arrive. Oh, and there is one last bill we have to settle," Bjorn stated, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small pile of papers.

Jayce winced as he looked at the cost, a punishment for not keeping a better eye on RK. "He just had to try to eat every building along that street," Jayce sighed, shaking his head as he pulled out a pen and wrote a billing reference on the bottom. "This will do, right?" Jayce asked, showing it to Bjorn. The baned roared with laughter. "Sure, why not?" he answered, pocketing the document, the bill now redirected to Marine Lieutenant Commander Alara Vanathur. Jayce smiled, patting Bjorn on the shoulder before heading towards the ladder. "Good, keep up the good work Quartermaster," he said. Bjorn grinned, giving a nod. "Aye aye, Captain Exarga."

Jayce headed to his quarters, climbing the curved steps to the aft deck before walking through his blue door to his room. He slid off his shoes, waving his hand behind him – the door locking with a click – before he clenched his fist, the giant windows tinting and the room darkening. He walked forwards across his fluffy rug before laying down on his colossal bed. It was the softest thing Jayce had ever experienced, yet the bed remained firm and supportive of his body as he lay upon it.

He could stretch out width ways with his arms extended and still have a few centimetres of space; the bed was huge, preposterously big. He crawled across it, laying his head down on its numerous pillows before reaching around the headboard and pressing a rune. A small gust of cool wind flowed across him, the duvet puffing up a little as cold air flowed through the mattress. "That damned djinn knows what he's doing," moaned Jayce, shutting his eyes.

"Jayce," came the voice of Wicke through his necklace, startling him awake. Jayce blinked, clenching his hand and untinting the windows before rolling across his bed to his feet. "Yeah, yep, I'm here. What's up?" Jayce answered groggily into his communicator. "We're ready to leave. All crew are aboard," Wicke answered. Jayce slipped on his shoes, waving his hand and unlocking his door before stepping outside into the open air. Wicke looked up at him, her arms crossed. "Did I disturb your nap?" she asked, glaring at him.

"No, no. Just resting my eyes. Captain's got to be ready for anything," Jayce answered with a grin, patting the top of her large hat before stepping forwards to the wheel, where Bjorn stood waiting. "We ready?" Jayce asked him. Bjorn nodded. "Then let's go! To the Rockies!" Jayce declared, the sails unfurling and the lines tightening with the press of a glyph on the wheel. "All crew to their stations!" yelled Bjorn across the deck, taking control of the ship's wheel. Vexx leapt high into the air, vaulting onto the yards of the main mast to quickly climb to the crow's nest, Falconer's crow cawing at him in surprise before taking to the air. Falconer climbed to the aft deck, a prepared route in hand as he showed it to Bjorn.

They departed out of the docks, sailing quickly into the main channel, Utarune falling behind them as they built up speed. It wasn't long before they emerged onto the open seas, the ship sailing like a dream and the hours falling away along with the sands of Deadman's Run. They weighed anchor as night fell, all settling down in the living room to eat dinner. The area was too small for RK, so he remained outside - a small cluster of rocks lay ready for him to consume. After two weeks of eating out in restaurants, inns, and cafés, the greasy, overdone meal Marisha had prepared for them did not go down easy, but with the comfortable lights, the well-crafted furniture, and the good company, the crew managed to finish it all.

Jayce spent the majority of his time in the training room, his new silver longsword unwieldy and heavy, compared the weapon he had been gifted by Alara. He swung at the dummies, their bodies slowly repairing themselves as he hacked away at them, trying to find a balance between his sabre and longsword. "You're not Bjorn," stated Vexx, walking casually into the room with his top off. He was glistening, his brow dripping with sweat. He was also very muscular, veins visible along his forearms; his biceps, shoulders and legs rippled with muscle. Yet, he still seemed small and skinny, and as Jayce watched him walk across the room his body seemed to condense, the muscle getting tighter, more dense beneath his skin. Jayce found himself staring at his abs, an immediate sense of jealousy running through his mind.

"Oi, don't look at what you can't afford. Your sword is new, different, you'll need a new style to utilise it properly," stated Vexx, taking Jayce's weapons in his hands. "This type of longsword is normally used with a shield. Your sabre is your shield, this means the style you'll use is reactionary. You need to learn how to counter, how to defend rather than attack aggressively. That means two things: one - you need to learn when to hit, two - you need to learn how to hit hard. Run

through the forms of Focus you've learnt for me," instructed Vexx, stepping back and practicing with Jayce's weapons to get a feel for how they worked.

Jayce nodded, entering into Focus, the waves building up in his head before fading away with a single droplet. His eyes concentrated, a strong glow enveloping the weapons in Vexx's hands, as well as Vexx himself, as he strengthened his Gaze. "Good, next," Vexx stated. Jayce steadied himself, his heartbeat slowing and a sense of calm coming over his body before his emotions switched into a sense of pure rage. He focused that feeling outwards and Vexx staggered, quickly shrugging it off and turning to face Jayce. "Panic has come along nicely. The other two?"

Jayce looked down at his arms, concentrating. His veins began to glow, lines spreading across his arms before they erupted into a glowing red flame, enveloping his entire forearm. "That's Punishment. It's still a bit slow, but you're getting the hang of it," Vexx stated, placing the swords down and walking over to a table, several pieces of chalk laying upon it. He picked up a piece, throwing it hard in Jayce's direction. The piece shattered on his temple, and instinctively Jayce flinched, but he didn't feel it at all. "And that's Endurance. Good." Jayce rubbed his temple. "Some warning would be nice. I only just protected myself." "All more reason for surprise attacks. The fact you blocked it at all implies your Sense is working as well, that was an angle in your blind spot. You didn't see it coming. So that's half of the ten that you can actually use, albeit not perfectly. By the time we reach Caedom we'll have fixed the other five. Get ready."

Jayce stumbled around the ship several days later, his body aching, his muscles sore, and his skin dotted with bruises. He was beginning to appreciate the ways things were coming together: he didn't need to force his crew to cooperate, they just did. Jayce headed to Bjorn's quartermaster station, supplies and daily items were ready for easy access, a little sign-in sheet available to identify who had taken what. If Bjorn needed any extra materials he could head over to Tempest: the djinn was more than happy to make anything requested of him.

If he didn't have the resources, he could head over to Yuthura, she could then transmute the raw resources he needed. If Yuthura needed medical herbs for her potions or medicines she could head over to Falconer's garden, a variety of medical plants ready for use. Jayce passed by Wicke's library, a box had been nailed to the outside wall. It was a box for research requests, a small stack of papers already filling the small container. Jayce grinned, sticking his head inside

the room to find her reading quickly through a large book, every so often making a small note in a notebook next to her. He stepped away and kept walking.

"Captain," came the voice of Falconer through his necklace, a little later. "The entrance to the Rockies is in view, please come to the aft deck," he stated concisely. "On my way," Jayce answered, stepping out of the living room with Marisha hot on his heels. "Are we all set?" Jayce called up to the aft deck, Falconer and Bjorn both talking intently. "Aye!" called down Bjorn. "It's going to get bumpy though, take a look ahead."

Jayce ran to the bow, looking up ahead at their destination. A giant landmass lay ahead of them, the entire continent a series of giant canyons made of red stone that towered over the Stacked Hand. There was a clear entrance to the area, the waters flowed quickly into the canyon, creating an entrance of sharp rapids that turned the green-blue waters white. Jayce ran back to the aft deck. "Raise all but the rear sails, we were warned about the rapids. Let's do this," Jayce said to Falconer and Bjorn. The pair nodding before following his command.

"How much width do we have in the canyons? It's going to be tight," asked Bjorn. "Fifty metres at the narrowest," Falconer answered, bringing a wince onto both Bjorn and Jayce's faces. "That is tight, we'll take it slow and carefully," Jayce stated. The pair looked at him and he looked back at them. "Let's go," Jayce said. "Onwards to a new land, a new region, full of mysteries and new people," added Bjorn. "To the Rockies, then," stated Falconer with a wide smile.

The entire crew stood around the top decks, watching the landmass get closer as they sailed towards the rapids, until finally, as the ship caught the current, Jayce gave the order: "Raise the sail!". The ship tilted downwards, accelerating quickly as they were dragged into the canyons. Bjorn stood behind the wheel, his claws dug into the wood and his eyes locked ahead of them, as he made minor changes to try to control the ship on the rapids. Falconer and Jayce stood on either side of him, both assessing their surroundings for any way to aide Bjorn as he steered.

Falconer reached behind him, grabbing one of the cages he had brought from below deck, a large seagull screeching inside. "I'm going to scout above," he stated. "The canyon tops might be safer to walk across, this seems suicidal!" he added, opening the cage and taking the gull out before throwing it into the air. The canyons towered above them, blocking out the majority of the sunlight even in the widest parts of the rapids. The Stacked Hand seemed tiny in comparison as the seagull took to the air, flying quickly upwards.

Jayce and Falconer both stared at the bird as it flew. "What do you think is on top?" Jayce asked. As Falconer went to answer, a large hand shot out from the canyon wall, grabbing the seagull before retracting in the blink of an eye. They stared in horror as the white feathers of the gull were caught in the wind and swept away out of sight. "Well," began Jayce, only to pause and shudder. "Never mind about going upwards," he added. Falconer slowly nodded, the pair quietly turning back to the face the front of the ship.

The rapids dropped in height, the ship temporarily skipping out of the waters before crashing back down, Jayce's stomach lurching as they went airborne. Wicke whooped and cheered as she stood on the main deck, taking in the sights around them as they zoomed through the canyons. A large marking carved into the walls flew by them: a circle with three lines through the bottom. "What was that?" she yelled up to them. Jayce too looked confused by the strange symbol, but the others seemed to have not noticed. "I don't know!" yelled back Jayce, the wind rushing by him and the waters crashing around them.

"Vexx!" Jayce yelled up, only to sigh and shake his head as he spotted Vexx swaying at the top of the crow's nest with a large bottle of rum in his hands. "Vexx!" Jayce repeated, this time into his communicator. Vexx leant over the railing, looking down at Jayce. "Yeah?" he slurred, initially too quietly until he too switched to the communicator. "Did you see what was on the walls?" Jayce asked. "See what?" came the answer. Jayce waved it off, turning to look back at the walls.

Another flew by several minutes later, still a circle, but this time with only two lines. "Two this time," stated Wicke. "A countdown?" she suggested. Jayce nodded to her, Falconer and Marisha both also starting to take notice – Bjorn remained glued to the wheel, his body frozen as he held the wheel still. A third circle flew by, this time with only a single line. "Turn! Turn right!" yelled Vexx from the crow's nest. Bjorn span the wheel, his eyes widening as a sheer wall appeared in front of them, the waters sharply turning right. The ship brushed the edge of the canyon wall as they turned, the current tilting the ship before throwing them towards the other side of the canyon. Bjorn turned the wheel away, desperately turning them as the ship continued to race across the waters.

They let out a collective sigh of relief as they moved back into the centre of the rapids, the walls straightening out again. "The lines are a countdown, the circle means right!" stated Wicke to the entire crew across the communicator. A diamond shape flew past them, the bottom marked with three lines. "That's got

to be left, right?" Bjorn asked. Jayce shrugged, nudging Bjorn off the wheel and taking his position. "Most likely, keep your eyes peeled." Another diamond flew by, this time marked with two lines. A while later came the final marker. "Left! Left!" yelled Marisha from the foremost crow's nest; Vexx was passed out at the top of the main mast. Jayce turned the wheel, fighting with it along with the aid of Bjorn as they tried to ride the centre of the current, this time turning in a significantly safer manner.

The seconds turned into minutes, the minutes into hours as the day flew by them. Darkness began to fall over the canyons, the rocky walls getting harder and harder to see. "This is going to become a problem if we can't stop soon, Captain," stated Bjorn from behind the wheel. "Agreed. Wicke, Tempest, can either of you give us some light!" Jayce called out. Wicke nodded, beginning to chant as Tempest disappeared below deck. A glowing orb formed in her hands, a bright light emanating from it in all directions. She ran forwards, throwing it into the air before holding her arms up, the orb of light hovering in front of the ship. "She's not going to be able to hold that long," stated Bjorn, briefly glancing at Jayce. Jayce nodded in agreement. "She'll have to hold it for now," he said, an uneasy feeling building in his stomach.

The minutes continued to pass, Wicke remaining with her arms held upwards in front of her, her entire body shaking and a deep sweat running from her face. "I can't! I can't!" she yelled, her arms dropping on their own and the entire area falling into darkness, the strong sounds of the rapids continuing to roar around them in the void. "Falconer!" garbled the voice of Tempest as he floated quickly onto the top deck, a bundle of small items in his arms. Falconer raced forwards, grabbing one of the items and drawing his bow before he released the arrow in front of them.

It glowed brightly, a large golden line falling behind the flying arrow as it sailed quickly ahead of them, illuminating their path ahead. A marking flew past them, two triangles back to back with three lines between them. "New marking!" yelled out Bjorn, his eyes still locked ahead of them as he gripped the wheel, his entire body vibrating from holding his position so long. Jayce bumped him off the wheel, taking over, his own body exhausted. Another pair of triangles flew past, this time with two markings.

"What does it mean?" called out Jayce to Wicke as Falconer released another arrow. She shook her head. "I don't know. A stop point, a split, I don't know." Jayce nodded. "All eyes forwards!" he ordered, the various members taking

different positions across the ship, all except for Vexx who had disappeared somewhere below deck. The third marker flew past, Falconer releasing another arrow ahead. "It's a split!" yelled Marisha, Jayce's eyes widening as he held the wheel. "Left or right! Make a choice!" yelled Bjorn. Jayce turned the wheel left, the ship tilting as it caught a wave, he then rapidly turned the wheel right, bouncing from one wave to another to cut across the whirlpools that had built up by the split. The ship scraped against the edge, Tempest immediately floating to assess the damage, before it carried onwards down the path to the right.

"Damage?" Jayce requested, as Falconer fired off another flare arrow. Tempest floated back onto the deck, reaching into one of his bags to pull out a small notebook. He flicked through the pages, eventually settling on one of note. He gave a slow thumbs up, bringing a faint smile to Jayce's face before it was snatched away as the ship lurched, dropping from the rapids out onto open water. Jayce looked around. They had landed onto a large lake in the middle of the canyons. A huge stone pillar sat in the middle, its entire body illuminated by the lights of the many buildings that had been built onto it: a vertical town in the middle of the lake. There was a collective sigh of the relief as the ship slowly began to drift out, a wave of exhaustion passing across the entire group. Jayce steered them towards the docks, the ship carrying the momentum the entire way.

They docked the ship, disembarking to find a sleepy dockhand approaching them. "Good evening," he yawned, "Welcome to Port Nemado. Docking fee please." They paid their dues of one hundred pearl, the group immediately heading to the nearest tavern for some food before returning back to the ship for some sleep. They slept in, the hours passing long into the morning before anyone got out of their respective beds. Eventually Jayce and Bjorn headed off the Stacked Hand, leaving the others behind as they began to climb the outpost to the nearest supply shop.

"Welcome," called out the shop owner, as they stepped inside a shop built into the side of the rock. The entire cave was decorated with supplies, with the shop front acting as a hatch to the seal off the cavern. "Hi there," Jayce answered, Bjorn nodding a greeting behind him. "How may I serve you today?" asked the shop owner, a slightly rotund old woman with long curly grey hair. "We're new to the region, and we, well, the journey here was an exciting one to say the least. We were wondering if you had any maps, or advice, or general information on the region that you could supply us with?" Jayce asked.

She nodded, reaching below the counter to pull out a sealed tube. She opened it, pulling out and unfurling a small map. "Well, information comes at a price, but I can certainly aide you. As I hope you are aware, you are in the Rockies, the largest continent in the New World. It is fractured, but not into archipelagos like the rest of the world. As you can see," she stated, pointing to the map. There was a large outline of the region, rough dimensions had been scribbled onto the map identifying routes ranging in the hundreds of kilometres.

The entire area was split up into a series of cascading channels, most winding and twisting their way through the continent. They all connected to each other, often through joining bodies of water like the lake Jayce and the others were currently upon. Somewhere along the channels, normally towards either the end or the middle, the path would split into two different directions leading onto two different channels, each with their own destination. Around the outskirts of the continent were several inlets that allowed for entry and exit: Jayce counted eight in total - three exits, five entrances.

"The Rockies are full of channels connected in a - how do you put it - cascading structure? They flow from one another, creating different routes. This means that if you choose one path over another, you could seal off an entire part of the continent. So, this means some routes - the ones nearer the middle, are more commonly travelled. As such there are four locations in particular most people travel through: Ruur, Aurare, Caedom, and Silvalan." Jayce nodded along as she pointed out the four locations.

"So, Ruur is an area full of tombs. Caedom is the Capital of this region, big city, lots of people. Silvalan is this large area full of really big trees and Aurare is a large casino area, lots of very rich people, gambling and the sorts. There's over thirty minor locations along the other paths, but if you stick to this route you pass through all four major locations. Since you made it here, I assume you've figured out what the symbols on the routes mean?" she asked. Again Jayce nodded, quickly reciting the examples they had seen. "Ah, right. There's one more to be aware off: a large square means an alcove or cave that can be rested in. I would always advise stopping, these routes are stressful to even experienced sailors and crews."

"Thank you, how much for the map and information?" Jayce asked. She smiled, thinking to herself. "Call it fifteen pearl, it's been a while since someone's come this way, and you're polite enough," she answered. Jayce handed her twenty, taking the map and departing. "Well," Bjorn said at last, as they began the walk

back to the ship. "That was slightly complicated. I'll pass it on to Falconer."
"Thanks. We'll take the day off, leave first thing tomorrow. Let's take the route she suggested. We need to go to Caedom anyway, and a city of ruins, gambling, and giant trees sounds like fun," Jayce stated. Bjorn laughed, nodding in agreement. "Vexx is going to love at least two of those."

Seize the Seas Tales: Exhaustion

Jayce returned to the ship, heading towards the living room to try and find Wicke. He stuck his head in, looking towards her usual position near one of the sofas. She wasn't there. Jayce shook his head, it was nearly noon, so he headed down the stairs of the ship towards her room. He knocked on her door. There was no answer. He waited a moment before knocking again. Once more, no answer.

Jayce pushed the door open, glancing inside. He looked towards her desk, she wasn't there. Towards her personal bathroom, the lights were off. Finally he rested his eyes on her bed: she was still fast asleep, her body tucked tightly into the wall that her bed lay against. Jayce entered into Focus, glancing more deeply towards her. Her chest was slowly rising and falling, and having determined she was still alive, Jayce departed, leaving her to her rest.

It was several hours later, as Jayce once again wandered the ship looking for his crew, that he realised he hadn't seen Wicke at all. He headed back to her room, once again knocking on the door before peeking inside. She had moved from her bed to her desk, a large open book sat before her, her face pressed upon its pages, a small stream of drool falling from her mouth as she lay there asleep. "Wicke?" Jayce said, the girl groaning before slowly opening her eyes. Her face was flushed and, as Jayce stepped closer to her, he noticed a faint surface of sweat across her entire body.

"Yeah?" she queried, slowly and feebly moving to avoid his hand as he pressed his fingers to her forehead. She was burning up, her skin hot to touch and her breathing shallow. "You're ill! Back in bed, I'll get Yuthura," he said, moving to head to the door. Wicke reached out, grabbing his arm and stopping him. "No," she complained weakly. "I need to finish my work. Make up for failing yesterday..." Jayce turned and looked down at her, she was avoiding his gaze, swaying slightly in her chair. "Getting better takes a priority, you know that. Go on. And you didn't fail. Did you try your best?" he asked. She nodded. "Then that's all I ask of you."

She looked down, shaking her head softly. "I still need to work, I'm nearly done." Jayce sighed, stepping next to her before bending down and scooping her up out of her chair. He carried her to her bed, her eyes wide as she looked up at him with her arms around his neck. He placed her down, tucking her in, before heading towards the door once again. "Stay with me?" she asked softly. Jayce shook his head, letting out a sigh before he turned back around and picked up a glass from her bedside table, carrying it into her bathroom.

Jayce refilled it with cold water from her tap, taking a small washcloth and dipping it in the water before returning to her. He wiped her face, the teenager fighting as he smeared her face with cold water before he began slowly dabbing her cheeks and forehead with the cloth. "Asshole," she muttered. "Read to me," she ordered. Jayce sighed once more, heading over to her desk and picking up the large tome she had been sleeping on. He glanced at the cover: the writing was in Arcanum. It took him a moment, but he eventually translated the title, taking off his necklace to prevent the translation enchantment from muddling up the words.

"Mages and their disciplines," he read, flicking back to the page she was on. He began to read, slowly and slightly inaccurately, but every time he made a major mistake Wicke immediately corrected him. It wasn't long before he glanced over and her eyes were shut, her mouth slightly agape as she snored softly. He shut the book, placing it back down on her desk before rewetting the cloth and placing it on her forehead. He then refilled her bedside glass of water, placing it down next to her before slipping out of the room.

Jayce headed immediately to the Doctor's room. Yuthura sat inside, looking at a petri dish through a microscope. Jayce knocked and she slowly glanced over her shoulder before beckoning him inside. "What now?" she asked. Jayce scoffed. "How may I help you, Captain?" he corrected. She was not amused. "Wicke's ill. She has a fever and seems quite exhausted," he stated, glancing around the room at the impressive collection of medicines and books. "I'm not surprised, the foolish girl has been working herself to the bone," Yuthura stated. Jayce faltered. "You didn't notice?" Yuthura asked, turning around on her chair and looking at him.

Jayce shook his head. "She's young, and foolhardy. She wants to be useful to the adults, so she's been pushing herself. I think she's probably not been sleeping very long, and she's certainly been skipping out on exercising. I'll give her a look, but she needs proper rest," Yuthura stated. Jayce nodded, turning around and

heading to the door. "Jayce, I know you like to dote on her, and I'm not going to pretend I fully understand your relationship with her - you've known her longer than I have - but she idolises you. I get that you see her as a younger sister, but understand she is at an age where feelings manifest in different ways. She may see you differently than you see her. I think when we get to Caedom it'll do her some good to have a break, from all of this – and to meet others her age. Just be careful with her, she's fragile."

Jayce paused, but he slowly nodded in agreement, turning to look back at Yuthura. "Since when were you an expert in psychology? I'll be careful," he said. She shook her head. "Welfare is my job, not just physical," she answered. Jayce smiled, only to look past her as he spotted a photo frame of a small infant on her desk. She followed his gaze, turning to look at it before sighing and crossing her arms. "You get one question. Choose it carefully," she warned, glaring at him. "Grandchild?" he asked curiously. She scowled at him, standing up and shooing him out of the door. "Get out!" she ordered, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 43: A City of Tombs

They left Port Nemado early the following morning. Wicke was still on bed rest, but the remainder of the crew had sorted out a rotation schedule to handle the long, high-intensity voyages. Jayce found himself paired with Vexx, and as they zoomed through the various canyons of the Rockies, Jayce couldn't help but feel conflicted. "What?" Vexx asked, wiping his mouth as he leant against the railing of the aft deck next to Jayce. "I didn't say anything," Jayce stated, his eyes flicking to the empty bottle of neat rum Vexx had placed down on the floor and the half-empty one he had in his hand.

"No no no, I see your looks. Go on, speak up. You clearly want to say something," Vexx stated, turning around and crossing his arms. "I just think it's unwise to drink so much. You stopped for a while, albeit you did substitute - I just think it's a little excessive. It's not healthy," Jayce said, maintaining his eyes ahead as he gripped the wheel with both hands. "I'm fine," Vexx answered. Jayce nodded. "I'm sure you are... but, you know, if there's a reason to it. If it's... I'm here to talk. Just saying. Things have slowed down again, Utarune was nice, but it was busy. I-I get that, I think. You know?" Jayce attempted.

Vexx shook his head. "I'm fine Jayce, leave it be," he said, his voice cold and unnerving. "Right... right. Just don't let it control you, please." Vexx rolled his eyes, taking a deep swig from his bottle before sauntering away. "You missed a marker," Vexx stated, as he walked down the stairs to the main deck. "There's a left turn coming." Jayce looked down at him, nodding before checking the map. "Okay, good catch. Thanks."

Jayce felt relieved when Bjorn switched with him, and he didn't like that. With a while until his next shift, Jayce headed to his room, sitting down at his desk and opening the letter he had received in the morning. The sight of a large brown otter climbing the ladder of the Stacked Hand had been quite surprising to him, it was all the more surprising when it took off its backpack and took out the crew's mail.

As he read through it, he frowned. "Pirate Lord?" Jayce questioned out loud, standing up and wandering over to his bed before laying down upon it. He continued reading, bolting upright, his eyes wide. Jayce rushed out of the room, Bjorn briefly glancing behind, out of curiosity, as he stood behind the wheel. "Bjorn! Bjorn!" Jayce said, quickly walking up to him. Yuthura raised an eyebrow as she looked at Jayce from next to the wheel. "That's my name," Bjorn stated.

"Have you ever heard of the name: Kitty Deliver?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded. "You haven't? She's a Pirate Lord, very famous. Why?" Bjorn asked curiously. "She's an acquaintance I met a while back. What's a Pirate Lord?" Jayce asked, casually throwing aside his first statement. Yuthura and Bjorn stared at him. "You know Kitty Deliver?" Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded. "How? When? What?" "I punched a few of her crewmates. What's a Pirate Lord?" he repeated. "You did what?" Bjorn exclaimed, Yuthura quickly taking over the wheel as he turned and stared at Jayce.

Bjorn nearly fainted as he listened to Jayce recount his encounter with Kitty Deliver. Yuthura just laughed. "Promise me, don't ever do something like that again," Bjorn stated. Jayce stared at him confused. "Pirate Lords rule the seas. They are the eight most wanted people in the New World. They are infamous, and if we ever come across one, it should be our biggest goal to get away from them. They are dangerous, chaotic, and terrifyingly powerful," Bjorn explained. Jayce gulped, slowly looking down at the letter in his hands before looking back at Bjorn.

Jayce handed him the letter, Bjorn skim-read it, faltering as he neared the end. "You could have warned me about the last part..." Bjorn said with a depressed look on his face. Jayce took it back, blushing. "Ah oops, sorry," Jayce chuckled softly. "Alara's picking fights with dangerous people, two Pirate Lords – her Captain is suicidal. From what she said, it seems Kitty wants to find you. That's probably a bad thing. Fortunately she's on the other side of the world," Bjorn stated quietly. Jayce shook his head. "I think you're being overdramatic. Kitty seemed nice, a bit excitable, but nice. And if she's a person in such a position, surely she'd be a great ally?"

"Pirate Lords are enemies of the Empire. There's a treaty with them for a reason. As long as they don't cause trouble they have free reign. They are dangerous people Jayce, really dangerous people, with a lot of influence. I don't think it's worth the risk, not unless you're aiming to become one, and that's not a good ambition. We should stay small, keep low, keep out of the Empire's eyes." Jayce nodded, sighing as he looked down at the letter. "Somehow I don't think we'll have a choice. Okay, thank you for the advice and the explanation." Bjorn nodded, turning back around to take over the ship.

The days passed quickly as they navigated the canyons of the Rockies. With a map, crew rotations, and stopping points – whether small village or port, alcove or cave, they travelled safely without issue. They awoke early one morning, the

rapids roaring nearby as the ship sat peacefully in an alcove in the canyon wall. Jayce let out a long yawn as he stumbled out of his room, Bjorn already behind the wheel and making the final preparations. "Morning Jayce," he said, as Jayce walked past him heading towards the stairs. "Morning, are we ready to sail?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded. "Then let's go."

The ship accelerated quickly as they re-joined the rapids, almost immediately slowing back down as it splashed down onto open water. Bjorn stared at Jayce, Jayce stared at Bjorn, they then both stared at Falconer. "We were this close!" Jayce stated in disbelief. "In my defence," Falconer began, faltering before he looked at the map, eventually just letting out a sigh and shaking his head. "My error, welcome to Ruur!"

Jayce wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but Ruur certainly had not been it. The entire area was one colossal canyon, a large cylindrical plateau sat in the middle, below the higher tops of the canyon itself. A small town had been built around the base, a large port bridging the land and the open lake, but all around the greater canyon were colossal statues carved into the walls. There were also entrances to tombs, thousands of them, all in varying degrees of elevation. Some were clearly more recent than others: as they sailed past, Jayce could see the faint writing carved into the doors, all in Arcanum, whereas others were half-buried in the canyon wall. A few archaeologists were slowly excavating a few of the entrances with small chisel-like items.

Jayce rushed through his breakfast as Bjorn and the others guided the Stacked Hand to the main port, stepping onto the main deck just as they finished docking. The crew collected together, all looking towards Jayce for further orders. "Well, I'm not sure how long we're going to be here for," he began, Wicke slowly edging herself closer towards the ship's ladder. "I want to check out a tomb or two, otherwise enjoy some downtime, we've earned it. Usual rules, stay in pairs, or at least tell your partner where you're going. Tempest, you're in charge of RK. Enjoy!" Jayce stated. Wicke and Vexx looked at each other, exchanging a nod before rushing towards the ladder.

Jayce looked at Marisha. "You and me?" he proposed, as Bjorn headed off to talk to the dockmaster. She nodded. "Let's go shopping!" she suggested excitedly. Jayce nodded in agreement. "Wait here for a second," he said, quickly rushing to his quarters before returning with the damaged sword he had received from Alara in hand. Marisha raised an eyebrow as she looked at it. "There's probably

a blacksmith here, I forgot to get it repaired in Utarune,” he explained, climbing down the ladder with her just behind him.

They made their way across the pier towards the main town, past various other sailors carrying cargo to and from their ships. A large guildhall sat in the centre, surrounded by a large marketplace made of temporary buildings, stalls, and tents. There were numerous other buildings built around, but as Jayce and Marisha wandered through the streets, they quickly noticed the majority of the town was actually on top of the water on stilts rather than built on the base of the plateau itself. It was a large town, but somehow it seemed empty. The buildings were populated, the marketplace had a vendor at each of its numerous stalls, and there were plenty of people moving in and out of the guildhall, but the streets were quiet, except for a pair or small group of shoppers.

Marisha led the way as they headed through the market. She held a small glass lens in her hands as she glanced at the numerous items on sale. She'd pause every so often, paying particular attention to an item that had caught her eye, before looking through the enchanted lens - courtesy of Tempest - but otherwise the pair of them were just window shopping. “Ah, here we are,” Jayce said at last, stopping outside one of the only physical buildings in the marketplace. Smoke flowed out of a hole made into the roof of the cheaply made wooden building, and the distinct sound of a hammer hitting metal rang out from inside. There was no sign, no real indication that the place was a shop, but, as Jayce tried the latch on the large metal sliding door that acted as the main entranceway, the door slid open.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Marisha asked with a slight smile, her attention quickly moving onwards to another stall nearby. “It's fine. I've got this. Just be careful, we'll meet back here in ten minutes. Don't do anything foolish,” he said. She turned back to look at him, sticking her tongue out. “I'm not Wicke, I can handle my money.” Jayce rolled his eyes, shaking his head before stepping inside the shop.

The walls were decorated with weapons and armour, the entire space cluttered with spears, swords, shields: anything a fighter would need. The front was just a regular shop, weapon racks lined the walls and there were aisles with containers of the various equipment, but beyond the counter was a large forge. It glowed intensely and there were various pieces of metal resting in the flames. An anvil sat nearby with a huge vat of water placed next to it, a large man stood

hammering away on a flat piece of metal, the beginnings of a shield, Jayce quickly noticed.

He was very tall, with broad boulder-like shoulders on either side of his huge, muscular back. His arms and legs were massive, covered in muscle from years of heavy work. He was borderline topless, a large leather apron covered his hairy front with crossing straps across his back. A thick belt, laden with tools, sat around his waist and he had a pair of loose brown trousers tucked into a pair of steel-toed boots. A pair of silver goggles were resting on his forehead, just over a large grey ribbon wrapped around his bald head, the tail hanging loosely behind him, waving slightly as he hit the shield with a large hammer.

Jayce walked up to the counter, leaning across it and waiting patiently as the man continued to smith. A large tattoo covered his right shoulder, a large anchor with a long chain wrapping around his arm before binding his wrist. Jayce watched in curiosity as the man then proceeded to pick up the in-process shield without any protective equipment before he dunked the item into the large vat of water next to him. Jayce entered into Focus: a large layer of magical energy was covering the Blacksmith's hands - he was using Focus himself, specifically the protection of Endurance.

The Blacksmith faltered as he pulled the item out, observing the metal. He let out a long sigh, placing the shield back down on the anvil before grabbing his hammer with both hands and smashing down on the item. The shield shattered, pieces of metal flying in all directions across the forge; Jayce caught a piece, placing it down on the counter with a small tap. The smith turned, allowing Jayce to get a look at his face. He had a thick brown beard, neatly cut to form a point beneath his chin. He had a large, slightly crooked nose, and a few scars were mingled in with wrinkles around his eyes and cheeks. His face was tattooed, with a pair of large lines leading all the way down across his eyes, smaller lines split off to the sides into small spirals and curves. The tattoos lead all the way around to the back of his head. His eyes were brown and serious, and they met Jayce's, softening as he quickly realised he had a customer.

"Oh, well hello there!" he said in deep, gruff, yet well-mannered voice. "Welcome to Xander's Emporium. It's not much, but out here in the middle of, well, um, wherever we are, it's the best you'll find. How may I help you?" he said. "Trouble with the materials?" Jayce asked, sliding the chunk of shield across the counter. The smith looked down at the item, a quick look of embarrassed recognition covering his face, before his expression changed as he looked

towards Jayce, a thick eyebrow raising in curiosity. "Aye... Are you a smith?" he asked. Jayce shook his head.

"There are more and more impurities in the materials I'm receiving. It's getting... infuriating, but a good smith can work around it. Anyway, I'm Xander – what do you need, stranger?" asked Xander, taking the piece and throwing it behind him onto a large pile of metal shards. Jayce reached down to his side, unclipping his sword from his belt and resting the weapon onto the counter. "I need this repaired, can you do it?" Jayce asked. Xander picked up the sword, unsheathing the blade and looking at the large chip in the sword. He nodded, stepping backwards and resting the sword next to his anvil. "Come back tomorrow, I'll have it fixed. It's not a fighting sword, anyone could tell you that. Where did you get it?"

"It was a gift, and yeah, I've realised. How much will it cost me?" Jayce asked. "Hundred pearl," he stated quickly. Jayce nodded, placing a black pearl on the counter. "Huh, fair enough. I assume you're a sailor, who's your Captain?" Xander asked, taking the coin and leaning across the counter. "I don't have one, I'm my own. My crew and I are just passing through on our way to Caedom," Jayce stated casually. "Really? At your age! What's your name, kid?" Xander asked. "Jayce, Jayce Exarga."

There was an immediate look of faint recognition on Xander's face. "Exarga? As in Admiral Exarga?" he asked. Jayce nodded proudly, puffing his chest out and standing up tall. "Fair enough. I'll have to take a look at your ship. You're a long way from the Capital Exarga, watch yourself. Whilst you're here, feel free to take a look at my wares. There's plenty of high-quality weapons and armour to choose from, well-priced, I'd argue."

"I think I'm good, thank you anyway. I've got enough weapons," Jayce said with a smile patting his sheathed swords. "Mind if I take a look?" Xander asked. Jayce nodded, placing them both onto the counter before stepping back. Xander unsheathed the silver longsword, taking a close look before nodding and placing it down. He then pulled out the Captain's Cutlass, that Jayce had scavenged so long ago. It was slightly warped and damaged, but otherwise was still perfectly functioning.

"Aye, I would replace this. The enchantment is fine, bit simple, a lot weaker than your other sword, but the weapon quality is poor to say the least," Xander stated. "It's served me well. It looks good, what do you mean about the quality?" Jayce asked, taking his longsword back. "Well, a skilled smith can create weapons of

superior quality to that of a normal weapon. To a normal eye it doesn't make a difference, but it matters greatly when in combat. Enchantments can be used to bolster weapons, using magical means if you have the skills, but smiths use different means, different techniques that can make certain weapons greater than others."

He reached behind the counter, pulling out a small black knife. On the base of the hilt was a curved 'X' in a small circle. "Take this for example, it's one of my best... recent creations." He held the knife up to the blade of the cutlass, pressing the two edges together. The small knife cut through the metal like butter, Jayce's sword splitting in two before the blade fell to the floor. "See, quality is incomparable when enough force is placed behind it," Xander stated proudly. "My sword!" Jayce exclaimed, his mouth hanging open.

"Oh oops. My apologies, please help yourself to a replacement. I would recommend the right of side of the room, that's where my higher quality equipment is. They aren't enchanted, but as you just saw, it didn't make a difference." Jayce sighed, shaking his head before he shuffled his way across the room to the large collection. There were numerous swords of all different styles, some blades curved, others straight, some thin, some thick. Jayce couldn't really tell the difference in quality, but he quickly spotted an identical marking to that of Xander's knife on a few of the blades.

He guessed that meant higher quality, so Jayce reached towards a simple longsword with a bronze hilt. He gripped the weapon, pulling it out of the barrel it was placed in and holding it before him. An eye stared at him as he looked at the hilt, he blinked, it blinked, before a mouth opened up on the hilt and bit into his hand. "Ouch!" Jayce yelped, the blade liquifying into black goo before dropping to the floor and forming legs. Another sword melted next to him, leaping to floor before rushing off after the other one.

They chittered as they ran away on long spindly legs, countless red and yellow eyes covering the bodies of the strange creatures as they scurried away before running up the side of Xander's counter. Xander's back was turned as he attended to the fires of his forge. "Look out!" Jayce yelled as the pair of creatures leapt from the counter towards him. Xander turned, the creatures landing onto his arms. They melted, forming a pair of thick black lines across his forearms, a single red and yellow eye glaring at Jayce on each wrist.

Xander chuckled, walking back up to the counter. "My apologies, I should have warned you about Sola and Luna. They didn't hurt you did they?" he asked,

glancing at Jayce as he rubbed his hand. "A small nibble. What are they?" Jayce asked. "Mimics, mischievous ones at that, but they mean no harm – provided they've been fed. I found them a long time ago, and they've been with me ever since," said Xander. He looked down at his wrists, turning them over before flicking out his wrists. A pair of large swords extended into his hands, both identical to the sword Alara had given Jayce, even down to the chip. "Woah," Jayce said with wide eyes. "They're also quite useful from time to time," Xander stated, the pair of mimics melting back into black goo before reforming as markings on his arms.

"Anyway, I best get back to work. It was a pleasure Jayce, come back at some point tomorrow morning and your weapon will be ready. You don't have to pay for whichever sword you choose, it was my fault you lost one." Jayce nodded, walking back to the barrel and pulling out an identical sword to one he had initially chosen, a large bronze longsword. "Thank you Xander. I'll be back." Jayce headed towards the door, clipping the sword and its sheath to his belt.

"One last thing," Xander called out. "There's a graveyard at the top of the plateau. I lost a friend recently, and we've been unable to bury her, some undead have gotten in the way. Could you investigate? See what's causing it and try to stop the source," Xander asked. "Naturally, I'll reward you for your time," he added. Jayce nodded. "I'll take a look," he answered, stepping outside and closing the door.

Marisha was waiting for him, her arms crossed as she leant against a wall. "Took you long enough," she stated, quickly glancing down at Jayce's new sword. "Did some shopping yourself, I see. What was wrong with your other sword?" Jayce sighed. "Apparently a lot. Find anything interesting?" he asked. She shook her head. "Just more trinkets, I think some have uses that Tempest could reverse engineer. We'll have to see. Although I did manage to get some good deals, an old family trick, I guess."

A pair of sailors walked past them, their chatter drawing both Jayce and Marisha's attention. "Shall we head to guildhall next, apparently there's an auction?" asked one of the women. The other shook her head, pointing instead to a building further away. "No, let's go to the bar. I heard two rich people have strolled in and are buying everything, a pair of kids with too much cash on their hands. It'd be pointless and a waste of time," said the other. Marisha and Jayce looked at each other, the pair letting out a collective sigh. "You don't think it's–"

"Of course it's them. Who else would it be?" answered Marisha, chuckling slightly. "I'll meet you there, there's a few more shops I want to check out."

Jayce hurried across the market towards the guildhall. It was an impressive wooden building, decorated with silvers and green with large halls and corridors inside. Beyond the main entrance hall, the numerous corridors all ran around the central stage. Jayce pressed through one of the numerous doors emerging into a giant room, with countless green seats all looking towards a stage. A man stood on the stage, a large barrel resting on a small trolley behind him. "Going once, twice, sold!" he yelled into a microphone, his voice travelling quickly and clearly across the room.

Jayce looked around; the place was practically empty. There were three groups of people, one of which got up and headed towards the exit, the other group getting up as well after watching them leave. The final group was a pair of people sat near the back of the giant hall, their feet resting casually on the backs of the seats in front of them, snacks in one hand, a bidding paddle in the other. They were bickering, and, as Jayce approached, he watched the redheaded girl hit the blonde man next to her with her paddle.

"Enjoying yourselves?" Jayce asked as he approached, glancing back towards the stage as the barrel was wheeled into the wings of the stage. "Very much, but Vexx keeps stealing my prizes," complained Wicke, sticking her tongue out at her companion. "You could just work together right? You have no competition, there's no need to compete," Jayce stated. They looked at each other, a brief sense of realisation crossing their faces. "That would be smart, wouldn't it?" said Wicke. "Our next item is a bottle of liquor taking from one of our local tombs. It is sealed and estimates put the age of the bottle as anywhere from two to three centuries old. Our starting bid is two hundred pearl," stated the auctioneer.

Wicke immediately threw up her paddle. "What are you doing? You can't drink that!" protested Jayce, Vexx throwing up his own paddle to counter Wicke's bid. "It's not for now! And it's my money!" she countered, throwing her paddle up. She glared at Vexx. "This is mine, you already got a big barrel of the stuff." He threw up his paddle. "Vexx..." she said quietly, looking directly at him as she threw up her paddle, away from Jayce. He sighed. "Fine," he said, shaking his head at the auctioneer. "Sold!"

"Thank you," she said softly to Vexx, before turning back to Jayce as he looked down at her with his arms crossed. "Do you want to join us?" she asked. "We are now coming up to our last lot!" called out the auctioneer before Jayce

could answer. "Ah, never mind. I'll just watch," answered Jayce, sitting down next to them. "Our final lot is our last deed to one of Ruur's recently uncovered tombs," said the auctioneer, a small groan coming from both Wicke and Vexx. Jayce looked at them, a confused look on his face. "We already have two. I thought they'd have something special at the end," Wicke said dejectedly, raising her paddle.

With the auction over, the three of them made their way to the front of the hall. "Thank you very much for your patronage," said the auctioneer, bowing deeply to the pair of them. Vexx pulled out a gold pearl and handed it to him as a tip. The auctioneer nodded, placing it in his pocket before guiding them onto the stage. A hand tapped the back of Jayce's shoulder and he turned, glancing down at Marisha. "How bad is the damage?" she asked. Jayce shuddered, following Wicke and Vexx into the wings as they handed over their owed money, staring at the two colossal piles of items. "Woah," stated Marisha.

"Is there anything further you require?" he asked, looking directly towards Wicke and Vexx. Vexx turned to face Jayce, a smug grin on his face. "My assistant could use some explanation on how the tombs operate here," he stated. The auctioneer nodded, an assistant standing behind him. "Of course. The tombs you have purchased are now rightfully yours, feel free to explore inside. Anything you find is yours to keep. Once you or your aides have cleared the tombs, you may resell the tomb back to us. We will purchase it on behalf of our archaeologists."

Vexx pulled out his bottomless bag, pointing it at his pile of loot before collecting it all. The auctioneer's eyes widened, but he didn't say anything. Wicke did the same. "Thank you, you may go," Wicke said with an upturned nose. The auctioneer nodded, turning around, and leaving with his assistant in tow. "Well," Jayce said, "shall we go explore some tombs?"

Seize the Seas Tales: To Seize the Seas

They headed back to the Stacked Hand, the rest of the crew arriving a little later. Wicke and Vexx immediately deposited their loot onto the deck of the ship. "Oh no," muttered Bjorn, slowly turning his head to look at Jayce and Marisha, the pair of them looking curiously at the floor and sky. "How much did you spend?" he asked. Wicke waved it off, kneeling down by her pile and searching through the numerous items.

The majority of the items were random artifacts taken from the tombs: spells scrolls, booze, gems, and jewellery, but amongst them all was a fine, rolled-up rug. It was a deep purple, and as Wicke unrolled it, the inside was decorated with a beautiful golden pattern of interweaving lines that created a sun in the centre. As they looked at it, the rug slowly began to float. Wicke leapt onto it, the young girl floating with the flying rug. "Okay, maybe it was worth it," stated Bjorn as Wicke slowly floated across the deck of the ship, the bottom of the rug covered in large glowing glyphs.

After looping around the ship, Wicke landed and resumed scavenging through her treasures. She picked up a large glass bottle, the inside filled with a golden liquid. She quickly tried to hide it, waiting until Jayce's attention was drawn away by Vexx as he began to roll a huge barrel of booze across the deck, before she slipped it into her bottomless bag. Jayce glared at her, Wicke returned a small smile as she fluttered her eyes at him innocently. He sighed and shook his head.

With the items sorted, they set sail for a small dock extending from the main canyon wall. There were a few other vessels docked, most of which were simple rowboats belonging to the numerous archaeologists, but otherwise the area was empty. "Can I repeat once again just how much of a bad idea I think this is," whined Bjorn as the group disembarked, RK contained in a small glass ball specially designed for him. "Noted. Let's go!" Jayce answered, the group following after Wicke as she began to follow a long path along the edge of the canyon. Eventually they came to a large circular metal door built into the rock face. It had a small keyhole inside the mouth of a menacing skull, the rest of the door covered in intricate etchings that had worn away with time. Wicke reached into the envelope the deed had come in, pulling out the key before she slotted it into the hole and twisted.

The door unlocked with a loud clunk, allowing for them to slowly push their way inside. "Light!" called out Wicke, illuminating the dark tomb with a miniature sun. Dust and debris was everywhere, and a stench filled the air: a musty smell, but one that felt dry, ashy. Ancient statues lined a walkway leading towards a long corridor, most cracked or toppled, and all around the room upright sarcophagi lined the walls. A few had rotted open, dried husks of ancient soldiers peeking through the gaps, their armour still on their bodies.

"I've changed my mind," stated Wicke, slowly rotating on her feet, the small sun in her hands. Jayce placed a hand on her shoulder as she moved towards the exit, stopping her in her tracks. She sighed, slowly turning back around and stepping

forwards. She stepped on a stone plate, the square dipping slightly before glowing brightly. A wave of black energy spread out across the room, a deep groaning echoing around the group as the soldiers were revived. "Oops!" yelled Wicke, leaping backwards as Jayce, Bjorn and Vexx stepped forwards.

"Watch your feet!" yelled out Jayce, as the others spread out behind him to form a defensive perimeter around Wicke. A zombie charged forwards, the creature falling away into thirds as Jayce slashed across its body with his swords. Bjorn grabbed another, throwing it at an incoming group, the shambling corpses crashing to the ground in a pile of dismembered limbs and broken bones. Vexx stood conservatively where he was, simply ducking under swings before obliterating the countless zombies with powerful punches to their heads.

Bjorn and Jayce both glanced towards Vexx, the restraint unusual for him, but as he swayed on his feet the reason was obvious. "I guess I'll do it myself," muttered Jayce, entering into Focus and glancing across the room. There were countless traps around the chamber, most identified by the enchantments creating them, but there were also a few false floors, swinging axes, as well as a falling roof inside the corridor ahead. Jayce lunged across the room, stepping carefully as he swung his swords, cleaving through the corpses with both of his blades. As the last body hit the floor, an uneasy silence fell across the room.

"Everyone okay?" asked Bjorn, glancing around. The others nodded, nervously looking towards the glowing stone plate. "There's a lot more traps around the room, everyone stay where they are," stated Jayce, glancing at the few traps that had been triggered by the zombies. One zombie stood frozen in an eternal, soundless scream as its body convulsed with a red lightning. The group stayed where they were, all except for Tempest. The djinn floated forwards, chanting as he held his hammer, the head glowing before he slammed it onto the floor. The trapped zombie dropped to the floor, the other triggered traps all losing their magic as well, as he waved his hand across the room. Jayce was forced out of his Focus, but he quickly reactivated it, glancing around at the mostly disabled traps.

"Well done," Jayce stated to Tempest, the djinn nodding before floating onwards towards the corridor. They passed through the corridor, disabling or otherwise avoiding the traps placed within. It was quite long, the corridor slowly ascending upwards as it went deeper and deeper into the rock, but eventually they arrived at a large door similar to the entrance. Jayce pressed a large stone button in the centre, the door sliding upwards to allow them entry.

A large sarcophagus sat in the middle of the round chamber, there were also three narrow doors on each side, a few metres away from the coffin. Jayce stepped forwards, Wicke, Vexx and Marisha close behind him, but as soon as Marisha had passed through the doorway the door dropped behind them with a crash, the room sealing itself. "That's not good," muttered Jayce, only to stare in horror as the lid on the sarcophagus slowly slid to the side, the stone and metal scraping against each other. "That's really not good."

Slowly a figure sat up, his body bound in wrappings, his skin shrunken and cracked, and his eyes filled with green fire. Slowly he opened his mouth, taking in a slow raspy breath before exhaling a cloud of dust. "Has it been a hundred years already?" he asked, stretching – one of his arms falling out of its socket before he quickly reattached it. He looked at the group assembled before him: Jayce and Marisha both stood with their weapons pointed at him, Wicke provided the room a continued source of light, and Vexx leant against a wall sipping from a glass bottle.

"Well?" he asked in Arcanum. "Aren't you going to answer your king?" Slowly he stepped out of his coffin, his feet bare and skeletal with his ankles decorated in gold rings. Jewellery covered his body, but he wore next to no clothes, wrappings binding what remained of his body. "Who are you?" Jayce asked, ignoring the messages from Bjorn, his words translating through his necklace. The mummy tilted his head, a small stream of dust falling from the bindings on his face. "Oh..." he said with a clear sense of dejection. "I guess even I was forgotten. What age is it?" he asked.

"582PD," answered Wicke quickly, looking at the mummy with deep fascination. "PD?" asked the mummy curiously, slowly shaking his head, confused. "Post Dungeon," Jayce answered, lowering his weapons, Marisha doing the same. "We're fine," Marisha stated quickly into her necklace. The mummy looked down, letting out a raspy sigh. "It has been at least six hundred years then. Never mind. I am Remesus the Third, although the name shouldn't have needed introduction. Who are you?" he asked, waving a hand – a table emerged from one of the doors along with two chairs, sliding across the floor to stop between himself and Jayce. "Sit," ordered Remesus, Jayce's body moving on its own to follow the command.

"Woah. What was that?" Jayce asked confused, as the mummy looked him up and down before looking across the group. "Simple sorcery, who are you?" repeated the mummy. "Jayce Exarga. These are a few members of my crew." The

mummy nodded, looking over the group before looking back at Jayce. "Why have you breached the sanctity of my tomb? And what is this Dungeon you speak of?" he asked, a large cube floating over before dropping onto the table. It opened, sliding away in opposite directions to form three ten-by-ten boards. Jayce stared at the object, he recognised it. "You recognise this?" asked the mummy, once again cutting Jayce off before he could answer.

"Seize the Seas," Jayce stated. "A game." The mummy nodded, pressing a switch on the box. "A long time ago, I was known across the lands for playing this game. I died unbeaten; defeat me and I will grant you access to all the treasures within my tomb. If I beat you, I get your body," stated Remesus. Jayce's eyes widened. "No, no way," he answered quickly. Remesus sighed, glaring directly at Jayce. "You may also ask me anything you wish to know about the past." Jayce again shook his head. "The risk is too high, I quite like my body."

"I could take your body if I wanted to. There would be little you could do to stop me. This is the only way you stand a chance of leaving this place. Every minute that passes I will curse one of your crew," Remesus threatened coldly. Wicke approached and leant towards Jayce's ear. "Do you think you can beat him?" she asked. Jayce shrugged. "I have no means of measuring, but out of the people I've faced, my father is the only person who has beaten me," he answered quietly, the mummy tapping their arm impatiently. "Fine, I accept. Five hundred points," Jayce stated, pressing a switch on his side of the board.

The board shimmered, an opaque wall forming in the middle of all three boards. One board was made of sand-coloured and white tiles, the middle was made of blue and white tiles, and the last one was made of white and black tiles. Jayce turned a dial on the top edge of the left board, changing the value to five hundred. A small pile of white sticks fell out of a slot in the side. He slid a small panel out from underneath the central board, inside were fifteen small figures, each designed in a different manner. Accompanying the figures were five small ships: a small ship, a medium ship, a large ship, a hot air balloon, and a small submarine. There was also a small stack of circular discs.

Jayce picked up the medium ship, placing it on his side of the central board. "I have chosen," Jayce stated. The mummy nodded in acknowledgement, staring intently at Jayce before making his own choice. Jayce slotted in the sticks into a small slot in the panel, a symbol appearing on the board reading the value. Jayce reached onto the panel choosing one of the figures, a hero, and placing it on the board. The symbol changed, dropping by fifty points and the barrier between

Jayce and the mummy shimmered, becoming transparent and allowing him to see his opponent's board.

The mummy had chosen a submarine, the ship placed on the yellow and white board that represented underwater. Jayce faltered, he had chosen his hero well, the Scout had given him the insight he needed to build the rest of his board. Jayce built the rest of his board using the remaining currency he had available. He chose a Wizard, a Barbarian, a Cleric, and a few other heroes to assist him, each costing fifty points in value. Jayce then spent the rest of his points on basic units, placing them all on top of his ship.

With the points allotted Jayce pressed a button, indicating he was ready. The mummy followed quickly after, his fleet spread across all three layers. "Best of luck," stated the mummy, the barrier falling and granting him his first sight of Jayce's board. The mummy paused, a vague expression of confusion masking his face. "You chose the Scout? A foolish and wasteful choice." Jayce shrugged, taking his first turn. He moved his heroes, a small group placed away from his ship, all placed on the middle board: the sea.

He then moved his ship, moving it two places away from the submarine. "I pass," Jayce stated, his ship too far away from any targets to attack. The mummy made his move, his fleet moving towards Jayce's ship on all three boards, the sky board and the underwater board lined up next to the sea board. Jayce moved his heroes, crossing from his side of the board onto the mummy's. The mummy looked at him curiously. "You've split your forces. Why?" Jayce didn't answer.

A few turns passed, Jayce keeping his main ship far away, whilst his heroes slowly made their way closer to the submarine. "I see what you're doing. Don't think I won't retaliate." His submarine made an attack upwards towards Jayce's heroes, eliminating one of his pieces. Jayce's turn started, his Cleric bringing back his fallen hero. His Wizard allowed him to move all of the pieces in its radius to another board, all of the pieces moving to the underwater board, directly next to the submarine. He moved his ship. Then he attacked, his heroes boarding the submarine, his Barbarian obliterating the small crew he had assigned.

The mummy leant forwards, moving his pieces to attempt to reinforce the damaged submarine, but he had spent so many turns dedicated to pursuing Jayce's ship, his troops were too far away, and too close to Jayce's ship. Jayce's heroes took the ship, damaging it enough to sink it. He then proceeded to use his ship to take out the mummy's remaining troops, clearing the majority of the board without casualties.

The mummy shook his head, leaning back. "I have been defeated. How?" he asked, confused. "I chose heroes that provided versatility. The Wizard to change boards, the Cleric to heal, the Ranger to move faster, but I also protected my ship, forcing you to choose one or the other. Your indecision gave me victory. It was a good match. Thank you, it's been a long time since I've played," Jayce answered graciously. The mummy nodded, extending a rotting hand across the table. Jayce shook it, the hand rough and dusty.

The mummy waved its hand, the doors around the room opening: the insides full of treasure, mostly outdated metal coins and gemstones. "You have your question, what do you wish to ask?" offered the mummy, packing up the ornate board. "What happened to cause the apocalypse?" Jayce asked. The mummy shrugged. "I do not know, the world was a utopia. It was after my time. The board is yours and the door is unlocked. Farewell, Jayce Exarga," answered the mummy, standing up before crumbling away into dust. Jayce stared at the box in front of him, its surface white and gold with a handle to carry it. "That did happen, right?"

They took the treasure, returning to the outside, an archaeologist waiting for them. Wicke handed over the deed, the archaeologist trading a small bag of coins in exchange. The sun was high in the sky, and the crew returned to the Stacked Hand. Jayce immediately headed to his room, placing the game down on his floor before opening it up. He smiled as he looked at the boards and the pieces. "Good game."

Chapter 44: The Lord of Graves

Jayce returned to the others as they mingled on the deck of the Stacked Hand; it was early evening – a few hours of sunlight still remained. “What should we do now? We still have two more deeds, two more tombs we could explore,” stated Wicke. Bjorn groaned loudly. “I, uh, no thanks. No more tombs for me. I’m going to take a bath, count me out,” he stated, moving towards the stairs leading to the lower decks. The others seemed of similar opinions.

Jayce glanced across the city, his eyes looking towards the top of the plateau. He entered into Focus: the top was covered in a bright glow, with several smaller lights floating in and out of area. He looked closer, more intensely, his eyes stinging as he strained his vision, the small lights getting clearer. They were bodies, floating spirits, swarming in and out of the area. Jayce blinked, his Focus ending, and he wiped his eyes with his hands, glancing down at a small smear of blood.

“You okay?” Wicke asked, glancing towards him with concern. He nodded. “Vexx, what’s the next stage of Gaze?” Jayce asked curiously, blinking quickly as his vision refocused. “You should see further and more clearly, without losing any clarity on closer distances. Bit like a zoom,” Vexx answered, a bit more sober than he had been for the rest of the day. “Got it. Wicke, Vexx, there’s something I need to check out at the top of the plateau, can you two join me?” Jayce asked. They both looked at him confused, but they nodded.

“So, why are we doing this?” Wicke asked a while later, as she glanced towards the long set of stairs leading up to the top of the plateau. “I met someone today, a man called Xander. He said there’s been some undead that have been preventing burials. He wants to put someone to rest, and he’s fixing my sword. I think it’s worth the look,” Jayce answered, beginning the climb. Wicke sighed, glancing towards Vexx, who simply shrugged, before climbing as well. The stairs were made of old rickety wood. There were a few spots where people had clearly stepped through the wood, large foot-sized holes visible every twenty-or-so stairs, but still they climbed, getting higher and higher.

Wicke glanced nervously over the edge, a long drop prevented by only a thin railing. She gulped, leaning as close to the rock wall as she could as she continued onwards after Vexx and Jayce. Eventually they made it to the top, the plateau barren and made of a crumbly, deep-orange rock. Dust-covered graves were everywhere, headstones seemed to have been placed anywhere there was space, leading to uneven rows and large gaps between clusters. A wind wrapped

around them, throwing dust towards their faces and threatening to blow Wicke over the edge – she grabbed onto the back of Vexx for protection.

“I don’t see any undead!” Wicke called out. Jayce nodded in agreement, but Vexx pointed vaguely up ahead. “There!” he stated, walking forwards. They crossed the graveyard, the patches of headstones giving way to small crypts. Vexx led the way, Jayce following close behind with both his swords drawn, with Wicke at the rear holding her grimoire. There was a small derelict shed in the middle of the plateau, skeletons shambled around outside, and piles of bones were scattered across the ground.

Jayce entered into Focus, his eyes glancing immediately towards a small figure crouched inside the shed. They looked humanoid: they had two arms and two legs, but he couldn’t tell much more than that - only their outline was visible. “Inside the gravedigger’s shed. It looks like a person but I’m not sure,” Jayce stated to Wicke. “Let’s get this over with,” Wicke answered, standing out from behind the tombstone she had been crouching behind and beginning to chant. “Shatter!” yelled Wicke, throwing a pulsing orb towards the shed. A group of skeletons dived in front, their bones shattering into a thousand fragments as they protected the shed.

The figure inside the shed rushed out, glancing around before settling their attention towards the trio. They looked like a person, their arms, legs, and feet bare, their fair skin splattered with orange dirt. Their body was mostly covered by a large white fur cloak, the edges meshed with large brown multicoloured feathers. The cloak connected into a feather headdress, the face covered by a blue clay mask decorated with white curving lines. The eyes were hollow, just simple dark holes made into the mask. The figure wasn’t particularly tall, but it was hard to tell as they stood half-crouched, a small army of skeletons between them and Jayce.

They extended their arms forwards, the skeletons rushing forwards. The skeletons were mostly unarmed, the thoughtless creatures either attempting to bite or pound Jayce and the others with their teeth and bones. Jayce carved through them, splitting apart their bones with his swords as he was slowly pushed backwards by the horde. Wicke chanted quickly, throwing spell after spell in all directions as she tried to hold back the undead. Vexx rushed forwards, slipping through the group as he tried to engage their leader directly. As Vexx moved in a blur, the figure lifted their arms, the piles of bones collecting together and rising off the ground to form a pair of legs, a torso, arms, and a giant skull.

The skeletal giant looked down at Vexx, bringing an arm back before throwing it forwards. Vexx tried to block the strike, but the arm split apart into fifteen separate arms making up the attack.

Vexx leapt backwards in a desperate retreat, landing back next Jayce and Wicke. "That's going to be a problem," Vexx stated, as the figure created another pair of skeletal giants, using the remains of the skeletons Jayce and Wicke had destroyed. Vexx reached into his pocket, pulling out a small pouch. Jayce glanced towards him as he ducked under a swing, watching as Vexx tipped a small pile of red powder into his hand. "What are you doing!" called out Jayce. Vexx brought his hand to his mouth, taking a deep inhale before lunging forwards, his eyes an even deeper red as he began to obliterate the horde.

The figure backed away as Vexx tore through the giant skeletons, cowering away as he rushed closer and closer. The skeletons around Wicke and Jayce changed their direction, rushing quickly towards their master in an attempt to protect them, but Vexx just leapt through the remaining protectors, the figure stumbling backwards as Vexx dove at them. "Vexx!" Jayce yelled, "Don't kill them!" His arm was already in motion, a fist moving towards the head of the figure.

Vexx's eyes widened, the red haze fading slightly as he heard Jayce yell, and he pulled his punch back, an echo of the blow carrying onwards and shattering the mask. She hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of her body and her head bouncing off the dirt as Vexx stared down at the young girl he had just hit. The skeletons around them fell apart, the magic holding them together fading in an instant. Jayce rushed forwards, staring wide-eyed at the figure unconscious on the floor. He looked scathingly at Vexx, the red in Vexx's sclera fading quickly. "What? I didn't kill her," Vexx stated.

Jayce just shook his head, bending over to get a better look at the girl. She was young, possibly Wicke's age, but Jayce got the sense she was a little older. Her cloak had come off, her skinny torso covered by little more than cloth rags. Her hair was short, shoulder-length, and a chestnut brown. She had freckles across her nose and cheeks. Jayce tapped her face gently and she stirred a little, her eyes flickering open before closing. They were slightly upturned, her irises a yellowish-hazel colour.

"Stay with her!" Jayce ordered, walking quickly to her shed. It had no door, and the roof and walls were full of holes. A pile of fabric covered the floor, mostly clothes, and a small broken bag was stashed in the corner to act as a pillow. Jayce rummaged around, looking for anything that seemed important: there was very

little, but he did find a small wooden box. He opened it up: there was some half-eaten food, a book, and a small black knife. The book was burnt, the back half completely destroyed, but inside were a few photos. It was a photobook and, as Jayce quickly flicked through it, he paused as he came across a small image of a tiny baby in the arms of a woman, a man by her side. The page was mostly burnt, their faces completely absent, but underneath was a date set fifteen years prior and a name: Caelie.

Jayce closed the book, placing it inside his bottomless bag before he picked up the knife, turning it over in his hands. On the base of the hilt was a small golden 'X'. Jayce put it away, shaking his head as he stepped outside. "Find anything?" Wicke asked as she knelt next to the girl. "Her name's Caelie, she's fifteen and most likely an orphan," Jayce stated, picking up the pieces of her broken mask before kneeling down and scooping her up in his arms. She was terrifyingly light. "We're taking her back to the ship," Jayce stated. Wicke and Vexx both nodded in agreement, both looking at her with concern and curiosity.

"Give her to me," Vexx stated, as they reached the top of the stairs. Jayce looked at him with suspicion. "Look, I messed up, I'm sorry. She was attacking us, and I saw a chance, so I took it. If you trip, that's the two of you dead. I will meet you with her at the bottom, okay?" Vexx explained, extending out his arms. Jayce nodded, gently placing Caelie into his arms. "Do you have her?" Jayce asked. Vexx nodded, looking down at the girl in his arms. "I have her, Jayce. I'll meet you down there." Vexx walked to the edge, leaping off.

It took Jayce and Wicke a while to reach the bottom, Jayce slid most of the way, whilst Wicke floated down on her flying carpet, but they found Vexx waiting for them. They returned quickly to the Stacked Hand, the sun beginning to set. Vexx leapt aboard with Caelie in his arms, Jayce and Wicke following him quickly. Bjorn stared at them in horror. "What the hell happened? Who is this?" he asked quickly. "Where's Doc?" asked Vexx, walking towards the stairs leading down.

"Long story," Jayce added, following after him with Wicke in tow. They barged into the Doctor's room, Vexx placing Caelie down on one of the tables. Yuthura stood up from her chair, quickly putting on a pair of gloves before looking towards Jayce for an explanation. "We found her on top of the plateau. Her name is Caelie, she took a nasty hit from Vexx," Wicke inserted quickly, dragging Vexx to the back of the room. Yuthura rolled her eyes. "Of course she did. I'll see what I can do."

Neither Jayce nor Wicke nor Vexx left the room as Yuthura checked her over. Yuthura transferred some minor injuries, but otherwise she just inserted a drip into Caelie's arm. "She's got an infection, she's also dehydrated and quite underweight, but from what you've told me, I'm not surprised. She'll be fine, she won't wake up for a few hours," Yuthura stated. Jayce nodded, looking at Wicke and Vexx. "I'm going to wait," Wicke stated, Vexx nodding in agreement. "Then let's get comfortable."

Caelie woke up an hour later, her vision blurry as she slowly opened her eyes. She stared up at the ceiling, the wood of her hut a different colour from normal and also with less holes. "You're in danger," hissed a voice to her left. She sat up, her eyes wide as four figures stared directly at her. Caelie shuffled backwards, pressing herself as far into the corner of the room as she quickly began to chant. A pair of small blue lights formed in front of her – Wicke immediately ended the spell, the wisps dispersing as the magic was countered. Caelie stared in horror. "Failure," hissed a voice behind her, another echoing above her, a cacophony forming around her as more voices joined the call.

Vexx stared at the girl as she grasped her ears, tucking her legs into her body and rocking as she shut her eyes. Something passed by him, his body instinctively entering into Focus. There was a swarm of spirits hovering over Caelie, glowing ghosts whispering to her. He couldn't hear them, but it was clear she could. Vexx unleashed a wave of Panic, the spirits turning to face him before fleeing through the walls in all directions.

Caelie glanced up, a cold feeling running past her, a presence pushing around her. The small blonde man was staring at her, his red eyes burning into her, but as the feeling faded, so did the voices around her – the momentary fear forming into a feeling of comfort, of unusual ease. She stared at him, and he stared at her. "Caelie?" asked Jayce, the other man in the room, drawing her attention. She looked at him nervously as he approached, sitting down on the bed near her whilst still giving her space.

Caelie tilted her head, her eyes glancing to the old woman and the young girl stood near the back of the room. "Do you understand me?" Jayce asked. Caelie looked back at him, nodding slightly. "Do you know where you are?" She shook her head. "They're here to hurt you. Run away," whispered a voice to her right. Caelie snapped her head around, staring at the glowing woman, another spirit passing through the ceiling above her.

"Do you see them?" Vexx asked quietly to Jayce. Jayce entered into Focus, his eyes widening as he looked at the spirits crowding the room. "Yeah," Jayce answered, unleashing a wave of anger towards the spirits, the ghosts once again fleeing away from the ship. He glanced through the walls of the ship, there were thirty spirits surrounding the ship, some leaving before being replaced by new presences. Caelie turned to look at him, her eyes staring with a look of fear. "Don't worry, we see them," Jayce stated, scooting a little closer. She pressed herself away into the corner, and Jayce slid back to his previous position.

"See what?" whispered Wicke to Vexx. Vexx whispered the answer to her, keeping his eyes still on Caelie. "My name is Jayce. These are my friends: Wicke, Vexx, and Yuthura. This is my ship, the Stacked Hand. You're safe here." Yuthura slipped out of the door. "I'll get some food," she said quietly to Wicke. Slowly Caelie emerged from the corner, Vexx watching the spirits as they began to move closer. Jayce extended a hand to her, a powerful blast of Panic emerging from him as he forced the spirits away, a gentle smile on his face as the blast curved around her.

She looked at the hand, her body in the eye of a storm. Slowly she extended her own hand, her fingers gently tapping Jayce's palm. They didn't pass through, and slowly she took it. "Hey," Jayce said softly, as she looked around nervously. "It's okay, we'll protect you." She leant forwards, sliding into him, silent tears running down her face as he held her, staring at the spirits haunting her with nothing but utter hatred.

Yuthura returned quickly with food and juice, a few other faces peeking in with curiosity. Vexx took it from her, approaching and sitting down on the other side of Caelie, Wicke too approached and stood opposite her. "You should eat," Vexx offered, the young girl looking at him as he offered her a pile of sandwiches. She looked at it suspiciously, so Vexx, with an unusual level of care, picked one up. "More for me," he said, stuffing the sandwich in his mouth and chewing it in a loud and irritating fashion. She grabbed the plate, pulling it away from him before digging in with animalistic intent, the sandwiches putting up little resistance.

"Has she said anything?" Yuthura asked, Caelie glancing at her before her attention was drawn away by a large mug of blueberry juice. Wicke shook her head. "But she can understand us?" Yuthura added. Caelie looked back at her, nodding. "Do you talk?" Wicke asked. Caelie opened her mouth a small squeak coming out before she closed it, shaking her head. Yuthura stepped forwards,

grabbing a tool out of her pocket before she stood in front of Caelie. Caelie blinked as Yuthura shone a light at her. "Open your mouth," Yuthura instructed. Caelie obliged, Yuthura looking inside. Yuthura pulled her usual red stone out of her pocket, chanting quietly. Caelie shut her mouth and cowered away, but Vexx took her hand, the girl glancing at him before he shook his head. "It's okay, Doc won't hurt you" he said sympathetically.

Caelie looked at him nervously before she turned back to Yuthura, her mouth open. "Attagirl," Yuthura said quietly, a glowing green copy of the inside of Caelie's throat appearing before her. Yuthura frowned, standing up straight and crossing her arms. "Everything okay?" Jayce asked. Yuthura held up a finger, thinking to herself before she turned to her bookcase and pulled a tome off the wall, quickly flicking through the pages. She read quickly, nodding to herself before closing the book and putting it away.

"Her vocal cords are scarred, but even with that she should still be able to talk," Yuthura stated. Caelie looked down at her feet. "Psychological trauma," mouthed Yuthura to Jayce. He nodded. "Will she be able to regain the ability to talk?" Jayce asked. Yuthura shrugged, kneeling down before Caelie and meeting her eyes. "If you want to, I can help, but you don't have to if you don't want to," she said, resting a hand on Caelie's knee. Caelie nodded to her.

"Okay," Yuthura said softly to her. "Well, first things first, you need a bath. Wicke, go get some of your clothes. Come on, Caelie," Yuthura stated, pulling a louse out of Caelie's hair before flicking it in Bjorn's direction, as he stood blocking the doorway. "Hell no!" yelled Bjorn, racing away. Caelie got to her feet, looking at both Jayce and Vexx. "Yuthura will look after you," they both said, before looking at each other. Vexx stepped back. "We'll see you soon," Jayce added. Caelie nodded, walking with Yuthura towards the doorway. Yuthura glanced back, nodding before walking away, with Marisha following closely behind.

"That's a lot of spirits," Vexx stated quickly to Jayce, his eyes glancing around the ship. Jayce nodded. "There's some questions I need answering. Stay close by, we're the only ones who can keep them away," Jayce stated, walking towards the door. "Where are you going?" Vexx asked, his body tensing before releasing as he send out a wave of Panic in all directions, the encroaching spirits flying quickly away. "I need to see a Blacksmith about something."

Jayce headed straight to the top deck, climbing quickly down using the ladder to step onto the pier. He shook his head as he stormed through the city, the few

people on the streets stepping to the sides to let him pass. It didn't take him long to arrive at his destination, the lights in Xander's Emporium were off, the place quiet. Night had fallen, and Jayce stared at the closed sign weighing up his options. He shook his head, banging his fist on the metal door. A light came on, and, not long after, the door slid open.

Xander frowned as he looked down at Jayce, the large man taking a moment to quite grasp who he was. "Jayce?" he said confused. "What are you doing here?" Jayce reached into his pocket, pulling out the small black knife he had taken from Caelie. There was an immediate look of recognition as Xander stared at it. "Is she dead?" he asked quietly. Jayce shook his head. Xander nodded, stepping backwards and walking into his shop, Jayce following behind. "Should she be?" Jayce asked, placing the knife on the counter as Xander walked into a backroom.

He returned with two large tankards full of a frothy liquid. "No, where is she?" he asked. "On my ship, currently taking a bath. Explain, quickly," Jayce stated, looking down at the beer. "Good, good. I took the time to visit your ship, I also looked into you a little more. Quite impressive for one so young, you're everything and more than I thought you'd be. It's relieving to know I can still read some people," Xander stated, taking a deep gulp from his tankard. Jayce stared at him coldly.

"Caelie is the living proof of one of my greatest mistakes," Xander stated, Sola and Luna detaching from his arms and dropping onto the counter as he leant next to Jayce. "My name is Xander Goibniu, you may or may not recognise that name," Xander stated, Jayce nodding as he looked at Xander curiously. "One of the three great Marine smiths. You designed their weapons for the Blood War, right? That was you?" Jayce answered.

Xander nodded. "A lifetime ago, yes. It was through the Marines and the baned that joined them that the war ended. My weapons were devastating, effective. When the war ended, I was asked to design new weapons, for the Navy. I did, not as great as those I made for the Marines, but much more reproducible, whilst still an improvement over their previous equipment," Xander explained. "How does this relate to Caelie?" inserted Jayce. "She was born long after the war ended."

"The creation of the Marines threw the Church out of the Navy hierarchy; the Blood War was their chance to take control. We needed an edge over the baned and those that sided with them. The Church's magic was supposed to be that answer, if not for myself and the other smiths, as well as your mother and

Admiral Truth. There was nothing they could do to me, I was too valuable, until I chose to stop making weapons. They still couldn't get to me, even a decade after the war ended, but they were always waiting. The Church never forgives its enemies."

Jayce looked at him, eventually glancing down at the tankard next to him and taking a deep sip from it. "They targeted my home, Caelie's home, deep in the Storm. I... lost everything dear to me, and Caelie lost her parents because I thought my skills, my creations, meant more than any threat the Church could throw at me. My wife... My daughter. No one survived the attack, and by the time I arrived... this small, terrified girl was all that was left. She had screamed for so long that she couldn't even talk. Because of me."

"It wasn't your fault. There's no way you could have known," Jayce said, looking up at him. Xander's eyes were empty, his face broken, as he looked towards the door. "This was my sin, my error. Even now the weapons I made are used on people just like Caelie, people who are gifted, innocent. I can never atone for that, I can never forgive myself." Xander placed his empty tankard down, picking up the small black knife and looking at it. "What happened to Caelie after the attack?" Jayce asked.

Xander glanced towards him, his eyes brightening slightly. "We headed north. To the city of Utarune. I was her uncle for a while, her guardian, but one day she left. She struggled with her abilities, ghosts talked to her, and I think she just... broke. I tracked her: it took me months, years to follow after her and it led me here. I tried to talk to her, but her skeletons forced me away. So I left her food, supplies, clothes, this knife."

"So why send me?" Jayce asked. "Why not be upfront, why hide this from me?" "I'm tired, Jayce. I've run from my past for so long, it's exhausting, and I can't, I can't continue," he said softly, a defeated look on his face. Jayce shook his head. "That's not the whole truth, is it?" Jayce stated, taking the knife from Xander's hand, throwing it across the room into the beam above the door. "My family is gone, and I'm not lucky enough to believe they're waiting for me on the other side."

Jayce shook his head. "I think you're wrong, time is different in the afterlife." "How would you know?" Xander asked, shaking his head. Jayce looked at him, stepping away from the counter and taking off his backpack, placing it on the floor before unbuttoning his shirt. He turned around, three large claw marks scarring his back. "I've been there," Jayce stated. "I died a while back, cursed by

a wraith. It's not pleasant, but people wait on the other side. Your family probably are as well."

Xander looked at him, a faint smile on his face. "I'm glad I met you, take care of Caelie for me." Jayce shook his head, putting his shirt back on before sitting on the counter. "You misunderstand me. We will all go to that side someday, to them it doesn't matter when. You said you hadn't seen or spoken to Caelie. If she left years ago, what makes you think she even recognised you? Isn't it selfish to not at least say goodbye to her?" Xander remained silent. "Your life is your life, do what you want with it. I'm not going to stop you, I can't stop you, but don't let the past define your today. If the Church killed your family, like they have many others, are you really going to just let them continue to go unchallenged?" Jayce asked, picking up his backpack and walking towards the door.

Xander looked up at the knife above the door, the golden 'X' shining brightly at him. "Jayce, wait!" Xander called out, reaching behind the counter and pulling out Alara's gifted sword. He carried it over to Jayce, handing it over. "I repaired your sword, and I haven't rewarded you for helping Caelie," Xander stated. "Sola and Luna have been with me for a long time, but they should see more than this pathetic excuse for a shop. Treat them well, they will serve you better than any weapon."

Sola and Luna slid up Jayce leg, squeezing his forearm as they wrapped around him, forming a pair of dark bands on his wrists. Jayce looked at him, the two mimics chirping as they opened their large eyes to look at him. "Thank you, but I can't separate them from their master. It wouldn't be right of me," Jayce said. "They chose you, I'm afraid it's out of my hands. Take care of yourself Jayce." Xander turned around, slowly walking towards the counter. Jayce turned towards the door, glancing back at the large man. "Do you want to meet her?" Jayce asked, Xander freezing in place. "She's at my ship. She's not going anywhere. At least see her one last time, if not for yourself, then for her." Xander slowly turned, shaking his head gently before nodding. "You really are an Exarga. Stubborn punk."

Seize the Seas Tales: Two New Beds

Jayce and Xander walked quietly through the night towards the Stacked Hand. Eventually, as the ship came into view, Xander reached into his pocket, pulling out a small leather case. "Cigar?" he offered, presenting one to Jayce. Jayce shook his head. "No thanks. Not my taste," he answered. Xander shrugged, biting off the end before lighting it using a match. "Probably for the best," he said. He

continued to walk, an awkward shuffle as he kept glancing towards the ship. "There's no need to be nervous," Jayce stated. Xander scoffed, glancing towards Jayce. "Who says I'm nervous?" Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Okay fine, I'm nervous. Happy?"

Jayce smiled. "Good, it means it matters to you," he said, grabbing onto the ladder and beginning to climb. Xander grumbled beneath him, grabbing onto the ladder and climbing upwards. The main deck was empty, Xander staring at the vessel in awe as he looked around, the deck lit up by the bright moon. The lights in the living room were on and Jayce could see the majority of the crew inside. "This way," Jayce stated, Xander faltering. Jayce glanced back, the large man taking a deep breath before he nodded and followed.

Jayce stepped through the door, the crew immediately glancing in his direction. Caelie smiled widely at him as she sat on one of the sofas, her hair washed, her body clean, and Wicke's pyjamas covering her body. "Where have you been?" asked Wicke, as she sat in a matching set next to Caelie. Jayce stepped to the side, Xander putting his cigar out in his hand before placing it in his pocket. "Hey Caelie," Xander said quietly as he looked towards her. She leapt up from the sofa, racing across the room before diving into his stomach, her arms wrapped around him and tears falling from her face. Xander dropped to his knees, holding her tightly as his tears joined hers. "Uncle," whispered Caelie, various eyes widening around the room.

Jayce glanced around the room, Yuthura stared directly at him. "Trauma," she mouthed. Jayce nodded in agreement, looking at the others before tilting his head to the door. Slowly the room began to empty, until only Jayce, Caelie and Xander remained. "Thank you," Xander said quietly, Caelie briefly glancing towards Jayce before burying her face back into Xander's shoulder. Jayce nodded. "There's two guest rooms downstairs, help yourself. Goodnight."

A knock woke Jayce up early the following morning. He stumbled out of bed, the sun shining blindingly through his windows as he untinted them. He opened the door, Xander stood just outside, Caelie holding onto his arm. "Sorry to wake you. Caelie was wondering where you were." Jayce looked at the pair confused. "I was also wondering if we could talk." Jayce nodded, letting out a yawn before stepping outside. "Sure, what's up?"

"Well, I was talking to a few of your crewmates, and I noticed a few of their weapons were a little out of sorts. And, well, since Caelie has joined your crew..." Jayce looked at Caelie confused, she beamed wildly at him, still wearing Wicke's

pyjamas. "Come again?" Jayce asked. Xander led Jayce to the living room, pointing at the crew list. A new name was scribbled at the bottom, in a handwriting identical to Wicke's, with a rough signature at the end and the title: Cabin Girl written next to it. Jayce laughed. "So I see. You know, we were in the market for a Blacksmith. Do you know where we can find one?" Jayce asked, extending a hand to Xander. Xander clasped it tightly, Sola chirping as he moved from Jayce's arm to Xander's before moving back. "I think I have an idea."

Chapter 45: What's Yours is Mine

Jayce and Xander made their way through the city of Ruur, back towards Xander's Emporium. "Thanks again Jayce. I nearly made a big mistake," Xander said, as he slid open the door. "What are you going to do with this place?" Jayce asked. Xander looked around. "The lease isn't an issue. But I don't really know what to do with all this equipment," Xander answered, stepping past the counter and moving to his anvil. He looked down at the giant piece of metal, thinking to himself before he grabbed a piece of rope, running it through a hole in the side. He then slung the rope around his torso, picking up the huge anvil with his hands.

Jayce stared at him, equally as impressed as he was horrified. "Is that not heavy?" Jayce asked, Xander nodded, his face a deep red. "I've got a better idea," Jayce said, pulling out a bottomless bag before aiming around the shop, the racks full of equipment getting pulled into the item. "That might be a better solution," Xander confirmed, putting the anvil down next to his forge before Jayce pulled them both into the bag. He took one last look at the empty shop, before he shut the door behind them, hanging up a sign before turning to face Jayce. "I am yours to command, Captain," Xander said, tying the bottomless bag to his belt.

They returned to the ship, the rest of the crew returning from their own adventures. Wicke sat on the main deck of the ship, a large pile of treasure scattered across the wood before her. "Find much in the tombs?" Jayce asked, looking at the mostly worthless metal coins. Wicke shook her head. "Just metals, a few gemstones - one was completely empty," she answered, dejectedly. The pile of coins rustled, Caelie sticking her head out of the top with a wide smile, a large diamond held in her teeth. She spat it out, the gemstone bouncing across the floor.

Jayce smiled, shaking his head before walking away, Caelie rolling out of the pile to walk in his shadow. "Are we ready to sail?" Jayce asked, looking towards Bjorn and Falconer. "Aye, we're all good. Have we got everything you needed from Xander's place? Tempest has just finished modifying the workshop," Bjorn answered, tilting the map to give both Jayce and Caelie a look at their destination: Aurare. "Yeah, Xander's taking it downstairs now. Are Xander and Caelie's rooms prepared?" Jayce asked, glancing down at Caelie - she nodded vigorously. "Good. Then let's sail."

Ruur fell quickly behind them as they took to the rapids, Caelie staring over the edge with wide eyes as the wind rushed through her hair. The excitement quickly

faded, the hours stretching out before the days began to fall away. She spent most of the first week following Jayce around as he checked over the ship, chatted to the crew, and relaxed in his room, writing letters to Alara. If Caelie wasn't with Jayce, she could be found talking with Wicke, although, more appropriately, she spent the time listening whilst Wicke monologued. She could also be found with Vexx.

Jayce stuck his head inside the training hall: Vexx stood with his fists raised as Caelie swayed before him, sweat drenching her small body and a pair of ghostly apparitions lunging from her side towards Vexx. He took a hit, his eyes widening and his body folding over, a ghostly steam emerging from his mouth and eyes, no physical wound on his body. He spent the rest of the sparring session doing his utmost to dodge Caelie's attacks, ending the bout with a powerful blow towards her face, his fist stopping an inch from her jaw.

She sat down, taking deep breaths in as she looked away, dejected. "You did good, you'll beat me eventually. Here, let's try with this," Vexx said softly, helping her to her feet before walking over to one of benches and picking up a bottomless bag. He tipped it out, a large pile of bones dropping to the floor. Caelie looked at the pile curiously, reaching down and sifting through the stack. She threw some away, splitting the pile into three groups of different sizes. Caelie chanted, her voice unfamiliar as she spoke in demon's tongue, but unaffected by her damaged vocal cords.

A large glowing green fog flowed from her body, the three piles rising up into three skeletons of different sizes, spectral bones filling the gaps. The fog disappeared, any trace of a magic output fading, but the skeletons remained, looking at her as they awaited a command. She pointed to the weapon racks, the skeletons walking over, dressing in armour and choosing weapons before they returned to her side whilst Vexx looked proudly at the small group. "We'll get you some more, I look forward to seeing what you can create, Caelie. Bring it on!"

Jayce left them to their sparring, heading to Wicke's room. As usual she was inside, a book in her hands as she lay on her bed. "Hey," Jayce said, leaning in her doorway. She lowered the book, glancing over the top of the huge tome before raising it again. "What do you want?" she asked. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Have I done something to annoy you?" Jayce asked curiously, walking into her room and sitting down on her chair. She sighed, placing her book down on her chest and glancing over at him. "No, no you haven't," she said. "Caelie spends a

lot more time with you than you do with me. It's hard not to feel replaced sometimes," she admitted.

Jayce frowned. "Ah, sorry, I guess. I didn't really notice. Do you want me to spend more time with you?" he asked, leaning forwards and meeting her gaze. "Gods, no," Wicke retorted, quickly glancing away. Jayce smiled, shaking his head. "Okay, if you insist. Anyway, I came down here to ask about Caelie's powers. You said you'd look into it." Wicke slammed her book shut, standing up and approaching her desk. She reached underneath, pulling out a small notebook. "Here," she said, handing it over to him. "She's a Shaman, at least I think so. They are rare, like, really rare. There's only one other known Shaman: Anne Muerte."

A flash of recognition ran through Jayce's mind, but he couldn't quite grasp where that name came from. "She's a member of Kitty Deliver's crew, the Pirate Lord," she answered, before Jayce could ask. Jayce nodded, a memory of a tattooed woman coming to his mind. "Anyway, unsurprisingly most of her powers relate to dead people and the use of them. Healing, Divination, Necromancy, Possession, and Soul Attacks are the tools she'll use. I've given her some books to read, but I don't think she reads very well, or has the attention span for it."

Jayce nodded, flicking through the notebook before placing it in his pocket. "Good job, thank you." She smiled, walking back to her bed and sitting down on it. "Anything else?" she asked. Jayce shook his head, standing up and walking to the door. "Jayce," she called out. He turned and looked at her. She faltered, shaking her head. "Never mind," she said, turning away. Jayce paused, and she slowly glanced back. "You're not getting replaced, you're not getting left behind. I made a promise. We'll find those Dungeons, get strong enough to reach the bottom, and then we'll go and find your family. Okay, little one?" he asked. She nodded and he stepped out of the room.

A few days passed and Jayce woke up in his bed, his body pushed to the edge and a foot pressing into his back. Jayce glanced over, Caelie lay sprawled out on top of the covers in a star shape. "Not again," Jayce muttered, rolling out of bed and stepping into his bathroom. This was the fifth time this week. After showering and shaving, Jayce returned to find her sat with her foot by her mouth as she attempted to bite her toenails. "Caelie!" Jayce scolded, "Not on my bed! Actually, don't do that all!"

She stared at him, confused. He sighed and stepped back inside his bathroom, returning with some nail clippers. "Come on, let's go," he said, handing them to her, the teenager glancing at the tool with great curiosity. She followed him outside his quarters, Bjorn opening his mouth to speak before closing it as he watched Jayce and Caelie walk to the edge of the ship before sitting down with their toes over the edge. "Right... not this morning," Bjorn muttered, shaking his head and walking to the stairs. Jayce looked down at his feet, demonstrating to Caelie how to use the mystical device, before glancing up in horror at the dockhands staring up at them from the pier below. One flinched, wiping her face before yelling obscenities in their direction.

Caelie took over, gently clipping her nails as Jayce wandered over to find Bjorn. "Why didn't you tell me we had arrived?" Jayce yelled down from the aft deck. "Caelie didn't get much sleep again, I didn't want to wake the two of you!" Bjorn yelled back. Jayce nodded, glancing back towards Caelie, a small group of spirits flocking around her. "I thought the extra-dimensional room helped!" Jayce called down. "It did, but I think the quiet scares her. It's a lose-lose unless she's with you or Vexx." Jayce nodded. "Anyway, welcome to Aurare. I hope your money pouch is full, the others have already disembarked."

After forcing Caelie to take a shower and change her clothes, the girl going from absolute refusal, to absolute refusal of leaving Jayce's shower, Jayce and Caelie made their way off the ship. Caelie had taken an eye to wearing white blouses, she seemed to like the way the sleeves flapped as she moved, and her fur and feather cloak had been washed, the white and brown colours emerging from the orange dust and combining rather well. She had also borrowed a pair of Wicke's leather boots and a dark skirt to accompany the outfit – taken from Marisha.

Aurare's dock had been built into the bottom of the surrounding canyon: a pair of long piers lead towards a large, opulent entranceway heading inside the canyon walls. As the pair disembarked, making their way across the pier, their ship docked right next to the entrance, Jayce couldn't help but stare up in wonder at the sight. The entire canyon face had been hollowed out, it was clear there were multiple floors to the inside, and a colossal, curved, stone bridge crossed the canyon, leading to even more space on the other side.

Bright orange lights glowed from the inside, but, as Jayce and Caelie stepped through the entranceway, they couldn't help but notice how empty the place looked. The entrance was lavishly decorated, silver and green decorated the inside – the usual Guild colours, except for the addition of a coiled snake in the

middle. Well-furnished wooden counters lined the edges, with several staff members waiting behind, yet, there weren't many patrons. There were plenty of ships outside, but the entranceway was almost barren, apart from a few dockhands.

Caelie grabbed onto Jayce's arm, looking up at him nervously – something felt off. "Greetings," called an employee from the side, drawing their attention. "Hi there," Jayce said, approaching the man and leaning across the tall counter, Caelie leaning her chin on the edge. "We're with the Rising Aces. Jayce and Caelie." The man nodded, reaching under the counter and pulling out a pair of metal cards. He placed them on the counter. "Perfect, it has all been set up for you. Your crew's balance has been added to the joint account already. These cards will grant you full access to our stages, casino and buffet. Please enjoy your stay."

Caelie grabbed the card hungrily as she heard the word buffet, years of eating in the wilderness had been nothing compared to Marisha's latest cooking trials and Jayce couldn't help but understand the feeling. "Thank you," Jayce said, taking his own card and placing it in his pocket as Caelie grabbed his arm and began to drag him away. They headed up the large stone stairs at the end of the entranceway, following the path up to the next floor, a colossal and open plan casino spaced out before them.

Bright lights and loud noises hit them immediately, an almost overwhelming wave passing through them the moment they stepped onto the wooden floor. Jayce glanced down, the faintest line of glyphs marking the top of the stairs, an invisible wall of magic protecting the lower floor from the noise above. There were machines and tables everywhere, topped with all manner of available games to gamble with, ranging from roulette to card games to dice games. A loud cheer called their attention across the large room; Bjorn and the others stood behind Vexx and Wicke as they played against a dealer in a simple game of Blackjack.

"Took you long enough," Vexx called behind him as they approached, a large pot of chips piled in front of him – Wicke was down to her last chip. As Vexx glanced away towards Jayce, Wicke slowly attempted to steal a few of his chips, only to receive a slight smack on her hand for her trouble. She scowled, betting her last chip and leaning on her wrist. "I see you've done well," Jayce said. "I thought this place would be more busy."

"It is still the morning," Vexx stated, sliding his entire pot in. "Hit," he said casually, looking at his hand: a ten and a four. The dealer flipped over an eight.

“Shit,” Vexx muttered, the others around him laughing as he lost it all. Jayce glanced around: there were a few attendants, but no noticeable guards. “Yeah, must be,” Jayce decided, taking a seat and presenting his card. The group spread out, taking to the various machines and tables and the time passed quickly.

Caelie grabbed her stomach as she watched Jayce play, her belly rumbling loudly even through the noise of the casino. Jayce glanced towards her, his own stomach answering the call. She looked very bored. “Okay, okay. Let’s go,” Jayce said to her, her face brightening up as he presented his card, the dealer stamping it with a glowing glyph as he cashed out. They made their way towards the only other staircase on the floor, the stairs leading upwards.

Once again, as they crossed the threshold, the noise of the casino muted behind them, Caelie leading the way as she bounced up the stairs. The next floor led to the bridge crossing the canyon, a sign indicating bedrooms and management were on the other side. A hall to the right contained the buffet, Caelie’s legs moving on their own, but to the left, through a small swinging door, was a performance hall. Out of curiosity, Jayce glanced through the small porthole built into the door.

A young woman sat on the stage, her legs crossed over and a variety of instruments sat around her. She held a violin in her arms, her head tilted into it as she played. Jayce glanced behind him, Caelie had a plate in her hands and was tearing her way through the buffet. She glanced back, meeting his gaze. Jayce beckoned with his thumb into the performance hall, receiving a nod in acknowledgement, before Caelie turned back to the food.

Jayce pushed open the door, the soft sound of music waltzing through the gap. Quietly he stepped inside; there were no other patrons, and it was clear from the lights shining brightly off the woman’s brown eyes that she had no idea that was the case. She had cerulean blue hair, mostly hidden by a brown leather, pointed, bycoket hat with a large white feather embedded in the top. It had a wide brim towards the back, matching the length of the feather. She wore a brown, leather, laced corset, her arms covered with white cloth. She had a pair of small brown shorts on, a pair of similarly coloured leggings on underneath, tucked into a pair of flat pointed shoes. Her nails matched the blue of her hair, her hands covered with a pair of fingerless gloves.

She began to sing as Jayce sat down, her tongue glowing slightly inside her mouth, the air distorting as her words flowed through the air. His body relaxed, his vision blurring as she played, but then it sharpened into view as she

seamlessly switched to a pan flute. He felt revitalised, a strange sense of invisible exhaustion fading in an instant. Once again she switched, grabbing a lute, a somewhat jovial piece taking over as she began to sing, Jayce's foot tapping on his own, his body wanting to stand up. It took everything he had to resist, a weird sensation taking over his body.

Caelie tapped him on the shoulder, a leg of meat in her hands. She presented it to him, her head bouncing as she looked towards the stage. Jayce took it, the momentary distraction allowing him to grasp a hold of the lyrics. She spoke of a longing of love, of attention, of being abandoned for another person. It was a song of sorrow buried within a happy tune, a song of a person rebelling against their fate to be alone.

Caelie bounded across the large room, moving away from the seat Jayce had taken for himself. "Caelie!" Jayce called out, trying his best not to interrupt the Bard, as he lunged to grab her. He missed, dropping the leg of meat, his body refusing to cooperate as he spotted the singer's glowing lips, her magic disrupting his body. Caelie vaulted over the front row, sitting down on the seats with a startling thump as she stared up at the musician.

A small flare of irritation crossed the Bard's face as she glanced down at Caelie, but it was quickly erased as she continued to play. Breathing a sigh of relief, Jayce shook his body, entering into a quick flash of Focus to disrupt the magic. Slowly he walked over, joining Caelie in the front row and looking up at the Bard. Her face flashed red as she glanced down at the pair of them, accidentally misplaying a note, before covering for it and finishing her song.

Jayce clapped, Caelie mirroring him, and the stage lights dimmed before the room brightened. The Bard glanced around, and her face fell a little as she looked at the empty seats. "Encore!" Jayce called out. She gave a small laugh, shaking her head. "Not today, not for free anyway," she said, with a mischievous smile. "When will you next play?" Jayce asked, standing up and handing her a tip. She looked at the large amount with wide eyes. "Uh, wow, thanks. You're the Rising Ace, right?" she asked.

Jayce chuckled, blushing from the unexpected recognition. "Yeah, that's me. This is Caelie. You are?" Jayce asked. She slid off the stage, standing in front of him, slightly taller than Caelie. She curtsied, taking off her hat with a flourish. "Zeta Vao, at your service," said Zeta with a smile. "Anyway, I've got somewhere else to be. Enjoy your stay, Rising Ace." She walked around the edge of the steps,

walking up onto the stage before collecting her instruments and walking into the wings.

Caelie dragged Jayce back to the buffet, a few other Aces helping themselves to the food. Jayce joined them, the conversation light and mostly revolving around how much they had won or lost. "So how long are we staying here?" Vexx asked at last, countless empty plates lining the group's table. "I don't know," answered Jayce. "At least the night. There's no reason not to." The others nodded in agreement. "Then let's get our stuff, grab some rooms and truly enjoy this holiday!" Vexx stated, standing to his feet and promptly walking towards the buffet exit. The others looked at each other before looking at Jayce. "You heard him. Enjoy!" he said with a grin.

The others shot up to their feet, heading quickly after Vexx, the idea of luxurious hotel rooms drawing all of their attention. Jayce followed slowly behind, a belly full of decadent food forcing him to a slow waddle as he descended the steps to the floor below. Caelie followed once again in his shadow, a spring in her step and a wide grin on her face as she enjoyed the strange environment, now passing through the casino with a full stomach. They found Marisha waiting for them, a strange look on her face.

"Everything okay?" Jayce asked, only to jolt as an attendant accidentally walked into him. "Sorry," she said, keeping her head low as she quickly walked away. Jayce frowned before turning back to Marisha. She remained silent, a confused look on her face as she tried to formulate her words. The opening and closing of her mouth quickly changed to a sharp inhalation of air as she began to panic. "Woah, woah. Calm yourself, it's okay," Jayce said as she grabbed his arm, looking beyond him.

Jayce turned, watching the black heeled shoes of a woman disappear out of sight to the floor above. Marisha collapsed, falling to her knees as she clutched the left side of her face, tearing off her eyepatch. Caelie sat down next to her, looking at her with great concern and taking her hand. Jayce knelt down as well, holding Marisha's other hand as she began to slow her breathing. "Take your time, we've got you." She nodded, her grip tight on their hands as she took deep breaths. "Serpent," she gasped. Jayce frowned, glancing around. The majority of the tables and the machines had small markings – stamps - of a coiled snake upon them.

"What about it?" he asked. "You don't like snakes?" She glared at him with both eyes. "I-I I need to go! I'll be back!" she yelled, standing to her feet and racing up

the stairs. Jayce turned to follow but Caelie grabbed his arm, shaking her head as she glanced around towards the ceiling. Jayce entered into Focus, a group of spirits surrounding her. He scared them off with Panic, glancing back towards where Marisha had gone. Caelie pulled him away, Jayce rubbing his head as he continued to glance behind him.

They headed down the stairs towards the dock, the majority of the attendants behind the counters were gone, replaced by several large well-dressed guards stood in front. They watched Jayce and Caelie as they walked through the entrance hall towards the exit. Caelie pushed herself as closely into Jayce as she could, a nervous feeling passing through his body. They stepped outside, the pair of them continuing towards the Stacked Hand, only to freeze as they watched it disappear.

Jayce twisted on his feet, staring wide-eyed at a medium-height, fair-skinned woman stood in front of them. She held a glass bottle in her hands, the Stacked Hand and its crew sat inside. "Jayce!" came the voice of Wicke through his necklace, only for the following words to get cut off as the woman placed the bottle into a small black box by her feet, shutting the lid with her foot. She was dressed in a rose pink long-sleeved top, the top folding over her chest and arms. A diamond snake necklace hung from her neck, a pair of large matching diamond studs in her ears and a singular platinum ring on the middle finger of her right hand, the image of a snake eating itself. She wore a red skirt, her nails matching the colour, with brown tights underneath, before they connected into a pair of black heels. Jayce met her orange eyes as she stared at him, her long light-brown hair hanging over the left side of her face and shoulder. She was older, but she had an unscarred face identical to Marisha's.

"Jayce Exarga, the Rising Ace," she stated, folding her arms and tilting her hip. She was early fifties at most, her demeanour and the seriousness of her eyes the only indicator of her age. Even in the current situation, Jayce couldn't help but acknowledge she was an immensely beautiful woman. "Who's asking?" Jayce asked, reaching behind to try to find the bottle for his ship, unsurprisingly, it was gone, a small cut underneath its holster. She smiled, a few of the guards inside stepping out to join her, one picking up the black box before stepping backwards. Caelie shot backwards, crouching low as she sensed danger, but Jayce held an arm out and she cautiously half-standing.

Jayce rolled up his sleeves, dark tattoos lining his forearms, eyes opening on the dark lines as Sola and Luna woke up. "Now now, there is no need for

aggression,” the woman stated, unfolding one arm and holding up her hand, her huge bodyguards stepping backwards away from her. “Perhaps I do need to introduce myself. I am the owner of this establishment, a purveyor of goods, a businesswoman with a particular trade, a particular collection. I am she who captures, she who sells anything, anyone, and everything. I am the Guild Master Serpent and you, Jayce, are something I wish to possess.”

“Give my ship and my crew back to me,” Jayce said coldly, flicking his wrists as he telepathically commanded Sola and Luna to take on the form of his longswords, the pair of mimics growing heavy as they transformed into his weapons. Serpent smiled, a soft and gentle smile held with nothing but malice. “Now, I appreciate candour, it is required for any trade of worth. But one must understand when they are beat. You are alone, and because I like to ensure that my transactions are smooth, I have taken precautions. Call my daughter, Marin, or whatever she calls herself now. Hurry up, I’m a busy person.”

Jayce stared at her unsure of what to do, but slowly he raised his hand, pressing his thumb to his necklace. “Marisha?” Jayce said quietly. A moment passed before there was a reply, Serpent tapping her foot impatiently on the floor. “Jayce! They have me on-” came a quick reply from Marisha before her message was cut off. “Okay, what do you want? You said you wanted to trade,” Jayce said.

She nodded, once again raising a hand, this time to beckon forwards one of her aides. One of her bodyguards approached, the large man carrying a briefcase that looked tiny in his hands. He opened it for her, before turning to present it to Jayce. Inside was a collar. “As I said I want to collect you. Compared to the rest of your crew, remarkable as they may be, you are a trophy beyond all else, and a toy I would very much like to wave around. Phoenix spoke highly of you, and you have continued to surprise many people in many high places, without even considering the power your name holds.”

She grinned as Jayce stared at her in horror. “I do like that look, it makes it so much more fun to break you. As you no doubt have realised, your crew is trapped, sealed in that container of yours. They will starve, slowly, trapped until I release them. A benefit of having my own Artificers. I also hold my daughter captive, she has already destroyed my plans for her, but I’m not the fool I was when she was a child. She can still be an heir, with the right motivations. Otherwise I will just kill her. But I would rather not have to break you, not have to rebuild you. Join me. I will pay you, handsomely, naturally the Rising Aces

will have to end, but I might be willing to keep some of your crew as trophies, gifts to earn back for good behaviour, perhaps."

"No deal!" Jayce stated, entering into Focus. Serpent tutted, shaking her head. "Pity, I guess I'll kill Marin and throw the box containing your crew into the ocean." Jayce faltered, his Focus fading. "That's better. It's a big choice, I understand. I'm borrowing the manager's office on the other side of this canyon, come visit me when you've decided to accept. Until then, enjoy the facilities. Enjoy the casino, the food, the beds, the performances. I will be waiting for you. Oh, and if for whatever reason you try to attack me, my staff or any of my guests, I will kill Marin. See you soon."

She turned on her heels, the case and collar remaining on the floor as she and her bodyguards walked back into Aurare. Jayce fell to his knees, Sola and Luna melting back into their bloblike forms before binding back onto his forearms. He glanced up at Caelie, a mortified look on his face as tears formed in his eyes. She snarled as she watched Serpent and her goons leave, before she looked down at Jayce, concern on her face as she tilted her head. "What do I do?" Jayce asked her. She looked at him, shaking her head before she walked over to the briefcase, closing it before she span on her heels and threw it into the water. She raised her fists into a boxer's stance, slowly opening her mouth. She squeaked, shutting her eyes and shaking her head before she tried again. "Fight," Caelie whispered.

Seas the Seas Tales: A Girl Long Forgotten

Marisha smiled at Bjorn as they and the others bounded down the stairs towards the casino. He caught her eye, smiling back before leaping to the side as a woman walked between them, her orange eyes meeting Marisha's before she passed by, her long, light-brown hair trailing behind. "Rude!" Bjorn called after her, as Marisha stood frozen. "Some people," Bjorn muttered. "You alright?" he asked. Marisha shook out of it. "Yeah, you go on. I'm going to wait for Jayce," she said, smiling at him. Bjorn nodded. "Okay, see you in a minute."

Marisha watched him leave, turning away as soon as he disappeared out of sight. She shook her head, her scars aching as she slowly walked towards the stairs leading upwards. "Everything okay?" Jayce asked. Marisha glanced upwards, her body freezing as she stared past him, a cold smile staring down at her. It was her mother. Her smile was the same: cold, empty. Marisha glanced to the sides, the symbols of her mother glaring at her from all direction. Her lungs emptied, and she gasped for air, her lungs refusing to fill.

Marisha fell to her knees, her scars burning, her eyepatch constricting around her head. She tore it off, her vision dark. "Take your time, we've got you," said Jayce, a pocket of light coming through the darkness as she held onto Caelie and Jayce's hands. "It's the Serpent, my mother," Marisha said, her mouth refusing to work. She blinked, her vision clearing. "I-I I need to go! I'll be back!" Marisha yelled, clambering to her feet before racing up the stairs.

The Serpent stood waiting in the middle of the hallway. "Ah, finally. I thought I'd never see you again Marin. I'm glad you have returned to me," she stated, slowly approaching Marisha. "My name is Marisha, Marin is dead." The Serpent shook her head. "Just because you chose for that to be, doesn't make it so. The same way choosing to destroy that face of yours, doesn't make you any less my daughter. Why did you abandon me, Marin?" she asked, continuing to approach.

"You abandoned me! I didn't see you for months! Where were you? Where was my Father?" Marisha screamed, tears forming in her eyes before they began to stream down her face. Her mother continued to approach. "Stay back!" yelled Marisha, reaching towards her bottomless bag, only to find it was gone. "You didn't need that man, he fulfilled his part of the deal. He gave me you and he got to meet you. I don't accept bad deals. I birthed you, I had you raised, and, Marin, I will have my side of that deal met, even if you decide not to be a part of that agreement. The terms are set, you will be my replacement, whether or not you like it. For now, however, you will help your Mother conclude one more deal. You've brought such a wonderful prize to my doors after all."

Marisha's eyes widened as she backed up. She lunged for her necklace, but a pair of hands grabbed her from behind, pulling her arms behind her. Marisha kicked and pushed, unable to break free even as she entered into Focus. "You don't yet have the right to act without my say-so, Marin. Become my darling daughter once again. I can even have your face repaired. Make you beautiful again." Marisha spat at her, the saliva passing straight through the image of her mother. "I chose my own life. You don't have any control, you haven't had any control!" The Serpent smiled, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a small totem tied to a string, hanging the small bear around her neck. "I've missed your naivety, your innocence. I'll see you soon. I love you Marin, even if you don't love me, or yourself."

Chapter 46: Surgical Counterattack

Jayce got to his feet, shaking his head and wiping his eyes before glancing towards Caelie. "You're right. She wants me, she's not going to kill the others unless we give her no choice. We need to find Marisha, then we can worry about the crew," Jayce said, glancing towards the inside of the entranceway – a few guards still remained, but significantly less than before. "We need information, and we can't force it out of anyone, not without risking Marisha's life. Can your spirits find her?" Jayce asked. Caelie shrugged, she then shook her head as she grasped her ears. Jayce entered into Focus, sending the small group of spirits fleeing with Panic. "I guess you can't control them. Okay, let's retrace our steps, get a sense of the layout and start eliminating from there."

They headed back inside, Caelie keeping as close as possible to Jayce's back as the numerous guards looked down at them. Jayce kept up his Focus, glancing around the room for anything obvious. The guards were all using it as well, their eyes glowing as they watched him. They continued onwards, heading up the stairs to the casino. A few attendants were waiting for them, most sat at the numerous tables inviting Jayce to play and a few others carried drinks and snacks. Caelie went to accept one, only for Jayce to pull her back. "Don't trust any food or drinks, it would be an easy way for her to win," Jayce warned.

The attendant laughed, prompting a surprised look from both Jayce and Caelie. "That was already attempted, don't worry. Surprisingly, your crew is resilient to most poisons. The Madam has requested you enjoy your stay - please do not feel threatened or slighted," she said. Jayce frowned, taking the drink suspiciously. He dipped his finger in it, there were no unusual taste. "It's hard not to take it personally," he said to the attendant. "Is Marisha's cooking really that bad?" he quietly asked Caelie; she gave an uncertain look as a response. "Thank you," Jayce said civilly to the attendant. She nodded, turning to walk away. "Might I suggest interacting with a few of the other guests here," she said quietly, before walking away. Jayce looked around, he hadn't seen any other guests. He hadn't seen anyone who wasn't an employee, no one except for...

"The Bard," Jayce muttered, Caelie already making her way upstairs. Jayce followed her, his thoughts racing as he placed his empty glass down on the top of the stairs. Jayce glanced towards the buffet, the food had been replaced by an array of appetising sweet delicacies taking the place of the previous savoury foods. Bar a few bored guards, most drooling slightly as they looked at the food, the place was empty.

Jayce turned away, heading to the performance hall. He peeked inside: there was no one there. "How are we going to find her?" Jayce asked himself, glancing around the hallway towards the main map. There were two more floors of rooms above them, and they hadn't even crossed the bridge. A thought crossed his mind and Jayce walked over to the nearest attendant. "How may I help you, sir?" he asked. "I was told I could use this place to its fullest. Can I request a musical performance?" Jayce asked. The attendant looked at him for a moment, a flash of confusion crossing his face before he understood what Jayce was after. "Oh, that performer. Of course, give us twenty minutes to prepare. I shall summon her immediately."

Jayce sat waiting for her as Zeta stepped onto the stage. The lights were dimmer than before, and she stared directly down at Jayce and Caelie as they sat in the front row. "What would like me to perform?" Zeta asked, a fake smile unable to hid a clear look of unease. "Do you work for this place?" Jayce asked her, standing up. "As a freelance, yes," she answered, her face changing into a look of pure confusion. "So you're not a full employee of the house?" Jayce pried. Slowly Zeta shook her head, Jayce leaping onto the stage in an instant as he entered into Focus, Sola turning into a dagger as Jayce tackled her to the floor, his knife pressed to her throat.

"What are you doing? Get off me! Help!" she screamed, the room empty apart from Jayce and Caelie, and the doors soundproofed. "What's my name?" Jayce asked. "Rising Ace!" she answered quickly, answering Jayce's suspicions immediately. "You have no idea what my name is do you? You were hired to capture me. That's why you were casting whilst playing. Who hired you?" Jayce interrogated. "Look, it's nothing personal. I like money. I've had nothing but utter shit for the last year when I should have had everything. My clothes were stolen, and I've only just got some half-decent replacements. I thought by now my music would at least be on the radio, but no, I'm stuck here, performing to pirates and lowlifes. The scary woman, she wants you, she paid a lot of money up front to either capture or, at the least, distract you. What are you going to do, kill me for making a living?" she blabbed.

Jayce slammed the dagger into the stage next to her head. "Where is she? Where is my crewmate?" Jayce asked. Slowly Zeta turned her head to look at the blade, before she glanced back up at Jayce, taking a deep gulp. "Honestly, I don't know. I swear! I just know where I was told not to go. And I haven't gone there," she stated. "Where?" Jayce asked menacingly, as he leant down over her.

"Underground - the basement. This side," she answered immediately. Jayce looked at her. "If you're lying-"

"I'm not, I swear... Are you going to kill me?" she asked defeatedly, her arms still pinned by Jayce's legs. He pulled the dagger out of the stage, Sola liquifying and binding himself back onto Jayce's arm. Jayce slowly stood up, before he offered a hand to Zeta. She frowned as she looked at it, taking it and allowing him to pull her to her feet. "I don't understand. No hard feelings?" asked Zeta. Jayce shook his head. "Your music's pretty good. And I can understand looking out for yourself rather than a group of strangers." Jayce reached into his money bag, pulling out a platinum pearl. "Since you're freelance, how would you like to earn some money?" he asked, Zeta glancing at him and Caelie before looking hungrily at the coin. "What do I need to do?" she asked curiously.

"This is a such a bad idea," Zeta muttered, as she pushed Caelie and Jayce through the doors of the performance hall, their hands tied behind them with rope, gags in their mouths and a dazed look on their faces. "You there!" she called out to one of the guards stood in the hallway. His eyes were hidden by dark sunglasses, but his mouth fell open as he stared at the pair in front of Zeta. "I've got them," she added. "Where do I take them? The charm won't hold for long, and this one is pretty good at escaping. I don't think they'll make it across the bridge," she partially lied: the charm would hold as long as she wanted it to.

The guard paused, thinking to himself as he glanced at the other guards. "Downstairs, with the other one. You, go get the Madam. This way," stated the guard quickly, heading down the stairs. Zeta looked at the pair in front of her, the platinum pearl held tightly in her hand. "It could be so easy," she muttered to herself. "Sorry?" asked the guard up ahead, a pair following behind them. "Nothing," stated Zeta. "Just wondering about a finder's fee and all. Don't mind me. Also your outfits are really bland, no style whatsoever," she declared with her nose to the air. "Screw you," muttered the guard, turning away before looking down at his suit.

They made their way down to the entranceway, the guards leading Zeta and her prisoners through a secret passageway hidden underneath the stairs, before continuing to descend downwards, the air cold, and the stone giving way to a dark metal. "What are you doing here?" asked one of the guards stood outside a metal door. Zeta dropped her charm, the dazed effect fading from Caelie and Jayce's eyes. Jayce lunged against the rope, getting pulled back as a guard grabbed it. "She captured them and said the charm would only last so long, the

Madam is on her way," stated their escort, presenting Jayce and Caelie. "So you brought them here! Are you a moron? Fine, come on."

Jayce and Caelie were dragged through the metal doorway, an ungagged but bound Marisha staring at them in horror as they were thrown to the floor. "Jayce! Caelie! No!" she cried, struggling against her bindings. Jayce rolled across the floor to land on his knees, the five guards looking down at the trio, Zeta stood behind them. Jayce grunted through his gag, attempting to speak. The guards looked at him curiously, one leaning down and pulling down the gag. "You know, when in the presence of a Bard, it's always worth checking you have ear protection, or that they're also gagged," Jayce said smugly, the guards freezing before falling to the floor unconscious as Zeta cast the spell she had silently chanted, her tongue and gums glowing with two rings around her neck.

"What's happening?" Marisha asked as she looked at Zeta. "Who is that?" "Marisha, Zeta; Zeta, Marisha," Jayce stated, silently commanding Sola and Luna to turn into a pair of shortswords. They spread out into his hands, cutting his bindings before he cut Caelie's and Marisha's. "How many more times can they transform today?" Marisha asked, standing up and hugging Jayce tightly before hugging Caelie as well. "Three, we need to get out of here. Serpent is on her way." "Where, where do we go?" asked Marisha defeatedly.

Jayce shook his head. "She has the ship, and the crew, in some antimagic box. She no longer has you to use against me, so she'll use that next. It's either on her or in the manager's office," he said. Marisha shook her head, pacing back and forth. "I don't think she's actually here. Or, at least, she has a way of copying herself," she stated. "Great," Jayce muttered. "The manager's office is our only option then. How we do we get there?"

"Probably not from here," stated Zeta. "She's on her way, right?" Jayce and Marisha looked at each other, before back at her. "Sorry, was I interrupting?" There was a loud clatter from the corner of the room as Caelie pulled a grate off the wall. "What are you doing?" Jayce asked, looking at her curiously. Caelie pointed inside, before crawling into the air vent. "This building is technically underground, it needs large vents for all the air. I think Caelie's onto something," stated Marisha, walking up to the hole in the wall and crawling inside. Jayce looked at Zeta. "Absolutely not, it's filthy," she stated, crossing her arms. Jayce looked at the unconscious guards on the floor. "Good luck explaining this situation," he said, before crawling in after the pair. Zeta grumbled as she followed after him, picking up the vent and re-attaching it to the wall behind her.

"I want to go home," she muttered, dropping her spell before crawling quickly after the group.

Caelie led the way, crawling through any passageway that led upwards. She'd pause every so often as a guard passed underneath, often resulting in Zeta bumping into the back of Jayce. "Ow!" she muttered as Jayce kicked her, only to receive a series of shushes from Jayce and Marisha. Zeta pulled a face at them, only to freeze and hold back a scream as a large spider crawled across her hand. Eventually, they spotted light at the end of the vents, a strong breeze blowing through them. Caelie tucked her legs underneath her, lying on her back before she kicked the grate with full force, the metal plate flying off into the air.

After checking the coast was clear, they slowly slid out from the vent onto a ledge underneath the bridge, high above the dock below. "Why? Why, why, why, why? Why am I here?" screeched Zeta, Jayce grabbing her arm as she nearly fell off the small platform. "What was that?" grunted a voice a little ways above. "What? You're imagining things!" answered another, the sound of heavy footsteps crossing the stone bridge above them. Eventually the footsteps disappeared, the small group breathing a sigh of relief.

Zeta sat down, hugging her knees as she stared over the edge. "Stop being a diva," stated Marisha, a quick flash of anger emerging on Zeta's face before she looked away in irritation. "Diva... I'll show you diva," she grumbled, taking off her hat and placing it over her face. Caelie rested a gentle hand on her blue hair, giving her a soft look of reassurance. Slowly Zeta looked up at Caelie, letting out a soft sigh before giving her a faint smile. "What are we doing here?" she asked. "We?" asked Marisha, before glancing towards Jayce. Jayce met Marisha's gaze, letting out a shrug before turning to look towards Zeta and Caelie.

"We need to get the box my crew is trapped in, if we can get that then we can get out of here," Jayce stated. Marisha shook her head, matching Zeta's position as she sat down hugging her knees. "She'll follow, she won't stop. It's hopeless," she said defeatedly. Jayce sighed, crouching as well, before looking over the edge. "Well, I guess that's the end of that," he said. "It was fun whilst it lasted." He leant forwards, beginning to roll off the edge. "You idiot!" yelled Marisha, grabbing him and pulling him backwards. "Well, what do we do then?" Jayce asked.

"We need to force her to leave us alone, to offer her a deal she can't refuse," Marisha stated. "How do we do that?" Jayce asked. Marisha shook her head. "When you have nothing, very little can seem like a lot," muttered Zeta, as Caelie

stood behind her, playing with her blue hair. "Then we get the box and go from there," Jayce stated, standing to his feet and looking at the underside of the bridge. "They're going to know we're coming. And they can all use, at the very least, basic Focus," Marisha stated, standing up and looking at Jayce. "Then we do this quietly," Jayce answered, crouching to allow Caelie to climb onto his back before grabbing onto the edge of the stone bridge and beginning to climb up along the side.

Marisha glanced down - the drop was far. "Worse ways to go," she muttered, grabbing onto the uneven stone and climbing after him. Zeta stared at the three of them in horror. "No way! No way in the abyss am I doing that!" she complained in an aggressive whisper. "Then stay here!" Marisha replied, following quickly after Jayce and Caelie, the teenager wrapped around Jayce with the largest grin on her face. Zeta paced back and forth, the other three getting further and further away. She grumbled as she reached up, grabbing onto the grooves in the stone as slowly she began to follow. "I better get one hell of a tip!" she growled, glancing nervously at the pier far below her.

Jayce led the slow climb across the bridge, his fingers screaming at him and his feet struggling to find footholds, especially with the extra, albeit very light, weight of Caelie. The barely five-foot-tall Caelie was loving the experience, the long drop of little concern to her as she hung onto Jayce. Marisha didn't mind - compared to the icy ravines she'd experienced before, the bridge was nothing. Zeta, on the other hand, was not enjoying herself, her nails had chipped, her fingers were raw and bloody, she'd nearly fallen a dozen times already - and they had only just passed halfway.

Marisha glanced back: Zeta was staring intensely into the stone as she slowly moved right. "Jayce!" she whispered loudly to her right. He glanced backwards, Caelie looking as well. "The diva won't make it," she stated, Jayce nodding in acknowledgement before he started to climb upwards. "I heard that..." grumbled Zeta. Marisha followed as well, the pair peeking their heads over the side of the bridge. Two guards faltered as they stared at Marisha and Jayce, a look of utter confusion on their faces. "Hang on, aren't you-".

Jayce and Marisha lunged forwards, the pair of them using their Focus to grab the guards by their suits before pulling them backwards, screaming, over the edge. The guards hit the water below with a colossal splash, their heads emerging from the calm waters before they began to yell. "So much for quiet," Jayce

muttered, helping Marisha to drag Zeta up onto the bridge. "Never again!" she yelled, staring at her ruined hands in horror.

"You'll live!" stated Marisha, grabbing Zeta and beginning to drag her along behind her as Jayce and Caelie ran ahead across the bridge. Jayce barged into the guards along the way, sending them tumbling over the edge, whilst Caelie summoned spirits to possess other guards, those too making the plunge to the water below. "Wouldn't it be easier to just kill them? They'll come back for us!" yelled Zeta as she followed after the group. "I don't do that, not unless it's necessary! These people are just doing their jobs!" Jayce yelled back, crouching low before leaping upwards with both fists into a very large guard's chin, the giant stumbling backwards before toppling over the side.

They raced through the entranceway at the edge of the bridge, a set of stairs leading upwards and another leading downwards. "Which way?" Jayce asked, looking towards Zeta. "Look, I've been this way once, maybe twice. You tell me!" she answered. Marisha raced ahead upstairs, wrestling with a guard before throwing them down the stairs. "Up, my mother always liked her office at the top. It's probably a running theme with her employees," she panted, pushing onwards.

They raced after her, sliding to a stop on the following floor as they glanced around. Countless people were stood lining the hallway, a large pair of green doors at the end. They were stood frozen, unmoving, tight collars around their necks. "I guess these are the guests," Jayce muttered, walking up to one and reaching for the collar. "No!" he yelled, pushing Jayce away, only to fall to his knees screaming as a large jolt of electricity ran through his body. Jayce stepped backwards, glancing at the others across the hall: most had vacant looks on their face, their entire minds zoned out as they attempted not to move. "There's nothing that can be done, we have bigger priorities," stated Marisha, taking Jayce's arm and pulling him away.

They approached the door; bar the people in the hallway, there weren't any guards. "This doesn't seem right. We had guards right behind us, where are they now?" Jayce asked, holding an arm out as Caelie went to push open the door. Zeta rolled her eyes. "What, so you want to stop now? The big boss should be on the other side of the bridge. What's the worst that could be in there?" she asked, shoving the door open.

A hiss came from the other side of the door, Zeta slamming it shut before a spear embedded itself through the wood, the point emerging directly next to her face.

"You know what, I'm not one to shy away from admitting I was wrong. Let's go," Zeta attempted, Sola and Luna transforming into Jayce's longswords before he pushed open the door and stepped through. Marisha and Caelie stepped through after him, leaving Zeta alone on the other side as fighting broke out. "No Zeta, we need to do this. Yes Zeta, great idea. By the abyss, you fools are worse than my sister!" Zeta yelled, rushing in after them.

A pair of guards stood either side of a large wooden desk, a spear held by one, a sword by the other, but stood between the pair of them, hissing as he looked down at Jayce and the others, was a large baned with the head and scales of a snake. He had a pair of large arms, emerging from a green suit, but he had no legs, his lower torso replaced by a long tail and partially covered with a matching skirt. His scales were a deep brown, his eyes a similar colour. He had a large hood of scales around his head and neck, his visage similar to a cobra's. Caelie began to chant, a guard rushing forwards to interrupt her. Marisha pulled her spear out of her bottomless bag with a twirling flourish before she intercepted, forcing the guard back. The other guard threw his spear at Jayce, Jayce dodging to the side before cutting it in half with his swords.

Zeta emerged into the office, her eyes wide as she stared at the cobra baned. "What the hell is that?" she asked, every member in the room turning and glancing at her. "No, that's not what I meant. Snake baned - there aren't any reptile baned!" she added quickly, a brief nod of acceptance coming from the various members of the group before they all, guards included, turned to look at the baned. "What?" hissed the baned, staring at the guards. "Fight!" The guards looked at each other before turning back to the baned.

"She makes a good point, you know? Why are you a snake? I've never seen any baned that weren't mammals," asked one the guards, their eyes glazed over. "Yeah, she does, why are you a snake? I don't like snakes," said the other one, drawing a sword. "Protect me from the snake!" ordered Zeta, her throat and tongue glowing. "Yeah, sounds good," stated the guards, pushing forwards. "Idiots!" hissed the baned, backing up and drawing a pair of swords from the scabbards on his back. He flicked his tail, the large appendage smashing through the two approaching guards, their bodies flying across the room before they hit the wall, hard, dropping to the floor with a crunch.

He slithered across the room, charging at Zeta with both swords, both Jayce and Marisha stepping forwards to intercept. Jayce glanced towards the balcony leading out of the room. Marisha catching his eye and nodding in agreement, the

pair slashing and striking with their swords and spear as they pushed the baned snake backwards. Jayce went low, aiming for his tail, whilst Marisha aimed high, aiming for his shoulders. He hissed as he fled backwards, the pair overwhelming him as he desperately defended himself.

They emerged into open air, the baned backing into the small railing of the balcony before his eyes widened as Jayce leapt, lifted his legs up and drop-kicked the baned hard in the chest, sending the screaming baned plummeting over the edge. He hit the side of the canyon, bouncing off before splashing into the water. "Too close!" complained Jayce, stumbling back into the room completely out of breath. "We need to get that box, now!" stated Marisha, rushing past him and beginning to pull the various drawers out of the central desk. Jayce headed over to the other cupboards in the room, Caelie stepping inside the ensuite to search in there, whilst Zeta started to look behind curtains and the numerous paintings on the wall.

Caelie returned back into the room, shaking her head. Zeta too shook her head. "Here!" called out Marisha, pointing to a large safe hidden underneath the desk. "It needs a key!" she exclaimed, dropping to her knees defeated. Jayce knelt next to her. "It's not over yet. Luna," Jayce stated, offering his left arm to the safe, the mimic sliding off his arm before melting into the lock. There was a series of clicks as the safe unlocked, Jayce pulling Luna out of the lock in the form of a small key. "Good girl," he said, Marisha lifting the lid and pulling out a small black box from inside.

"We got it, we're going to be okay!" Marisha stated, standing to her feet and breathing a sigh of relief. Jayce stood up as well, placing the box on the top of the desk next to her. "Um, guys?" whimpered Zeta. The pair of them glanced up in horror as they stared at the Serpent as she stood in the doorway with her arms crossed. "I wouldn't be so certain," she said. "I don't appreciate bad deals, but I guess this just calls for a more aggressive tactic. Your move Rising Ace, lay your cards down for me. Let's see who has the better hand!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A Crew's Resolve

Wicke, Bjorn, Vexx, and the others sat on the deck of the Stacked hand, looking up at the darkness surrounding the ship. It had been a few hours, and a nervous tension filled the air. "We're so dead..." muttered Vexx, as he sat next to a pile of empty bottles. "Shut up! Shut up, Vexx!" yelled Wicke. "No more. If you want to give up, fine. But keep it to yourself. Jayce will fix this... he has to." The mood

shifted, the few doubts that had begun to build temporarily getting shoved back down.

"At least Marisha and Caelie are with him. They'll figure something out, to deal with whoever this is," Bjorn stated, nodding to Wicke reassuringly. "They're probably dead already," stated Vexx, standing up and throwing a bottle against the barrier, the glass shattering on impact, the barrier unaffected. "Jayce is not the sort of person to go down easily, as Bjorn said, he is also not alone," stated Xander, standing up and walking over to Vexx before attempting to place a hand on his shoulder. Vexx shook it off, glaring at the much larger man. "What do you know? You hardly know him!" Vexx retorted, backing away and leaning against the ship's railing.

"True," answered Xander, looking around at the other crew members. Little Witch was making her way from crew member to crew member, apart from Falconer who already had Wren laying down with her giant head in his lap. "We wouldn't all be here if we didn't believe in the Captain. Why did you join? Surely you found some reason to believe in Jayce, think back to then. He will get us out of this. Have faith, my friend." Vexx stared at Xander with a look of disgust. "Look I don't know if you're just stupid, blind, old, or naïve – there is only one person you can have faith in: yourself," Vexx retaliated, unnecessarily.

Bjorn stood up, a brief look of anger on his face, but Xander held a hand backwards. "If you truly believe that, how do you intend to get us out?" Xander antagonised, Vexx frowning as he looked up at the older man. "You don't have an answer, so complain all you want. There are three people who can help us, and none of them are you, Vexx. So sit down, have some faith, and don't continue to be a nuisance," Xander stated, turning around and walking back to sit back down on the grass. Vexx stammered as he stood there, struggling to find a way to retaliate. "Fuck!" he yelled, turning around and storming down the stairs to the deck below. Wicke glanced towards Bjorn, the baned looking down at her with a look of worry. "What's wrong with him?" she asked. Bjorn shook his head, glancing back towards the stairs. "I don't know."

Chapter 47: Aggressive Negotiations

Jayce and Marisha slowly walked around the desk, Jayce placing the black box into his bottomless bag as he kept his eyes fixed on the Serpent. Caelie stood watching in the corner of the room, Zeta stood next to her with focused eyes staring at the Serpent, her lips glowing. "Drop!" commanded Zeta, her words empowered with magic as she spoke at the Serpent. Slowly the Serpent glanced over at her, her body otherwise unmoving as she glared coldly at Zeta.

"Do not interrupt me with such paltry tricks. Did you honestly believe that would work?" she asked, before glancing towards Caelie. "Don't try it little one, and just to ensure this conversation can be held with all seriousness..." Serpent stated. She clicked her fingers, the doors opening behind her as she reached into a pocket, pulling out a small white disc. The corridor of guests behind her moved forwards, stepping into view for Jayce and Marisha. "Attack me and I will press this, delivering a quick and painful execution to them all. With that established, let's negotiate."

She walked across the room, moving through Marisha and Jayce to lean on her desk. "What do you want with us?" Marisha asked. The Serpent sighed, shaking her head. "I'm afraid this conversation is with your Captain, but your question is valid Marin. I recognise talent. You rescued my daughter, you made it to my office and defeated one of my main guards, and you managed to retrieve your crew, all without permanently injuring my employees. I respect that, but I also recognise the reasons why."

She glanced directly at Jayce. "You're empathetic, caring - it's who you are. A powerful gift for making connections, a horrific weakness that is easy to exploit. So, to allow me to walk away with something from this encounter, let me propose this. You are concerned I will continue to hunt you if you escape, a valid assumption - an accurate one. Option A: join me, not as a guest or a prisoner, but as a partner. Your crew goes free, safe from my, and your, interactions. Option B: I take Marin back with me, she leaves you and your crew and joins me in your place," offered the Serpent.

"Option C?" Jayce attempted, as Marisha looked at the floor with a defeated look. The Serpent smiled, a cold and sinister smile. "You press this button," she stated, reaching into her pocket to pull out another small white disc. "My business operates in people. I get people what they need, living or otherwise. I also handle the Guild's transgressors. Those people stole from the Guild, this is the consequence. Every single one of them has a debt greater than the worth of their

lives and I am in charge of clearing that debt, through any means necessary. And since I can see you squirming," she said, looking at Jayce, "they stole medical supplies. Supplies that could have gone to hospitals to treat those with serious injuries, soldiers, mothers-to-be, a simple farmer who had an accident. Each and every one of them was involved, alongside others who have already had their debts cleared, leading to a total loss of supplies worth fifty innocent lives, each. They are heavily indebted, guilty. You press this button, choosing your crew's lives over theirs, and I will never interfere with you, or Marin's -" she faltered, "Marisha's life, again."

She placed the disc into his hand, the other disc still prominently displayed in her other hand. Jayce looked down at it, mortified, before he glanced towards the hallway of guests. Some were praying, others crying, a few stood vigilantly, but all were terrified. Jayce looked towards Marisha, shaking his head. She nodded stepping forwards. "I think you misunderstand, Marisha, this is not your choice to make. You have a contract with your Captain, and I will not have your first act as my official aide be to break it without consent. Make your choice Captain: sacrifice yourself for your friends, your crewmate for yourself, or these strangers for everyone," she said, stepping forwards and extending her arms outwards in a grand and open display.

Marisha glanced towards Jayce through her injured eye, the Serpent looking away from her. He nodded and in one quick movement she reached into her bottomless bag, grabbing the head of her spear and pulling it out in a wide slash. Simultaneously, Jayce commanded Sola through his mind to turn into a blade, the mimic extending outwards mid-swing as Jayce aimed for the Serpent's wrist. The Serpent gasped as Marisha opened up her side with her spear, just above her hip, with a deep slash, right before Jayce swung downwards through her wrist, her hand dropping along with the small disc.

The Serpent stumbled backwards, hitting the edge of her desk before slowly sliding to the floor as she grasped her side, slowly lifting her remaining hand to look at the deep red blood covering it. Marisha dropped to her knees, staring at her mother as tears streamed down her face. "Why? Why did you have to come for me now? After all these years!" Marisha sobbed. Slowly the Serpent extended her hand, placing it onto Marisha's face.

"How could I not have? Where did we go so wrong? When did I lose you?" asked the Serpent quietly, her face pale and pained. "When you took my Father away from me, abandoned me with strangers for months at a time!" cried Marisha,

leaning into the hand. "You always idolised that man, didn't you? I suppose endless gifts and attention counts for a lot for a child. You came about as part of an exchange, I got you and his connections – did you think he didn't get anything out of our deal? Foolish girl," she said softly, shaking her head and lowering her hand, leaving no handprint behind.

The Serpent sighed, looking up at Marisha. "You always tried so hard to please me, to get my attention. Interrupting meetings with dignitaries, stealing from my personal collection; I remember those dances you used to do, with that stupid pole you stole, in that beautiful dress. And those meals, the best thing I could ask for after a long day or journey, delicious..." she said, a genuine and soft smile on her face. "Until you hurt yourself and gave up on me," she added. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you. I understood too late that you needed me more than I thought you did, that you would build your own future without needing me to make one for you. But the past cannot be changed, and one way or another, I will always love you... even if you don't love me," she stated softly.

Marisha sobbed, shaking her head before glancing down at her mother. The Serpent sighed, looking up at Jayce, her wound gone, her hand restored. "Treat Marisha well. She will always be my daughter, so understand her cunning, her skills, and her prowess for business. She will take you far, Jayce." She stood up, looking at the pair, to Marisha's horror. "Phoenix was right about you, there is something truly remarkable about you, and you have my respect for it. Don't worry, I will leave you two and your crew alone, for as long as the Guild has no reason to meddle in your affairs. Anyway, you made the right choice. Farewell," she stated, a loud buzz building up before it disappeared with a click, an echo of bodies dropping behind them in the corridor. Jayce glanced back in horror at the two neat rows of corpses, before he turned back to the Serpent, only to find her gone.

A few moments of silence passed as the group stood there stunned, broken only as Jayce dropped to his knees on the floor, a mortified expression on his face. "So, we won?" Zeta asked at last. Marisha nodded to her, wiping her eyes before she knelt next to Jayce, placing her arms on his shoulder and hugging him. "I'm sorry, but there was no other way. We were never going to beat her without consequences. We were outmatched."

"What a waste of life... Why did she have to? What was the point?" he asked. She leant backwards, meeting his eyes. "In some twisted way, I think that was her warning us. We got off lucky, and if we are in that position again, she wanted

to see if you would sacrifice yourself, one of us, or strangers. She told us a story, but they could have been anyone, that was the point. She was measuring your character, but, stupidly, a tiny part of me hopes she was here for me, not just you." Marisha shook her head. "Let's go, I've had enough of this place," she said, standing up and offering a hand to Jayce. He took it, Caelie running into his stomach with a tight hug as he stood up.

Slowly they left the room, Jayce staring at the row of bodies lining the corridor, a twisted feeling in his stomach as he shook his head. As they reached the stairs, a pair of bodyguards were walking up it. Jayce and the others entered into a defensive stance, but they walked straight past the group, continuing onwards towards the office before picking up the two injured guards inside and shutting the doors. Jayce and the others continued descending to the floor below, before they slowly crossed the bridge with Zeta trailing behind, a depressed atmosphere enveloping them.

Zeta thought to herself, eventually nodding as she opened her mouth. She began to sing, a song about a lowly taxman. "Really? Now?" asked Marisha, glancing behind her. Zeta ignored her, the tune changing in speed to an upbeat tempo. Caelie bounced her head as she skipped carefree ahead of them along the stone bridge. Jayce struggled to not hide a smile, his own head bouncing along as he listened to the lyrics, the tune depressing but sung in a happy tune. They crossed the threshold of the other side, Zeta concluding her song before stepping to the side.

"Well, this was... horrible, and I'm surprised to still be alive. Good luck with whatever you do, Rising Ace. I wouldn't worry too much about those dead people, they're dead, they sounded like scumbags, and you got your crew back because of it," she said, with a reassuring smile. Jayce shook his head, reaching into his money pouch and grabbing a handful of random coins before handing it to her. "You still don't know my name do you? Thank you for your help, Zeta. I don't think we'd have made it through this without you. What will you do now?" he asked. "No idea, but freelance life is the way for me. Bye!" she said quickly, backing away before walking through the doors into the performance hall.

They made their way down to the docks. The countless bodyguards were gone, replaced by a few attendants wandering around, but Jayce didn't notice. As he stood on the pier, he reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out the black box before opening it – the ship inside. He uncorked the glass bottle, running his fingers along the runes and releasing the ship out onto the water with a splash.

Bjorn and Wicke clambered quickly off the sides, Wicke and Caelie hugging each other quickly before Bjorn grabbed Marisha, eventually dragging Jayce in as well. "You both have a lot of explaining to do!" Bjorn stated, Jayce and Marisha both nodding in agreement. "It's a long story, it's been a long day," Jayce said quietly. Bjorn nodded. "Ready the ship to leave, I want to get out of here as soon as possible," Jayce added, stepping past him and walking towards the ship.

After the story had been told, Jayce found himself leaning on the railings next to his quarters, waiting for Bjorn to return with their money. A whistle rang from below him and Jayce glanced around the deck to see where it had come from. "Oi, Jayce!" called a voice from the dock. Jayce glanced over the edge, looking down at a blue-haired Bard. "Oh, it's you," Jayce answered. "What do you want?" he asked, ignoring the large pile of luggage stacked on a trolley behind her.

"Well, it turns out the majority of these ships are just a façade, and I don't really know how to sail. So I'm kind of stuck here. And I was thinking... you know, for a good salary, a nice room, food, travel, and so forth... would you be in the market for a Musician?" she asked, in a roundabout way. Jayce smiled before he nodded. "Welcome aboard. I'll come help with your luggage," he stated. "Thank you very much, is my room that one behind you?" she asked, walking away from her luggage and beginning to climb aboard. Jayce laughed. "No."

Bjorn stood on the deck, a confused look on his face, as a young blue-haired woman stared up at him whilst holding a lute. "Jayce, who is this?" he called out. Jayce stuck his head out of the living room window. "Zeta, Bjorn; Bjorn, Zeta," he answered, disappearing before reappearing through the door, a few other crew members arriving to the main deck from various points on the ship, drawn by the noise. Bjorn stared at Jayce, waiting for further information. "Hi," Zeta inserted, "Zeta Vao, I'm your new Musician."

Bjorn stared at her with wide eyes, before slowly he turned his head to look at Jayce. "Did she say Vao?" he asked softly, prompting a wide and surprised smile from Zeta, a few other faces amongst the crew changing in recognition. "You've heard of me? That's great!" she stated, only for Bjorn to shake his head before he glared at Jayce. "What's wrong? What's so significant about her surname?" Jayce asked. "Her grandfather is the Fleet Admiral," Bjorn said through gritted teeth. "How did you not know that? Surely you, Jayce bloody Exarga, have met her before?" he asked.

Zeta glanced towards Jayce, giving him a thumbs up. "Neat, you're an Exarga? Small world! Your mother is very nice. And, since I'm sensing a little tension, I'm the youngest grandchild, if I were my sister, or one of my cousins, this would be a bit more of a problem," she stated, Bjorn throwing his arms up in dismay before staring at Marisha. "So now we've gone from two people with family members in high places to three. A head of the Guild, an Admiral, and a Fleet Admiral. We're doomed."

Zeta gave a smug grin in Jayce's direction. "My family is more important," she chided. "As you said, it's your grandfather, that's half points, so I still win," Jayce retaliated with a wide grin. Bjorn was unamused. "I don't get your issue, Bjorn," Jayce stated, crossing his arms. "Running off what you and Marisha have told me about today's events, we very nearly lost all of our lives. We only won because the Serpent took pity on us, and wasn't serious about taking us down. She was free to do as she pleased. The Admirals may not have that luxury, especially if they are ordered to bring back a certain granddaughter to her grandfather. This feels like we're just taunting our enemies. No offense," Bjorn stated.

"None taken, but can I at least say something to defend myself?" Zeta asked. Bjorn nodded. "There's dangerous people everywhere, and I left my home because my parents were assholes and my sister left me alone with them. It was either military or something else. I chose something else. My grandfather is my grandfather: he's weird, annoying, sometimes funny, but mostly just busy. If you want me not to join, fine, but do so because of who I am, not because of something I can't control. I'm no more a danger to you guys than Jayce or Marisha," she stated with a strong level of vulnerable honesty that Jayce was surprised by, until he noticed her lips were glowing. He laughed to himself. "You're in, you've already signed, and Tempest is making your room at this very moment, but I get your point Bjorn. Today taught us a lot, and you're right about the Serpent pulling her punches," Jayce stated.

Marisha was staring at him, and Jayce met her gaze. "Zeta is in, I'm happy to have another person I can trust, even if it is a diva," Marisha said, prompting a look of offence from Zeta. "We were lucky, and I hate that I have to say that. If we are outclassed again, it's probably not going to be against something or someone who will play nice. If they trap our crew in a metal box, the Church will throw that box in the sea. If they have us at gunpoint, the Navy will pull the trigger. Bjorn is right, we need to be more careful and weigh up our choices more seriously. Jayce, can you honestly say that if today happened again, you could

actively choose to sacrifice others for us?" she asked. Jayce looked down. "Yeah, I thought so. I'd press that button for anyone on this ship. I think most of us would. Please just think about these things, for me. We're a crew, family, we need to talk about this, especially if it's not comfortable."

Jayce nodded, looking at the others assembled on the deck, almost all of them looking towards him. "I can't... I can't promise that I can actively choose to sacrifice others for us, it's not who I am, nor is it who I wish to be. I'm not that person, I don't think I can choose to let a family die just to save one of you," Jayce stated. "Nor should you," inserted Xander as he leant against the mast, Marisha, Wicke and Vexx looking towards him. "This is a pointless topic. Would you want innocent people to die for you? Is that what you're asking for? This seems exactly the point the Serpent was trying to make, as sick and twisted as her methods are."

"Which is?" Wicke asked, crossing her arms as she glanced across the group. "Are we pirates? Or are we adventurers? Do we take and take and take, just so we can live better lives, or do we do things for people, risk ourselves for others? I will put my life down on the line for others, for you all, but I won't chose to sacrifice people for myself. I think that's what Jayce is trying to figure out. Where do we lie on the morality scale, are we heroes or villains? I'm neither, my hands are already stained, but I'll do my damned best to be a good person at the end of it. If it means breaking a few Church skulls to do so, so be it," Xander stated. Yuthura and Bjorn nodded in agreement, a gentle grumble coming from RK as Vexx shook his head.

Jayce glanced across the group, varying looks of confliction echoing around, except for Caelie who seemed more interested in following Little Witch across the deck. "I agree, and I can see the faults in it too," Jayce said to Xander, the others all looking towards him. "We need to be more careful, I think that much is obvious, but worrying about things out of our control won't help either. Let's do our best not to get trapped again, and if we do, let's trust each other to get us out of it. Let's make way, put this place behind us and continue onwards to Caedom. It was my fault that I let the ship get captured - I'm sorry. I will not let that happen again, I swear it. And if a decision comes, I will do the best I can for all of us," Jayce stated, the others nodding in acknowledgment before wandering off.

"That went well," Zeta muttered as she, Jayce, Marisha, and Bjorn remained on the deck. "It was needed," Bjorn stated, nodding to Jayce. "You have my support as always, but it's getting real now. First the Oni, now the Serpent, two names

known across the world - who else will we stumble across with an interest in us?" he asked. "I don't know, but probably more and more, and we shouldn't be afraid of that. We step up our training, take that time we talked about in Caedom, make allies, learn from those ahead of us," Jayce answered. "Can I leave the ship to you and Falconer?"

Bjorn nodded, Jayce glancing towards Zeta and Marisha before walking past them to his room, shutting the door and locking it before stumbling over to his bed. He lay face down, his eyes shut and his feet hanging over the edge, before eventually he rolled over, glancing out of the window as the ship began to move. He sighed, bringing his arm up over his eyes as he took deep breaths. "It's getting real now," he said quietly to himself. "What do I do Alara? How do I protect them without giving in? Without becoming the person I promised not to become? How do I stay a good person?" There wasn't an answer.

Seize the Seas Tales: A New Member of the Family

Jayce stepped out his room a while later, a soft tune echoing across the ship from high above. Zeta sat with her feet hanging over the edge of the crow's nest, a lute in hand as she sung, trying out some lyrics. "Bjorn is a grumpy old git, a big, rude, old bear..." she sang, prompting a smile from Jayce as he looked at Bjorn stood behind the wheel with plugs in his ears. Jayce tapped him on the shoulder. Bjorn took out an earplug, looking down at him. "I only asked if she could practice somewhere further along the ship. I hate her, so much," he grumbled, placing the plug back in as Jayce laughed and made his way to the stairs.

Jayce headed to the living room, a strong smell floating out of the windows, a somewhat pleasant one. "Ah, Jayce, perfect timing," stated Marisha from the kitchen. "Dinner is almost ready, can you lay the table?" she asked with a smile, her eyepatch back on and an apron around her waist as she stirred a large pot. Jayce nodded, setting out an extra place around the large living room table. "Any more crew and we'll need another table," Marisha called backwards. Jayce nodded, a small smile coming to his face as the thought crossed his mind.

Dinner was called out, the various members of the crew making their way to the living room, Bjorn eventually joining them once the ship had successfully been docked in an alcove. They sat around the table, passing around their plates and mugs until everyone had been served. "Dig in!" Marisha declared, to the cheers of the crew. They took a bite, and for the first time, it wasn't bad.

Chapter 48: A Surprise Appearance

Jayce slowly opened his eyes, rolling over and glancing around his room. For once, he had his bed to himself, and he had actually been left to sleep in. He smiled as he leant back, looking up at his ceiling before untinting his windows, the morning light shining through the glass. A red-headed teenager stuck her head around the corner, glancing in through the glass before she quickly disappeared. Jayce spotted her out of the corner of his eye, chuckling to himself as he waved his hand towards the door, unlocking it.

A few minutes later there was a gentle knock before the door was opened, several faces hovering in the doorway, a cake decorated with candles held prominently in front. There was a beginning of several different birthday songs, the group looking at each other before eventually pointing at Zeta, letting her take the lead with the traditional Imperial song. Jayce laughed, sitting up as they brought the cake over to him. "Happy birthday!" they concluded, Bjorn presenting the messy cake to him, the icing a bit too runny and covering the entire cake in a bright blue. Jayce blew out the candles. "Thank you, all of you!" he said, even glancing out of the door towards RK as the rokken glanced curiously through the railing of the aft deck.

"As we were looking at the crew list, we realised none of us actually know how old you are, so I hope the number of candles is close," Marisha stated. Jayce laughed, counting them quickly. "Three too many, I'm twenty-one today," he stated, prompting a few wide eyes. "A fine age to be, congratulations!" stated Xander. Marisha had a smug grin on her face as she looked down at him. "Little baby, Jayce," she said.

Jayce rolled his eyes, prompting a soft laugh from Yuthura. "I wouldn't play that game, Marisha. I think Xander and I have you all beat. You're all children to me!" stated Yuthura. "Anyway, get dressed and come down when you're ready. Happy birthday Jayce!" Wicke stated, pulling the others towards the door. They gave their final congratulations, shutting the door behind them and carrying the cake away. Jayce laid back, looking back up at his ceiling, a wide grin on his face. "Happy birthday to me," he said softly, before he rolled out of his bed and wandered towards his shower.

He shaved and showered before getting dressed into some casual day clothes: a simple loose shirt and a pair of baggy trousers. Luna and Sola leapt from his bedside table onto his wrists, forming their usual dark lines across his forearms. Jayce then headed to his door, stepping out into the morning sunlight. His crew

were waiting for him in the living room, RK hovered outside of the door, his giant head peaking inside the doorway as Jayce walked inside.

"Shall we have some cake?" Jayce asked, drawing their attention as they sat around the room. "Presents first!" stated Wicke, "I call being last!" Jayce smiled, glancing at the small pile scattered across the table, but one present immediately drew his gaze. "I must profess this tradition within your species is a peculiarity, but I can understand why the significance of one's creation is an important aspect of your kind. Congratulations on your survival, your birth, and your continued existence. I believe I am due to claim this gift as a collaborative idea of myself and RK-227," Tempest stated, pointing to a large stand next to him, a full set of plate armour laden upon it. It was intricately designed, a dark grey and blue with etchings across the metal, and blue cloth leading down from the groin and across the back. It looked amazing, and Jayce immediately wanted to try it on.

"Thank you, Tempest. I am... I'm actually speechless, this is amazing!" Jayce stated, running his fingers across the grooves, plates, and etchings. The armour thrummed slightly under his fingers and, as he glanced at it with his Gaze, it was distinctly magical. The djinn nodded, looking towards the others, and beckoning them forwards. "I suppose I am next," Falconer stated. "Within my culture it is traditional to grant a person two gifts." He presented a small brown box, a platinum bangle inside, a line of sapphire lining the middle. He then pointed to a small plant sat on the table. "Living in the desert, life is a rarity. As such, it is customary to give both a living and a non-living present. May you long outlast this plant! Happy birthday, Captain."

"Thank you, Falconer. I shall treasure them both," Jayce said, slipping the bangle onto his wrist before running his finger across the leaves of the plant, a soft fuzz covering the surface. "I think I shall go next," said Yuthura. "When you've seen as many birthdays as I, there is often only one thing a person can ask for: something useful. Here's some more moisturisers, scar cream, shower gel, perfume, the usual stuff. Happy birthday." Jayce took them eagerly with a broad smile. "Thank you, Doc."

Caelie rushed forwards, two wooden cases in her hands. "You're a difficult man to buy for," Xander stated. "As one of the newer people on this ship, I must state that we didn't have as much warning as the others. The smaller one is from Caelie and Zeta." Jayce just barely caught Zeta place her hands together and bow her head to Xander, but he didn't mind. Jayce opened the smaller case: inside was a small black fountain pen, his name and title engraved on the pen in gold. "Given

how often you're writing to Alara, I figured this would be of some use. Now, it is also partially from Tempest - he helped me with its creation, and it should never run out of ink, thanks to his enchantments," Xander added.

"The other box is from myself, once again with Tempest's aid, but Caelie also helped." Jayce grinned as placed the pen back in its case before handing it to Caelie and taking the other box. He opened it: inside were a pair of leather and metal vambraces designed to go over his forearms and wrist. They too were magical, and grooves had been designed into them. "Is that why you were trying to measure my arms whilst I slept?" Jayce asked Caelie, who grinned chaotically, nodding her head. "Try them on," Xander stated.

Jayce did so - they fit perfectly. Much to his surprise, Sola and Luna then slid across the bracers slotting into the grooves, their eyes peeking up at him. "With luck, Falconer's should also fit," Xander added. Jayce slid the bangle onto his left wrist, the platinum jewellery fitting on top. Xander pumped his fist to himself with pride. "Thank you, all four of you, these are perfect - better than anything I could ask for. I appreciate the gifts, especially with the short notice." He patted Caelie on top of her head, Zeta and Xander nodding to him.

"Who's next?" Wicke asked, glancing at the remaining members. Marisha picked up a small grey backpack off the table, stepping forwards and presenting it to Jayce. "Given that your last one was slashed, and that the patches you have made to keep your previous one going are a little bit... horrific, I thought this would be useful. The slot for the ship's bottle is more concealed, making it less vulnerable, it's also lighter than your last one and made from a blade-resistant material. Since we have the bottomless bags, backpacks aren't so necessary, but I figured you'd appreciate it, regardless. Happy birthday, Jayce."

He smiled, trying it on and adjusting the straps. "It's great, thank you." She smiled, stepping back. A platinum pearl coin flew through the air towards him, Jayce catching it without issue. "Happy birthday, use it well," Vexx stated casually. "Thanks Vexx." Vexx nodded, beckoning Bjorn forwards. Bjorn glared at Vexx before he stepped forwards with one of the only two wrapped gifts on the table. "Happy birthday Captain," Bjorn said, presenting a rectangular item to him.

Jayce tore open the wrapping, a quick smile spreading across his face as he looked down at a photo of the entire crew stood on the deck. Jayce stood in the middle, Caelie in front of him, Wicke across his back with a wide smile. Bjorn and Xander were on either side of his shoulders and RK stood behind the entire

crew with Tempest hovering next him and Wren sat on his shoulder. Falconer stood next to Bjorn in front of Wren with Horus on his shoulder. Marisha was in front of Bjorn, with Vexx next to her, whilst Yuthura stood next to Xander with Zeta in front of them. Little Wicke sat in front of the entire crew, the cat looking curiously at the camera.

He held it silently for a moment, unable to take his gaze away from it until his vision started to blur. He wiped his eyes, smiling the entire time before he looked up at Bjorn. "Thank you, this means a lot," he said, extending an arm and hugging Bjorn. "I had a few copies of that photo made, there's one up on that wall. It's a good photo," said Bjorn, pointing behind him at a similar frame on the wall. Wicke budged him out of the way, a poorly wrapped bottle in her hands.

"My turn!" she said, presenting the gift. Jayce set the frame down, tearing open the wrapping. It was a very old bottle of golden liquor, one he immediately recognised as the bottle Wicke had bought in the auction at Ruur. "I get that you like this stuff. It's one of a kind, so don't drink it too quickly!" she said. Jayce smiled, pulling her in for a hug. "Thank you, Wicke. It's already quite old, I think it won't mind a few more years, then we can try it together." Her face lit up, and she stepped back, nodding. "It's a deal!"

Jayce looked across the numerous presents, across his numerous crew. "Thank you, today has already been one of the best birthdays I've ever had. Now, let's have some cake!" he said to the cheers of the group. Jayce cut the first slice, the simple vanilla cake containing a few small lumps of butter, the icing a bit too runny, but otherwise delicious. After finishing his first slice, a small squeak drew Jayce's attention to the doorway.

An otter stood in the entranceway, its fur brown, and a large two-sided backpack across its front and back, the Guild logo stamped on the material. It was slightly smaller than Caelie in height, but not by much, and it gave him a little wave before it unzipped its backpack. "Mail's here!" Jayce called out, a few members glancing towards the Guild otter before returning their attention to the cake. Jayce approached the otter, the mammal pulling out a small waterproof bag containing the latest newspaper and some letters, as well as a small wooden box. It handed over the bag before it presented the box to Jayce, a glowing seal on the latch. It squeaked at him. "Ah, Wicke, can I borrow the beacon. It needs confirmation of delivery," he called back into the room.

Wicke threw him the beacon and he placed it to the seal, the glow subsiding before the object detached itself from the box's latch. The otter picked it up,

placing it inside the backpack before zipping it back up. It gave another wave before it ran to the edge of the ship, leaping off into the water below. "So cute," Jayce said with a smile, rattling the box, before stepping outside and placing it down on the grass. He opened the sealed bag, pulling out the newspaper and setting it to the side. There were three letters addressed to him, one in his Father's handwriting, one in Damian's, and one in Alara's.

"What's in the box?" Wicke asked curiously as she stepped outside, the others following behind her, each with their eyes towards Jayce. He pocketed the letters and picked up the wooden box. "Shall we see?" he asked, flicking open the latch and peeking inside. He faltered, a few others leaning forwards to get a better view. Inside was a small hand axe: it had a golden shaft, a black metal blade, and a red cloth handle. "An axe?" Wicke asked, as Jayce lifted it out of its container. "Who would have sent you an axe?"

It sparked, a jolt of red electricity flowing across the blade, before a bolt of lightning leapt off the weapon hitting the floor, another quickly following, followed by another and another. Jayce let go of the weapon, his eyes wide as it floated and began to spin, bolts of red lightning flying off in all directions. "A bomb?" Bjorn asked quickly, stepping forwards to shield Wicke and Caelie. Jayce shook his head, a dark thundercloud forming above the ship, a flash from his childhood overtaking his vision as he stumbled backwards. "Oh no," he muttered, a large bolt of red lightning releasing from the cloud above onto the deck of the ship.

As the crew slowly turned to look, their eyes temporarily blinded by the light, a figure immediately drew their attention. She was dressed in red, a long cape across her shoulders and a colossal gold and red axe held in her left hand. Her back was to the group, her long orange hair tucked into a black, gold, and red peaked cap, but slowly she turned to face them. "An Admiral!" yelled Vexx, rushing forwards with Bjorn by his side.

Jayce blinked and Bjorn was on his back on the floor, a boot on his chest, her axe to his throat, whilst Vexx struggled in the air, a hand clenched around his neck. The figure looked up at Vexx as she held him, his eyes wide with fear as his red eyes met her blue ones. "Mum?" Jayce asked, Cassandra immediately dropping Vexx to the floor before she looked towards him, a smile on her face. "Jayce, happy birthday!" she said, before glancing down at Bjorn, her axe melting away into a golden ring on her fourth finger. She stepped off him, extending a hand down to him and pulling him to his feet with terrifying ease.

"What are you doing here?" Jayce asked, his mother glancing around at the mostly terrified crew. "What mother would miss her eldest son's twenty-first?" she said, stepping forward and opening her arms, Jayce stepping forward into them. "I wanted to see you, so I've taken the week off. I like the ship. Ooh, right, I'll be back in just a second!" she stated, releasing him. A small axe identical to the one that had been in the box appeared in her right hand and she dropped it onto the deck, disappearing in a flash of red lightning.

The crew slowly turned towards Jayce, Vexx still rubbing his throat. "Did you... did you know she was coming?" Bjorn asked nervously, as he stepped back away from the axe. Jayce shook his head. "Definitely not, um, that's my Mother," he replied awkwardly. There was another flash of lightning and she reappeared on the deck wearing a new outfit: a red flannel shirt, a pair of jeans, a pair of black combat boots and a black sun cap. A large pile of boxes were held in her hands, which she carefully placed on the floor.

"Happy birthday Jayce! I brought cake from the Capital, sweets from that sweetshop we always go to, booze – lots of booze for cocktails, uh, clothes, I think an axe – some kind of weapon. Anyway, where were we?" she asked, pointing at the various boxes before looking towards Jayce with a wide smile. There was a loud beep echoing from her pocket, it chimed a few more times before she let out a sigh, pulling a small communicator from her pocket. "Sorry, one moment." She opened it, an image of a green-haired, fair-skinned, brown-eyed woman appearing on a small projection. "Admiral, respectfully, what the hell is this?" she asked, presenting a poorly scribbled note to the screen. 'On holiday, back in a week.' It read.

Admiral Exarga let out a sigh. "Sylvie, I thought it was pretty obvious. I've gone on holiday," stated the Admiral, glancing towards Jayce before rolling her eyes and shaking her head, the rest of the Rising Aces staring in confusion and bemusement. "Gone? Gone where?" demanded her assistant. Cassandra stepped backwards, getting closer to Jayce so he could see the projection. "Oh, hi Jayce," she stated casually. "Hi Aunt Sylvie, working hard?" he answered. She smiled, only to falter. "Jayce! Where are you? What are you doing with Jayce? Cassa–"

"Bye Sylvie, back soon!" interrupted Cassandra, crushing the communicator in her hand before she blew the pieces away into the wind. "Urgh, paperwork this, paperwork that, can't a woman take a bloody holiday to see her son?" she exclaimed. "Right, sorry about that. Your crew! Don't worry, I'm not here to kill you!" she reassured, much to the discomfort of Bjorn and Wicke. Caelie stuck her

head out from behind Jayce's back, looking curiously up at Cassandra. "Hello," greeted Cassandra. Caelie cautiously stepped out, looking at Jayce before glancing back at Cassandra, then back at Jayce before she flicked between the pair, eventually approaching Cassandra and wrapping her arms around her.

"Aren't you adorable? I like this one, but I don't recognise her. Who are you?" she asked, hugging Caelie back before glancing down at her. "That's Caelie. You recognise my crew?" Jayce asked, the others now beginning to settle down as they took various positions across the deck - Vexx leaning against the mast with his arms crossed. "Of course! Your Father has kept me well informed," she answered, looking across the group. "Marisha, Yuthura, Falconer, Vexx, Bjorn..." She skipped over Wicke, glancing towards the Tempest and RK. "Officially I shouldn't know, in reality Tempest and RK-227 as the reports say..." She then faltered, gently releasing Caelie as she looked at Xander.

She stepped forwards quickly, Xander opening his arms before lifting her into the air. "You old fool!" she stated with a wide grin. "I thought you were dead!" "You, calling me old? It is good to see you, Cass," said Xander with a wide smile, before he stepped back and cleared his throat. "Admiral," he greeted. She smiled. "Weapons Master." She faltered. "Xander, I'm so sorry about Bri and Ava. I heard what happened, by the time I arrived... I'm so sorry."

Xander shook his head, his face darkening. "It was a long time ago. My fault, my burden to bear." Cassandra shook her head, but rather than pushing she placed a hand on his shoulder before glancing towards Jayce. "You've found a real treasure out here. Congratulations on acquiring a slightly worn-out legend Jayce, use him well, he'll take you far!" she stated, smiling at the large man before stepping back. "It's good to see you Pumpkin," stated Xander, Cassandra's ears turning a bright red, before she glanced across the deck towards another figure of note.

Zeta stood not-so-casually against the wall, her head angled away, but her eyes constantly glancing towards Cassandra. Cassandra approached her, opening her arms, Zeta stepping in without hesitation. "So this is where you ran off to. My dear, it's good to see you. I love what you've done with your hair, it looks much better long!" stated Cassandra, Jayce immediately receiving several glances from Bjorn, Wicke and Marisha. He stared at the floor. "I needed to get away for a bit. One way or another, I'm here!" stated Zeta with a wide smile.

Cassandra glanced once again towards Jayce. "We'll talk later. Jayce, why don't you show me your room?" she suggested, walking over to the pile of boxes.

"Bjorn!" she stated, Bjorn snapping to attention. "Relax, you're not in the services anymore, nor am I on duty." She paused, glancing at the floor before standing up to her full height and looking up at him. "It took some searching to dig up your record, I'm sorry for failing you. The Navy failed you, and you slipped through the cracks because of it. It shouldn't have happened, and you deserved better than the treatment you received at the end of your service. Please take the cake and booze inside, I need to talk to your Captain, if I may?" she asked softly. Bjorn relaxed, somewhat awkwardly, his face falling before changing into a look of pure confusion, before eventually he nodded. "Aye, Admiral," he stated softly, as she handed him some boxes.

Jayce picked up the rest, walking towards the stairs before he glanced back. Cassandra stared at Vexx as he leant against the mast. He crossed his arms, trying to cover the stains on his hands, but she just shook her head and walked towards Jayce. "Lead on," she said, pointing him onwards. He took her inside his quarters, Cassandra setting down a small canvas backpack on the floor as she glanced around the room. Jayce emptied out his bottomless bag, the various items crashing to the floor.

"Woah," stated Cassandra, staring at the large suit of plate armour amongst the pile. "Did Tempest make you a set of armour?" she asked, as Jayce took off his own backpack and pulled out the photograph of the crew, placing it onto his desk amongst a few other photos. "Yeah, he made it for my birthday," he answered, pushing the armour stand against the wall before sorting through a few other items and returning the rest to the bottomless bag. "That's a really big honour in their culture. Tempest must really respect you."

She stepped towards the suit of armour, moving it across the room to a better position near Alara's sword. Jayce rolled his eyes. "I'm glad to see you took inspiration from my ship. I remember when I first showed you around the Ursus, bossing my crew around, demanding we fired the cannons," she said reminiscing, before she sat down on his bed, laying back onto it and spreading her arms wide. "Oh yeah, that's the good stuff."

Jayce took the letters out of his pocket, placing them on his desk before crossing his arms as he looked towards his mother. She glanced towards him, patting the bed before looking back up to the ceiling. Jayce sighed, sitting next to her before leaning back onto her arm. "I've missed you," she said. "Why did you have to get so big? I feel like I've missed so much." Jayce glanced towards her, her eyes meeting his. "You did, you missed a lot, Mother." She nodded, her face falling

before she looked back up at the ceiling. "Yeah... I guess I did. I'm sorry for that, I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you more. If I could take it back--"

"You can, not with me, that's passed, but with Damian. He still needs you, wants you," Jayce stated. Cassandra shook her head, before smirking as a thought crossed her mind. "I saw him a few months back. He came to my office, told me all about this," she stated, waving her arm around the room. "He's sailing with Corina and Ottar as her assistant, somewhere in the Gardens." "That little snitch," Jayce muttered. Cassandra flicked him. "Rude," Jayce protested. "Why are you really here?" he asked. Cassandra shut her eyes, shaking her head. "So much like your Father, never taking anything at face value. I'm here to vet your crew, and to find out, why exactly you are here and not with Alara in the Marines? So, tell me Jayce, what went wrong?"

Seize the Seas Tales: A Musician's Power

Jayce wandered the ship, an echoing in his ears, a constant stream of words repeating in his mind. He knocked on Wicke's door, there was no answer. "Wicke?" Jayce tried. Again, he received no reply. Slowly he pushed open the door, the young girl sat at her desk with earplugs in her ears. Jayce tapped her on her shoulder, Wicke leaping out of her chair with a yelp. "Don't sneak up on me like that!" she protested, pulling out her earplugs. "Has she finally stopped singing?"

Jayce smiled, shaking his head. "Oh, why?" she complained. "Damned Bards!" she declared, shaking her fist upwards, the faint echo of singing floating through the ceiling. "Anyway, what do you want?" she asked, turning to face Jayce. "Speaking of Bards, Zeta can cast spells without talking. Tell me about Bards and their capabilities, probably best to be familiar with what they can do." Wicke nodded, turning around, and reaching beneath her desk for a small notebook.

"Right, listen up, listen well, I'm only saying this once! Bards directly weave magic into their words, they are master manipulators of everything that can hear, and they can physically alter the world around them with their magic. They directly weave Demon's Tongue into their words, they speak whilst also speaking other words, if you get what I mean. This also means they have means of imprinting Demon's Tongue onto any source of sound, whether music or voice. As such, Zeta can cast using any type of sound, and irritatingly she knows how to make sounds with just her throat. So she hums, makes a gargle, something irritating that is hard to notice, and she can cast spells without chanting."

Jayce nodded along, thinking to himself. “How would we spot a Bard casting?” he asked. Wicke flicked through her notes. “Their magic imprints itself on their throat and mouth, look for the glow on their tongue, gums, lips and neck. That’s all I have, now can you please restrict when she can play to hours that aren’t so irritating?” she begged. Jayce nodded, stepping away towards the door. “Thank you Wicke, I’ll go talk to her.” He shut the door heading up to the main deck before following the sound towards her spot at the back on the ship. “Hey, can you be a bit quieter?” Jayce asked Zeta. She glared at him, immediately beginning to sing significantly louder.

Chapter 49: A Widening Family

"Please explain it to me," Cassandra asked, as she looked at Jayce as he lay on her arm in his quarters. "I made a choice to change one person's life for the better, a choice I don't regret. I don't have any other reason, I did as I felt best," he answered honestly. She nodded, letting out a sigh before sitting up, dragging her arm out from underneath his head. "Not the answer you wanted?" Jayce pried, as he sat up. She looked down at her feet, shaking her head. "No, but there are other questions I need answering. Anyway," she said, looking towards the door, her eyes passing beyond and following a target outside. "Your crew have sent a scout."

There was a knock at the door before it opened, Caelie peeking her head through the gap. "Hello Caelie," Cassandra said, standing up. "I'm all done with your Captain, for now. Can you show me around the ship?" she asked, Caelie nodding eagerly before she took Cassandra's hand and pulled her towards the door. Cassandra dragged her feet, not enough to stop Caelie, but enough to slow her down. "Treat me as any other guest, I'm going to go chat with your crew! There's a gift from your Father somewhere in the pile," Cassandra said, shutting the door behind her as Caelie dragged her away.

Jayce let out a sigh of relief, his nerves beginning to settle as he stood up and headed to his desk, sitting down on his chair and grabbing his penknife. He opened Damian's letter first: it was a postcard from the Gardens. 'Happy Birthday! From Damian,' it read, Jayce smirking slightly as he set the emotionless card to the side. Next he opened the letter containing his Father's handwriting. "Dear Jayce, I wish you the happiest of birthdays! I apologise I am unable to be there in person to celebrate it with you, but know that I am thinking of you on this day. I have watched you grow into a brave, clever, and remarkable young man, with a mind sharper than any blade."

Jayce paused, shaking his head in doubt before he continued. "And although I cannot agree with your decisions to go it alone, or in the manner you have chosen, I can respect a young man's wishes to change the world his way. You will do great things, I know it. Continue to strive to do good, I believe in you, my son. Always have, always will. Happy birthday! The greatest of love from your Father, Philip Exarga."

Jayce set it down, taking a moment to think to himself before he turned over the paper, a small chessboard sketched on the back. "Queen to B4, checkmate!" Jayce paused, shaking his head. "Dammit!" he muttered, placing the letter to the side

as he accepted defeat. He then picked up Alara's letter, taking a deep breath before cutting it open and reaching inside. "Dear Jayce, happy twenty-first birthday! I wish you the best of days, and although I'm not there to celebrate with you, I hope your crew can act partially in my stead. I'm currently on my way to my first real battle, and I'm terrified. It's against a Pirate Lord and, naturally, I can't tell you where I am, but we'll be there in a few days."

"I realised as I wrote this that this is the first time I've not been there to celebrate with you, and most likely it'll be the same way around for me. I wish this wasn't the case, but such is the way of things. I miss you, I wish I was with you, I wish I could hear your voice, see your face. So in the spirit of things, after realising the only time I do see you is in bounty posters or in newspapers, I've sent some photos to you."

Jayce reached inside the envelope, pulling out five photos before he turned back to the letter. "Why I hadn't thought of doing this earlier, I have no answers. So, presuming you haven't messed up the order, let me explain them. I've added some markings on the back as well, for ease!" Jayce looked at the first photo, a group photo of thirteen Marine recruits and their Instructor in a cave with liquid walls. "This is my squad, 'The Wolfpack', and our Instructor – Gibbs, during our first crucible. It feels like a lifetime ago, all of their names are on the back." Jayce smiled as he turned it over, glancing back and forth between both sides as he placed names to the faces.

He set it aside, glancing back at the letter. "Next photo is me and my closest friends on leave!" Jayce glanced at the photo, an image of five people sat in a booth. He glanced at the back, each member was named: 'Wulf', 'Riley', 'Witchford', 'Astris', 'Alara'. Jayce, again, couldn't help but grin as he looked at the heavily intoxicated group. "Next photo is myself, my Captain, and my Commander." Jayce leant back in his chair as he looked at the three of them talking together, their names written on the back: 'Onasi', and 'Vao'. "No way," Jayce muttered, setting the photo aside in a different spot, the blue hair too coincidental for his liking.

"Next is me in my uniform." Jayce smiled as he looked at her Lieutenant Commander uniform, a smiling Alara beaming at him. "Next is me without my uniform." Jayce blushed a deep red. "I hope you're doing well. I miss you, truly. Forever yours, Alara Vanathur." He closed the letter, gently resting his face on his desk as he glanced at her photos, a melancholic feeling tearing its way through his chest. "I miss you too..."

There was a knock at the door, the door opening quickly. Jayce lunged for Alara's less-than-decent photo, slamming it face down on his desk as he turned to face the intruder. "Am I interrupting?" asked Wicke as she looked at him. Jayce shook his head, inviting her inside. "No, what's up?" he asked, turning back to his desk and sorting his mail. "Are we... safe?" she asked. Jayce glanced over his shoulder at her before he nodded. "She's not here to take any of us, don't worry. I'm sorry there wasn't any warning. Are you okay?" he asked.

Wicke hugged herself, glancing away as she leant against the doorway. "I think so, she hasn't said anything to me. She hasn't even looked at me or said my name. Not that this is about me, it's your birthday – it's probably a good thing she's pretending I don't exist. I'm a wanted criminal!" she stated with a nervous laugh. Jayce turned back to his desk, looking down at it before he nodded and stood up, walking to the door. "I'll talk to her. Don't think too hard on it." Wicke nodded, smiling faintly up at him before walking with him towards the stairs to the main deck.

Jayce stuck his head inside the living room; no one was there, but the two cakes had been laid out on the table, Marisha's looking significantly underwhelming compared to the colossal chocolate fondant cake next to it. "Where is everyone?" Jayce asked Wicke. "Training hall. Vexx challenged your Mother to a fight!" she stated, balling her fists and bouncing on her feet. "He what!" Jayce exclaimed, stepping quickly towards the stairs and heading below deck with Wicke behind.

Jayce found his crew exactly where Wicke had said they would be. Vexx stood opposite Cassandra, a tank top on as he bounced up and down. Cassandra still wore her simple flannel shirt and jeans as she stood opposite him, stretching her arms and rolling her neck. "Right, use whatever weapons you want!" stated Cassandra, beckoning him forwards as she entered a defensive stance with one foot placed ahead of her. "I am a weapon!" Vexx stated, entering into Focus. "Come on assassin, I'm waiting."

Jayce entered into Focus, Vexx rushing forwards with his fingers flexed as he span, landing a step in front of her and thrusting his fingers towards her throat as he pressed his palms together. His hands were engulfed in blue fire within Jayce's Gaze. Vexx's eyes widened as she stepped to the side, her face expressionless as she twisted her torso, bringing her arm back before throwing her fist into and through his jaw. The Rising Aces stared in horror as Vexx dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, a loud crack echoing around, his jaw

clearly broken and a few pieces of teeth bouncing across the floor. "Oh my..." muttered Wicke, as she instinctively hid behind Jayce.

Vexx groaned on the floor, Yuthura rushing forwards only to falter as Cassandra reached into her backpack, placed nearby, and pulled out a bottle containing a glowing crimson liquid. She knelt next to Vexx, his face covered in blood, a few teeth scattered around him, and placed his head on her lap. He attempted to fight, but she flicked his temple and he settled. She poured the liquid into his mouth, the blood on his face steamed before it evaporated away, his jaw righting itself with a loud crunch and his teeth growing back.

He shot to his feet, staring at her wide-eyed as he backed away. "Not bad. But you're a long way off where you should be, Executioner," she stated. He glanced around, looking at the other members of the crew before he turned, staring at Jayce before shaking his head and rushing past him. "What was that?" Jayce asked as he stormed into the room. "He made a request, and it was natural for me to test your strongest warrior. He'll be fine, I went easy on him," she stated casually. "What is she like when she tries?" questioned Marisha, quietly from the side.

Cassandra glanced towards her, a smile on her face. "Sorry?" she asked. "Uh, I was just saying I think it's time I start lunch!" Marisha answered quickly. "Wonderful idea, need any help?" offered Cassandra. Marisha shook her head. "You're a guest. Give me thirty minutes!" she answered, nudging Bjorn before heading quickly towards the exit. "Right, Admiral, sorry, Cassandra. Did you finish your tour?" he asked. She shook her head, Caelie standing in front of her and leaning her head back onto Cassandra's chest. "We were interrupted. Care to help Caelie show me around?" she asked. Bjorn nodded, pointing past Jayce to the room's exit. "Please, follow me."

They reconvened a little later back in the living room, the ship sailing smoothly as Falconer and Xander took command of the Stacked Hand. Lunch was simple, but despite the plain taste and the less than appetising style the food had been presented in, the crew ate it without issue. Unsubtle eyes glanced towards Cassandra as she looked down at her plate, a chicken salad before her. She took a bite, chewing and covering her mouth with her hand before she glanced towards Marisha.

"Thank you for the food, I didn't get a chance to have breakfast, so this is perfect!" she said kindly, chewing as she spoke before she picked up a glass of water. "You're welcome!" answered Marisha, sitting back in her chair with a wide smile

before she tried her own food, that smile fading. Vexx was absent from the table, but he was visible from the living room, training on the deck as he practiced his strikes.

After lunch they brought out the cakes, sitting down and eating Marisha's homemade version before they quickly switched to the large chocolate cake Cassandra had brought, all except for Jayce who continued to eat the homemade cake contently. With lunch settled, the crew dispersed, Cassandra smiling at Jayce before wandering off to speak to Xander with Bjorn and Caelie. "Weirdly, I quite like her," stated Marisha. Wicke turned her nose upwards and looked away. "What you mean weirdly?" protested Jayce. "She is still my Mother!"

"You know what I mean, don't play dumb!" countered Marisha, picking up a crumb and throwing it at him from across the table. "Children, behave!" order Yuthura, picking at a few of the remaining pieces of cake. "But I do agree. She is a well-educated, well-mannered, and fascinating woman, who commands a terrifying presence when she needs to. I might need to ask for some tips," Yuthura partially joked.

Jayce rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "I'm glad... I think. I don't know how long she's going to staying with us, anywhere up to a week. She'll be in the guest room. Also, if she's not up extremely early, don't – and I repeat – don't wake her. There are consequences for disturbing her when she wants a lay in," he warned. The others nodded in acknowledgment. "At least we don't have to worry about bandits for a while," said Wicke with a smile, prompting a few chuckles. "I pity any fool who tries to cause us issues whilst she's here," agreed Yuthura. "Anyway, I've got work to do, call me for dinner," stated Wicke, standing up and quickly departing the room. "What's her issue?" asked Marisha, looking at Jayce.

"She's uneasy about having an Admiral here, naturally, but I think she's waiting on something. Expecting some... confrontation. Wicke is the reason we're all here, she started this whole journey with me. Without her, I'd be in the Navy." "The Navy? Not the Marines, like - what's her name - Alara?" questioned Yuthura. Jayce shook his head. "The Red and Yellow Admirals created the Marines twenty-six years ago. The name Exarga is... noticed. My parents would have had full control over my career, and, despite the zealot ideals the Navy pushes, I like my freedoms," Jayce answered.

"Sounds like going into the Imperial military would go against those ideals," stated Marisha. Jayce shook his head. "The Navy rarely set down on the islands, they work in consistent patrols, long hauls at sea. It's a nice way of travelling and

seeing a lot in a shortish length of time. I doubt I'd have stayed, the more I've seen and heard from Xander, you Yuthura, Bjorn... it's not good. A lot of corruption, bad people, I think I'd have wanted to change it and that would have put me in direct conflict with the chain of command, and the Church. It would have either got me killed, or I'd have probably joined the Marines regardless, hell maybe I'd have ended up here after refusing to execute someone. Growing up I loved the Navy, I read book after book about them, mostly to spite my Mother - Alara was always the Marine fanatic."

"I find that hard to believe, plenty of offence intended to the Navy and all," stated Marisha. "Yeah, but there was a crew who visited my home every so often, a group of merchant sailors, led by an absolute moron of a Captain," Jayce said, reminiscing. "I can sympathise," said Yuthura. Jayce stuck his tongue out at her. "He inspired me to look elsewhere, told me about his stories - so much so that I stole a boat and sailed out to sea for a few days. He brought me back, found me dehydrated and hungry and scared in the middle of nowhere. No wind and on a boat not made for far sailing. I don't really remember how I got home, just that he brought me back. I think I was ten, I can't really remember."

Marisha chuckled. "Sounds like you, also sounds like you got really lucky. Must have been one hell of a sailor to track a child across the sea." Jayce looked out to the portside window, watching the canyon wall as it flew past. "Yeah, he was." "He... died?" asked Yuthura. Jayce shook his head, rubbing the back of his head as he turned back to them. "He and his crew sailed across the Frontier after doing something to the Church." The others nodded, but they then both looked at him with soft smiles. "We know more than we used to about the Frontier, if the Nomads have crossed, Wicke's clan as well, then he and his crew are probably out there waiting for you as well. You'll see him again, no doubt about it," stated Marisha. Jayce nodded, standing up and walking to the door. "Yeah, definitely."

Darkness began to fall a few hours later, Bjorn and the others docking the ship in a small alcove before they reconvened back in the living room. Marisha had gone a little overboard on her cooking and a large array of various dishes and platters lay scattered across the table. Zeta sat on one of the sofas with a lute in her hand, providing a bit of music as Cassandra stood in the kitchen with Marisha and Bjorn, a vast array of alcohols and juices scattered across the countertop as she demonstrated how to make various cocktails.

The mood was joyful, another day's voyage reaching its end and the food and drinks readily available for the crew. "To Jayce!" declared Xander, raising a glass

full of a blue liquid to the air. "To Jayce! Happy birthday!" repeated the others. Jayce smiled, raising his glass as he sat in his usual spot at the end of the table, a poorly-crafted paper crown on his head. He glanced around - Vexx was absent, once again. A new cocktail was placed in front of him, a deep green with a yellow centre and he returned his attention back to the party, shutting Vexx out of his mind.

A while later, the group mostly drunk but all of their bellies full of food and drinks, Cassandra tapped her glass with a fork, drawing everyone's attention. "First of all, happy birthday to my favourite eldest boy, Jayce. Second of all, thank you Rising Aces for the hospitality and for treating me to such a rare and wonderful day. Last of all, I noticed you had some baths. Who's in?" she asked. There was an immediate cacophony of voices in agreement, the crew standing up and heading to get to their things, re-energised by the good idea. Jayce waited behind, his Mother also pausing as the others headed off. "You coming?" asked Bjorn. "Give me a moment," Jayce replied, Bjorn nodded, leaving them to it.

The waters were warm, luxuriously so, as always, and a heavy, slightly salted, steam filled the air. Wicke leant against the stone wall of the bath, the back slightly rough, but not unpleasantly so. Her legs were tucked in, and she held them loosely, her long red hair wet and floating in the shoulder height water. Yuthura was laying against the stone wall to her right, her legs fully extended, her body covered with scars, and her hair tied up. Marisha sat opposite Yuthura, to Wicke's left, she lay on her right side, her head resting on the soft padding she had placed onto the edge. Caelie lay in the middle of all of them, floating on top of the water with her chin resting under the surface as she used her fingers to keep herself afloat.

Wicke let out a long sigh. "What?" asked Yuthura, opening an eye and glancing towards her. "Nothing," answered Wicke quietly. A wave of water splashed her as Yuthura kicked towards her. "Don't be childish, speak," Yuthura ordered. Wicke wiped her eyes, glaring at her. "Fine. Why is she here? Really? I-I-I don't get it, she's our enemy, right? She's got orders to kill us, she's killed hundreds of people without issue, why are we still alive? Why is she parading around here? And why are you all okay with it?" she lamented.

The curtain parted behind Wicke, a quick sense of dread filling her as Cassandra stepped through with only a towel around her waist. She took it off, placing the towel down on one of the benches at the edge of the room before she slowly stepped into the huge bath. Yuthura looked at her curiously: her body was

flawless, muscular, without a scar considering her years of fighting, all apart from one area. She had a large scar on her abdomen, a horizontal line a little beneath her belly button.

Cassandra lay down in the water, extending fully as she shut her eyes and soaked in the water, directly opposite where Wicke was sat. Slowly she sank down, dropping her head into the water before she sat back up, Wicke staring intently at her, waiting. She sat up, tilting her legs to the side as she opened her eyes and met Wicke's gaze. "I came here for you, Wicke. To find out what sort of person you were. To find out why, my son, the son of two Admirals, would throw away everything I had prepared for him. To find out why he would throw away his girlfriend, my daughter-in-law-to-be, for you. Why did he choose you? What makes you so special, that he would throw everything away? Were you a good choice?" Cassandra asked, a serious look in her eyes as she stared over Caelie at Wicke.

Caelie paddled her way across, sitting down next to Cassandra and leaning her head on her shoulder, looking curiously at Wicke as they waited for an answer. "I... I don't know," she admitted, leaning her head down on her knees in defeat. "He shouldn't have chosen me. I was a stranger, a nobody he met by accident. I've nearly killed him, over and over again. I turned him against everyone he loved. I-I... I was a bad choice." Cassandra nodded, sitting back and brushing Caelie's cheek with her thumb, eventually sighing as she stood up, Caelie rolling away towards Marisha. She crossed the bath, Wicke shutting her eyes and turning her head away, her face bracing itself.

A moment passed, Wicke relaxing before flinching as a hand placed itself on the top of her head. "Fortunately, I trust my son's beliefs much more than I do yours. I am relieved to see that his choice is not looked upon lightly." Wicke opened her eyes, looking up at Cassandra. "You have my approval, don't waste it," said Cassandra, stepping out of the bath and walking to the showers before turning them on, Wicke turning around and looking at her. "Jayce begged for a sister, I couldn't give one to him, not after the damage my other idiot son did to me. I'm relieved he found one, but at least I also get an early granddaughter," she stated, the group glancing towards Caelie as she resumed floating on her back in the centre of the bath.

Cassandra grabbed her towel, walking towards the curtain before she faltered, sensing as Wicke opened and closed her mouth to say something. "You don't need to fear me. Say what you want, Wicke. I will listen." Wicke took a deep

breath, her eyes beginning to blur. "Why? Why was my home attacked?" she asked. Cassandra glanced at her. "Because of those tattoos on your back, and the power you possess. If the Empire can't control something, it destroys it. It's something I'm trying to change, but I'm only one woman with two hands, and I can't bail out a sinking ship alone. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve it, but some people do and that makes it hard to change." Cassandra stepped through the curtains and Wicke sank back into the water, dropping all but her eyes beneath the surface.

Seize the Seas Tales: From an Admiral to a Captain

Jayce stretched as he opened his eyes; his birthday was over and, unsurprisingly, as he glanced across his bed, Caelie was sprawled out upon it. A soft snoring to his left drew his attention, his bed invaded by another figure – Wicke - the two girls fighting for the majority of his bed. Jayce sighed as he shook his head, standing up and stepping into his bathroom before he quietly shut the door. He showered and dressed, sneaking out of his own room to wander the ship. It was a cold morning, a gentle mist covering the deck of the ship, the sun starting to illuminate the top of the canyon.

He descended onto the main deck, a slight dripping sound drawing his attention towards the main mast. Jayce glanced down at the floor, a small puddle of crimson liquid on the deck of the ship. A droplet hit the pool and Jayce glanced up, stumbling backwards as he stared at Vexx hanging upside down from a rope. His foot was bound, his leg and arms hanging loosely, blood dripped from his nose and mouth, his hair sticky and his eyes shut. "Vexx..." Jayce muttered. "Good morning," came a voice, from a lounge chair nearby.

Jayce turned, staring at his mother as she lay with her cap on and a pair of orange sunglasses covering her eyes. "Don't worry, he's alive. His nose is broken, but he knows how to fix that, if not, Yuthura will sort it," she stated casually, standing up and taking off her sunglasses. Her eyes were sunken, bags underneath them and a genuine look of exhaustion crossing her face – a look Jayce hadn't seen in a long time. She spotted his worried face, rubbing her eyes before putting her sunglasses back on. "Don't worry about me, I'm fine. I haven't slept very much recently, and I thought today I'd at least get a lie in. That moron woke me, challenging me to a duel. He's improved significantly since yesterday, but... keep an eye on him."

"What do you mean?" asked Jayce. She looked at him curiously, before glancing back towards Vexx. "He's complicated, I'm impressed you've kept him settled

for so long. Just, as advice from someone who has been a Captain for a while, not all wounds are physical, and he is badly hurt. Just be careful.” Jayce nodded and she smiled faintly, reaching down and picking up her backpack. “Well, it was fun. I should get back to work, leave you to your voyage,” she stated, extending her arms. He hugged her tightly and she planted a large kiss on his cheek. “I thought you were staying longer,” he said disappointedly.

“As always, unfortunately not. Duty calls. Your Father said he’s planning to intercept you at some point soon, keep an eye out for him – you know how he likes to surprise people.” Jayce nodded. “I love you, I’m glad I got to see you.” “You make it out like this is goodbye,” Jayce said. She nodded. “Is it?” he asked. “Possibly. You’ve chosen a path I can’t walk with you, at least not yet. Grow strong, stronger than me, stronger than anyone, so I can walk with you again without putting you in danger,” she said, a tear running out from under her sunglasses before she backed away, red lightning forming around her right arm. “Alara is doing well, she’ll see you soon, I’ll make sure of it. Goodbye my love,” she said, blowing a kiss before disappearing in a flash of red light.

Slowly the crew began to emerge as the morning truly came around, the majority of them staring up at Vexx in horror, but slowly he too came around. Vexx screamed the most foul things Jayce had ever heard as he struggled to untie himself, but eventually he dropped to the deck with a crash. “Where is she?” he demanded. “She’s gone,” Jayce stated, a few disappointed glances coming his way. “Godsdammit!” screamed Vexx, falling to his knees as he yelled to the heavens.

Chapter 50: New Era

"Commander! Commander!" called out the voice of Ensign Warde through Alara's door. She jolted, accidentally spilling her bottle of ink across the letter she had been writing. "Shit!" she muttered, leaping up from her chair. "Coming!" she yelled, frantically dabbing the ink with a cloth as she tried to salvage the letter. Defeated, she rushed to the door and threw it open, startling the young Ensign. "Commander, Captain wants you topside. We are an hour away from our destination," he said, nervously standing at attention. She nodded, turning around and holding the door open with her leg as she threw the ruined letter into her bin. "Understood, thank you. Dismissed."

He saluted, raising his head and slamming his knuckles together, before quickly turning around and walking away, as Alara reached behind her door to grab her new glaive. It wasn't as good as her old one, but it held the same features, so she folded it up and stowed the weapon across her back. She then shut her door and started the walk to the top deck. Marines stepped to the side to let her pass, saluting or otherwise greeting her as she walked past them.

"Lieutenant Commander," greeted Wulf as she rounded a corner, joining him on the route to the top deck. "Warrant Officer Wulf, heading topside?" she asked. He nodded. "Yes ma'am, all Marines in training have been requested," he answered, Alara smiling as he acted all formal. "How fortunate that I'm also needed up top, walk with me," she ordered, as she looked up at her baned friend. "Aye Commander."

They rounded another corner, another figure joining them. "Commander," greeted Axel, his red hair mostly tucked into his Marine beret. His uniform sported a new badge on his right shoulder, a golden sun: the markings of a medic. "Morning Axel, I guess congratulations are in order," Alara stated. He nodded, his brown eyes glancing at Wulf. "It's only the start, and I have this one to blame for it – he wouldn't shut up until I applied. So, yeah, medic-in-training, at your service! I think that time in the hospital did me some good, although I'd still prefer not to have the scar. You still owe me big guy," he said with a smirk.

Wulf bumped into him, Axel bouncing off the wall as they walked together. "Yeah, yeah. Next time we're in battle, I'll save your life and we can call it there," Wulf suggested. "Promise? Field Medics need looking out for, and if you do go for the assault role then we'll probably be stuck with each other," Axel asked, extending a fist. Wulf tapped it. "I promise, but these don't stack if you do have to save my life again," Wulf said with a grin. Axel laughed, attempting to shove

him, only for Wulf to remain unaffected. "We'll see. Let's get through today first." Alara smiled to herself as they then proceeded to start bickering behind her as she climbed the stairs to the main deck.

She emerged into the morning daylight, the two squads of Marine recruits assembling quickly on the main deck before the ship's wheel. She flashed a quick smile to Riley, Astris and Witchford before moving past them to head to the captain's quarters. The door was open and, now long used to the lax attitude the Captain held, Alara waltzed straight in. "Captain, Commander" she greeted, the pair turning to look at her. "Morning Vanathur," said Onasi. Commander Vao nodded to her. "We're about an hour out and I wanted to prep you for the day ahead," said Onasi.

"Prep me? In what way?" Alara asked, watching him as he walked past her towards the door. He beckoned for her to follow, and she stepped outside with him, and the Commander, onto the aft deck. "Admiral Kai summoned the New Era. Captain Kai sent us, a Marine ship, in his stead. They've been warned we are coming, but that doesn't mean we are going to be openly welcomed by our Navy brothers and sisters. You've also passed your halfway mark on your open seas training, so by all accounts, in my books, you and your fellow recruits are officially all true Marines. Regardless, the enemy we face will see you no differently to any other Marines on this ship, remember that and carry yourself appropriately, Lieutenant Commander Vanathur."

Alara nodded as she listened, gripping the ship's railings as the Captain leant next to her by the wheel, looking down at the other recruits. "Because we weren't invited, and because our ship is a Hunter-class vessel, we will most likely be sidelined, placed to ensure the enemy cannot escape. So, all I need you to do, when the time comes, is to relay mine and the Commander's orders to the Master of Guns. This is your first real battle, it's okay to be nervous, but beforehand we need to meet the other members participating, so I'm going to have you shadow Commander Vao. Just keep your eyes peeled, mouth shut, don't draw any attention to yourself and you'll be fine," Onasi stated.

Alara gulped, Vao laughing before placing a hand on her shoulder. "You'll be more than fine. However, since you're now officially third-in-command, and neither the Captain nor I like giving speeches, we're leaving the rallying speech to you. Tell them what they need to hear," she said with a grin, looking towards the recruits assembled before them. Alara's face fell as she glanced between the pair. "Oh come on, really?" Alara asked, desperately waiting for the punchline,

only to finally rest her eyes on Lieutenant Hawke. "Good luck!" he said, adjusting the ship's wheel.

Alara sighed, turning to the face the two squads. "Marines!" she called out, the recruits snapping to attention and looking up at her. "Today marks our first real battle, our first real encounter with one of the Empire's greatest enemies: a Pirate Lord. I know you're nervous, I know you're excited, but today we need only two things from you. Follow your orders, follow your training. We've practiced this a thousand times, you know what you're doing. We've passed the halfway point of our open seas training, you are Marines, let the enemies of our Empire fear us as such! Let's take down a Pirate Lord!" she called out, her eyes resting on her squad. "Oorah!" called out the Marines before her.

"Dismissed!" she ordered, the Marines rushing off to return to their duties as Alara felt her face turn crimson. "I'll give it a six," stated Onasi, laughing as Alara glared at him. Vao held up seven fingers. "I think it was an eight," stated Hawke. "I hate all of you..." muttered Alara, shaking her head and crossing her arms. "You'll get better at them. Anyway, we make landfall in fifty minutes. Prepare yourself, you'll be effectively meeting your Navy counterparts," concluded Onasi.

Alara raised an eyebrow. "The New Era were all selected by Admirals, in a manner not too dissimilar to what Admiral Exarga has done for you. They are the Empire's chosen, the next era of great Navy. They could be valuable allies, or your greatest rivals, depending on today. You've won over two Kais, today's a chance for two more. Tread carefully," advised Vao. Alara exhaled through her teeth and nodded, looking out across the deck - Astris was staring directly at her.

They docked not long after at the island of Silver Spear, a busy trade island with a series of long extending piers leading from its huge harbour. There were at least twenty Navy ships, one of which included 'the Ballast', a huge warship nearly identical in design to the Ursus Ultra. Its hull was a flat azure blue, decorated with white and black, and its figurehead was the image of a black and white lion. It dwarfed the many other Navy ships, commanding an intimidating presence from its rows of countless cannons.

Alara, Onasi and Vao departed the Lone Wanderer, stepping onto the pier alongside a small squad of Marines including Astris, Riley, Wulf and Axel. The group began the long walk down the pier, the countless Navy sailors all stopping what they were doing and looking in their direction. They stepped to the side to let them pass, but the mutterings and half-hidden insults echoed around them,

most aimed towards Wulf. He walked with his head high; Onasi tilted his head slightly to look behind him to check on his comrade. Wulf looked at his Captain, nodding in acknowledgement that he was unbothered; Onasi turned back, continuing their march.

Astris hid in Alara's shadow, her obsidian eyes glancing at the Ballast as they passed, before settling on a much smaller ship hidden in its shadow: the Sentinel, her sister's ship. Her heart pounded inside her chest, her breathing shallow and a cold sweat forming on her body. She rested her hands on her holsters, temporarily breaking march before shaking herself off and straightening her walk. "There's no need to be nervous, right?" Alara asked quietly, sensing Astris' discomfort without looking. Astris nodded, before she shook her head, taking in a deep breath and looking ahead.

Riley and Axel both stared at the countless ships around them, Riley pulling faces at the various sailors whenever she heard an insult, whilst Axel prepared himself to grab Riley when she inevitably went too far. Miraculously, there was no need, as the group arrived at the end of the pier, a large tent laying before them. There were squads of Navy sailors waiting all around the camp, all belonging to the numerous Commanders, Captains, and Commodores that were presumably inside.

The majority of the sailors wore the standard Navy uniform: a double-breasted white shirt, a coloured ascot tie – most blue, some green – as well as matching parachute trousers tucked into knee-high black boots. It was all accompanied by a thick black belt with a golden bronze buckle clasped around their stomach, and a coloured suncap matching their trousers and tie. Alara spotted higher ranking sailors amongst the various groups, all identified by cufflinks and pins on their shoulders. She ignored the lower ranks - all jacketless sailors were ranked lower than the base Marine, excluding the Warrant Officers with their golden cufflinks and pair of gold pins on their shoulders - but, regardless, they were all grunts in the Empire's Navy.

The Ensigns stood out: they all wore a simple reefer jacket of the appropriate colour. Their superiors had little changes: the Lieutenant Junior Grade had identical outfits, bar a pair of golden pins on each shoulder. She spotted a few Lieutenants, their suncaps traded for peaked caps and their reefer jackets traded for double-breasted tailcoats. She even spotted her equivalent, another Lieutenant Commander, staring right at her. Her ascot had been exchanged for a loose bowtie stuffed into her high collar and she had three gold lines on each

shoulder, the middle line thinner than the surrounding pair. She gave a courteous nod as the pair exchanged glances, turning around and barking out orders to the sailors around her.

Onasi stopped a few metres away from the tent entrance, the others stopping behind him. "Stay nearby, don't pick any fights. Commanders, with me," he ordered, stepping forwards with Vao and Alara in tow. They headed inside, the conversations that were echoing around the large table in the middle of the room silencing, as the numerous figures turned to look at them. "Onasi," growled a voice from across the room, an almost boulder-like man slowly standing up from a throne placed at the head of the round table. "You actually dared to show your face," said Admiral Kai, as he leant forwards across the table.

His uniform was identical to that of the other Admirals, only a deep blue colour. He wore a long coat, tightly clasped to the left side of his body with a high collar, nearly identical to the jacket of the Marines, however his was decorated with medals. His trousers were slick and tight, coloured the same way as his jacket. His boots were black, the same colour as the inside of his cape that lay draped over the back of his throne. His black and blue peaked hat sat on the table along with a pair of blue-lensed sunglasses.

A wave of fear passed through Alara, her breathing stopping in a manner reminiscent of her encounter with Kitty Deliver, but Vao stepped in front of her, and it eased. "Apologies for the delay, Admiral, we rushed here to provide our aid to you as soon as we could," said Onasi stepping forwards and heading towards an empty seat on one side of the table. Vao headed towards another on the other side, Alara quickly walking after her. "Hmph," said the Admiral, sitting back down. He had tanned and wrinkled skin, a stern expression remaining on his face at all times. He was clean-shaven, and his dark hair was cropped very closely to the skin on his square head, but unlike his daughter or his son, his eyes were a deep brown. It was easy to imagine Beowulf looking similar to him as he aged.

Where Alara had initially presumed he was slightly overweight, she quickly spotted his chest more than overtook his stomach, his arms colossal underneath his jacket. His hands were worn: ancient calluses had built up on the inside of his huge palms. He was a powerful man in stature, presence, and authority, and as she took her spot at the edge of the tent behind Vao, a few other Commanders glancing at her as she walked past them, he stared directly at her. Slowly he leant back, looking away from Alara at Commander Vao, his stern expression slowly

forming into a tiny smile. "My dear, it's always a pleasure to be graced by your presence. I hope you and your family are doing well," he said, with utmost respect and sincerity.

Vao smiled at him, nodding her head. "They are, thank you for your kind words, Admiral," she answered gracefully, the Admiral completely ignoring Onasi. "It pains me you are still assigned to that particular Captain, I could request a transfer. I'm also certain your grandfather could arrange a promotion. Maybe even imprisonment for that scumbag," he said, a few laughs echoing around the table as Onasi sighed and shook his head. "I don't think that's necessary, Admiral. But I will keep it in mind. Thank you," answered Vao, gently twirling her blue hair. "With pleasantries out of the way, care to explain what that is doing here?" asked the Admiral, turning to Onasi, as he vaguely gestured in Alara's direction.

Alara tried to disappear as the numerous eyes glanced towards her, a sense of impending danger falling upon her. "I'm surprised you aren't already familiar with who this is, Admiral. This is Lieutenant Commander Alara Vanathur," Onasi stated, his voice echoing around the room. The Admiral slowly raised a thick eyebrow, turning to look directly at her, the countless expressions around the room changing as the name sparked a sense of familiarity. "Given her current position - as Admiral Exarga's chosen - I figured on hand exposure to such an exclusive-".

"Shut up," stated the Admiral. "To think I'd see the day. I do apologise, my dear. It is rare to be in the presence of such a distinguished lineage. Clearly your parents have bred well to have created such a fine young woman willing to serve her Empire. I applaud them, they were astounding and exemplary Vice Admirals willing to go above and beyond in the line of duty. They have earned you a right to remain in this meeting. New Era, understand that she is everything you will be competing against, bond well, she will rise to overtake you before you know it," stated the Admiral. Alara clasped her hands before her, bowing her head and remaining silent, as she spotted six notable figures staring directly at her. One in particular sat directly to the left of the Admiral, her obsidian eyes watching with intense curiosity.

"Bring Commander Vao and Lieutenant Commander Vanathur up to speed," ordered the Admiral. A pair of documents slid across the table to Vao, she then threw one over to Onasi. "Our target today is Pirate Lord Ruyn Masse, a conqueror. In recent times he has been using spoils taken from raids across the

Empire to recruit mercenaries, mostly from the Catmurian Grand Company and the Ten Thousand. From these mercenaries, he has been building a fleet, estimated sixteen-fold, give or take, two thousand strong,” stated Captain Cyrenna Kai.

Vao nodded as she flicked through the document, eventually passing it over her shoulder to Alara, the other unseated Commanders staring wide-eyed as she took it. Alara flicked through the document, listening to Captain Kai as she continued to lay out the attack strategy. It detailed the number of ships they had available, as well as their rough crew count and ship specialities. It also detailed the expected capabilities of their enemy: their firepower, number of baned, magical capabilities – all in advanced detail.

“So ultimately, the plan is to draw them out of their fortress by targeting their docked ships. The threat of the Admiral’s warship should incentivise the Pirate Lord to flee rather than hold out in their fortress. We then trap them using our larger numbers and blow them to pieces in open waters. Correct?” stated Onasi, leaning on his wrist. Captain Kai nodded. “Great, sounds like a plan. And you’re not participating in this battle then, Admiral?” he pushed. The Admiral grit his teeth. “It is the act of the New Era to stomp out this pirate, to claim an easy battle for myself would be... dishonourable. The Ballast will provide support if needed, but it is down to you all to do your duty, or die in the name of the Empire. Am I understood?” stated Admiral Kai, looking in particular at the six members of the New Era. “Aye Sir!” echoed the many voices in the room, Vao, Onasi, and Alara excluded. “To the ships!”

The tent emptied quickly, leaving behind the six members of the New Era, the Admiral, Commander Vao, Captain Onasi, and Alara. The Admiral slowly walked around the table towards Alara, he met her gaze, giving one last nod before patting her on the shoulder. “Take your time to meet your rivals, I expect great things from the Vanathur line,” he stated, before continuing onwards to Vao. He leant over to her as she remained seated. “Keep him in line.” He then walked out of the tent, the choking atmosphere of tension disintegrating the moment he left.

Onasi rested his face on the table, only raising it as Vao stood up, the New Era all looking directly at her in awe, waiting for her to say something. She held her hands in front of her, a distinguished, calm expression on her face that seemed alien on her - an extreme - going beyond her usual professional attitude. Onasi slid his chair backwards, standing up and stretching whilst letting out a huge,

loud, and annoying yawn. Immediately, all of the New Era glared at him. "Meet back at the ship in fifteen," Onasi stated, walking out of the tent with Vao on his heels.

Alara stood there nervously as she looked at the six Captains around the room. There were four men, two dressed in green uniforms, and two women, both in blue. They were all young, anywhere from her age at twenty to twenty-five at the oldest. "I'm not quite sure what is expected from our encounter today," said Cyrenna, stepping forwards. "But my brother speaks highly of you, and it's nice to finally meet you. Astris has put a quite a legend behind you in her letters. Cyrenna Kai, Captain of the Sentinel." She extended a hand, and Alara gripped it, the others stepping forwards as well.

She had dark hair, similar to Astris, and her eyes matched her siblings, but like her brother, she had more of a square face than Astris' heart-shaped face. She was similarly short, looking up to Alara, but across her back was a large two-handed sword that provided more than a sense of threat from the smaller woman. "With me are five of the ten other Captains of the New Era. Captains: Kask, Haros, Vemrin, Losa, and Roose," she stated, pointing initially at the four men, starting with the two in blue then moving on to the pair in green, before finally finishing off with the other female Captain.

They extended their greetings, shaking Alara's hand whilst making brief comments about her parents. "Truly honourable Vice Admirals, an example of everything we should strive to be," stated Captain Roose, her brown hair braided and tucked neatly under her peaked cap, her green eyes speaking with sincerity. Alara nodded, trying her best to not show any discomfort. "Anyway," interjected Cyrenna. "We should move out, I'm sure they'll be lots of time for full introductions after the battle," she stated, the others nodding and departing. Alara turned to walk with them, but Cyrenna placed a hand on her shoulder from behind. "Walk with me," she stated.

They stepped out of the tent, both faltering as they found an awkward, alone, and out of place Astris stood to the side. "Tris?" asked Cyrenna, shocked, Alara quickly looking around for the rest of the squad. "Hi," she said quietly, a dejected look on her face. Cyrenna grabbed her, pulling her in for a tight hug. Astris stood there pinned, her eyes wide before she eventually relaxed. "Father?" asked Cyrenna. Astris nodded, the pair remaining embraced in silence, no further words needed between them.

Alara stood there awkwardly, until finally Cyrenna released her younger sister, dismissing her awaiting squad with a single glance. They looked very similar, but Cyrenna definitely resembled her father. "Where are the others?" asked Alara. Astris looked away from Cyrenna, a quick look of realisation on her face as she remembered Alara was stood next to them. "Oh right, um, I was kept behind by the Admiral. Commander Vao also asked me to wait for you. They're back at the ship. We should probably go," she answered, taking a glancing look at Cyrenna.

Alara nodded, looking at the pair before smiling at them. "We may be a while, the walk to the Sentinel is quite far, and it is our duty to ensure the Captain gets back safely. Right, Captain Kai?" asked Alara. Cyrenna returned the smile. "It's very far, I'm sure much conversation will be needed to fill the gap. Besides the ships aren't fully loaded yet. So, Astris, how have you been?" asked Cyrenna, taking her sister's arm. A smile grew quickly on Astris' face. "I think I'm doing better."

Seize the Seas Tales: Drums of War

Alara and Astris dropped Cyrenna off at the Sentinel, the Captain giving her younger sister a glancing wink before stepping aboard. "Thank you for that," Astris said, as they continued their walk onwards down the pier, ships all around them beginning to move away and take to the seas. "It's no problem, I wanted to meet her... and I sensed you needed it. Your father... is he-?" Alara asked. "I don't want to talk about my family," intercepted Astris, her dark eyes looking down. "That's okay, that's okay," Alara said quickly. "A friend from home doesn't particularly like talking about family either, I understand."

They walked in silence, until eventually Astris looked up and over at Alara, sliding her loose hair over her ear. "It's complicated, and something that can easily be misinterpreted, but my siblings have always looked out for me – a little obsessively at times. But thank you... for looking out for me, and continuing to care even though you're no longer our squad leader." Alara smiled, shaking her head. She reached out, Astris yelping as Alara placed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in, the pair continuing to walk as Alara leant on her. "You're my friend. Even if we weren't on the same ship we still would be, right?" Alara asked. Astris smiled. "Yeah. Yeah of course!" A whistle from down the pier drew their attention. "Hurry up! We're leaving!" yelled Commander Vao, as she stood at the bottom of the gangplank. Alara and Astris looked at each other, grinning wildly before racing off towards the ship.

The Lone Wanderer took to the seas, joining the other vessels in the fleet at the rear of the trident formation they took. The Ballast lead the way, its imposing size giving a clear leader for the rest to follow as they sailed quickly across the seas. Alara leant on the railing at the bow of the ship, a pair of binoculars hanging from her neck as she watched the numerous ships sail together. "Always a beautiful sight, amiright Commander?" asked Lieutenant Thorn, as he stood dutifully behind her.

She nodded to the Master of Guns, her foot bouncing nervously as the ships began to spread apart, their target slowly appearing far on the horizon. "You'll do great! There's no need to be nervous," he said reassuringly, the short, stocky old man grinning from one ear to the scarred stump he had as the other. "Who said I was nervous?" Alara asked with a soft and nervous laugh. He chuckled. "Aye, I take it back. Regardless, your role is simple. All I need from you, Commander, is a target, the Powder Monkeys will do the rest. The forward guns are yours, and they are ready to roar on command," stated Thorn, stepping back and waving a small communication device in his hand.

An alarm rang out across the ship, Alara and Thorn bracing themselves as the ship lurched, the Lone Wanderer changing angle to the right and gaining speed as it broke off from the fleet, various other ships beginning to spread out to surround the incoming island. Thorn patted her on the shoulder. "I believe in you, and I think that still counts for a lot. You'll do grand," he stated. Alara nodded, smiling at him before looking further down the ship. Commander Vao stood centre on the main deck, the Captain stood with Lieutenant Hawke by the wheel above her.

Vao nodded to Alara reassuringly before barking out a series of orders to the Marines manning the sails. Alara looked beyond her to the Captain: he was looking across the seas to the portside, but he glanced back, giving her a noticeable wink even across the long ship, before returning to watching the horizon. A different alarm rang out across the ship, a slower and duller whine. "To war!" yelled Alara, the Marines around her slamming their knuckles together and raising their heads. "Oorah!" they yelled, a thundering of cannon fire echoing across the horizon as the fleet began the attack.

The large fortress built on the lone island they were attacking erupted into flames, barrage after barrage of cannonballs flying through the air, targeting the exposed ships in its large harbour that hadn't yet taken to the seas. The Ballast had raised its sails directly south of the island, the ship motionless, its presence

alone funnelling the numerous enemy ships directly away from it. The rest of the Navy fleet had formed a wide semi-circle around the island, the ships slowly spreading out to entrap the enemy entirely, with the Lone Wanderer sailing around the outskirts ready to pursue any target that broke through.

Alara stared at the chaos erupting, the lines beginning to break as ships began to engage one another. She scanned the horizon, her eyes looking for their main target. There was a large explosion from the island, the entire harbour tearing itself apart as a single ship blasted its way out from inside the fortress. "And the Ruiner shows himself!" called out Thorn by her side. The Pirate Lord's arrival brought a swift and sudden change across the fleet, the lines breaking apart completely as the main target revealed itself. The numerous Commodores, Captains, and Commanders all surged forwards to target the colossal ship he commanded.

The ship was massive, it was of equal, or even larger size than the Ballast. Its hull was reinforced, and large metal spikes decorated its body, the entire ship designed to eat and consume any ship unlucky enough to cross its path. Alara stared at the red, black and gold monstrosity, its cannons spitting purple light at the smaller ships brave enough to approach. An alarm rang out across the Lone Wanderer, Alara and the other Marines bracing themselves as the ship rapidly changed angle.

Alara regained her balance, bringing up her binoculars and staring back towards the Ruin's Wake as the fleet engaged with the warship. "That fool!" yelled Thorn next to her. "It's too soon! Ziost, you power hungry fool of a Commodore!" growled Thorn, pointing off at four ships that had broken off from the main battlegroup to target the Ruin's Wake at broadside. They sailed quickly across the waters, an additional flag flying from their mast: a red flag with a golden crown-topped cross. "Zealot!" yelled out Thorn.

Commodore Ziost and his small fleet broke up quickly as they attempted to surround the Ruin's Wake, approaching it from the rear. A loud whine slowly built up, quickly releasing in a loud echoing slam across the horizon. A colossal wave emerged from the base of the Pirate Lord's ship, swallowing up the barrage of close-range cannon fire and Priest attacks launched at it from both port and starboard side. The surrounding ships desperately turned to ride the wave, one turning too late and rolling as it was thrown sideways from the top of the wave with a crash.

The Ruin's Wake returned fire, its countless cannons eviscerating the smaller frigates that made up the Commodore's escort until only his ship remained. He desperately sailed away, the ship looping around the front of the Ruin's wake in an attempt to avoid its cannons. However, where the Commodore's ship should have easily cleared the bow of the Ruin's Wake before contact, Alara stared in horror as the Ruin's Wake launched itself forwards. The two ships collided, the still large but still much smaller Commodore's ship receiving the full brunt of the colossal bow of the Ruin's Wake from portside. The Commodore's vessel was carried forwards on the spikes, the ship rolling before shattering as it was torn asunder, the entire vessel obliterated in a matter of blinks.

A stunned silence fell across the Lone Wanderer, the entire crew all wondering the same thing: "How can anyone sink such a vessel?". The whining began to build again, a large wave following as the Ruin's Wake sent another shockwave into the water, the much smaller Navy ship's quickly sailing to avoid the new predator as it began to hunt. A smaller Navy frigate was caught on the waves, the ship desperately firing at the Pirate Lord's flagship to protect itself. A few cannonballs hit the reinforced hull, but, as the ship tilted, one sailed over the top of the high deck, passing through a sail. The Ruin's Wake retaliated, the small irritation getting scattered across the waters.

Alara's eyes widened. "I have an idea," she said quietly. "I have an idea!" she yelled, turning on her heels and looking directly in the direction of Commander Vao. Vao finally caught her gaze and Alara rolled her hands, Vao tilting her head but nodding as she ran forwards to swap position. "Captain!" Alara yelled from the main deck. "What?" he yelled back, talking quickly into a communicator. "I have an idea to disable the Pirate Lord's ship! We ride the wave to get an angle on the ship's masts. Pound them with chainshots then ride away using the wave as cover," she explained.

Onasi paused for a moment, thinking to himself. "That could work - it's suicidal, but that could actually work! We'd need reinforcements to draw attention to get close enough. Okay, Vanathur head to the comms room! Get in contact with the New Era, explain your plan. If they agree to assist, we'll do it!" ordered Onasi. "Aye Sir!" yelled Alara, racing quickly through the door below the aft deck to the main communications room. Three Lieutenants were stood around a large table, a series of communication devices sprawled out across the surface, all speaking in a cacophony. "Mayday! Mayday! We're outnumbered! Enemies are surrounding us! Mayday! May- ", cried a distress call, the device ending with a quick blast of static.

"The Joiner is down!" stated one of the Marine Lieutenants into another device. "Get me in contact with the New Era!" ordered Alara, rushing forwards. The nearest Lieutenant nodded, immediately passing a communicator over to Alara. "Hailing New Era, I repeat hailing New Era, this the Lone Wanderer!" Alara spoke into the device. "This is the Sentinel, Vanathur is that you?" called Captain Kai. "Yes Ma'am. We're requesting aid for an attack on the Pirate Lord. I have an idea," Alara stated quickly.

"All ears Commander, make it quick!" came the voice of Captain Losa. Alara nodded. "The Ruin's Wake deploys defensive waves when ships get in close, it's also too large to allow us to hit its main deck and masts, forcing us to hit its reinforced hull. I think we can ride the wave to get us an angle on the masts. If we cripple the ship's speed it can allow us to board or bombard the enemy. The Lone Wanderer can't do this alone," Alara answered. A moment of silence fell through, followed by another. "Little busy here!" answered Captain Kask, his communicator dropping off the channel with a click. "Sorry, no can do," answered Roose.

Alara's stomach sank, a quick sense of regret building. "The Sentinel is with you, Lone Wanderer!" stated Captain Kai. "It's the best idea I've heard today." "Same here," added Captain Vemrin, following confirmations came from Captains Haros and Losa. "Mark an intercept, you have your aid Lone Wanderer!" stated Kai. Alara nodded, rushing back outside and throwing the communicator up to Onasi. "We have our support, Captain!" she yelled. He grinned madly, nodding to Lieutenant Hawke, the Lieutenant spinning the wheel.

"Great job Commander! To your post!" ordered Onasi, the alarm ringing before the ship lurched again. Alara ran across the deck, Vao meeting her midway before they swapped. "Lieutenant!" called out Alara to Lieutenant Thorn. "Aye Commander?" he called out, a series of Marines around him rushing to positions as he pointed them out. "Ready the chainshots, we have our plan of action!" she declared. He nodded, repeating the order, Marines quickly breaking open crates to pull out half-cannonballs held together by large metal chains. "On your command!" he told her.

The Lone Wanderer sailed quickly across the battlefield, the Sentinel, the Commonwealth, Ripper's Retort, and the Ancillary quickly joining the small fleet as they headed straight for the Ruin's Wake. Alara could hear orders getting yelled behind her, the ship adjusting its sails to utilise the extra speed the Lone

Wanderer possessed. "Here it comes!" yelled Thorn, the Ruin's Wake turning to get a better angle on the incoming fleet.

The battlefield silenced for a second, the water rumbling before a spray of water hit Alara from the side. A colossal explosion erupted across the seas, a fireball reaching high into the sky close to the main fleet. "What was that!" yelled Alara. "Find out!" she ordered, pointing to a nearby Marine. She ran off, returning quickly. "Sea Mines! A mercenary ship was deploying sea mines, Captain Kask detonated them in a chain reaction!" answered the Marine quickly. Alara looked at Thorn. "To our benefit, it's stunned them!" he yelled, pointing at the rapidly approaching Ruin's Wake. "Get ready!" ordered Alara, a whining building up across the air before a loud boom echoed from the base of the Ruin's Wake.

The waves were so much larger up close, the entire horizon bending and warping as the surface of the water rapidly folded. The Lone Wanderer angled to ride the wave, the Ancillary and the Commonwealth following closely behind with Ripper's Retort and the Sentinel on the other side of the colossal ship. Alara lowered her body, steadying herself as the ship began to tilt. "Hold," Alara said, the ship continuing to roll. She stared up the colossal vessel next to them, the entire ground turning underneath her. "Now," she declared. "Open Fire!" ordered Commander Vanathur. "Fire!" repeated Lieutenant Thorn into his communicator. The portside of the Lone Wanderer rumbled, the cannons firing in quickly succession, an entire volley of chainshots sailing across the air.

Some crashed into the hull of the enemy ship, but the majority flew over the edge, most catching the sails. The alarm rang out and the Lone Wanderer tilted, Alara legs flying out from under her as the ship turned to ride the wave. She rolled, glancing backwards to watch two of the huge masts of the Ruin's Wake splinter and crack, the colossal beams of wood falling over with a crash as the third one caught fire. All across the sea, cheers rang out as the Ruin's Wake slowed down, its speed crippled by the attack. "Yes!" screamed Alara, slamming her fists onto the deck of the ship, before grabbing Thorn's hand as he pulled her to her feet.

The Ancillary and the Commonwealth had both also escaped retaliation from the Ruin's Wake, their crews celebrating as they raised their fists to the air. Alara glanced across the horizon with her binoculars, any remaining mercenary ships were using the distraction to flee through the gaps the Navy had left, whilst the remainder of the fleet were all circling around the Ruin's Wake, unleashing volley after volley in its direction. "We've done it!" Alara stated with a wide grin as she and the other Marines watched the display, only to stare in shock as a large

purple circle spread out across the waters, surrounding the aflame ship, a bubble spreading to capture the entire vessel. With a soft zap of purple lightning, the ship disappeared as it teleported away. "How's that fair?" asked Alara as she dropped to her knees, victory taken away from her.

With the majority of the battle over, and the few remaining enemies fleeing quickly into the horizon, Alara found herself a while later standing in Onasi's quarters, the Lone Wanderer docked on a nearby island. "To victory!" declared Onasi, raising a glass of red wine high into the air. Alara and the other senior members of the crew raised their own glasses. "But we didn't win, the Pirate Lord escaped... again," stated Alara quietly, as the group dispersed. Vao nudged her. "We destroyed a dangerous threat and sent a Pirate Lord running for their life. All thanks to your idea, I'd like to add. There'll be consequences to that decision, so get used to having eyes on you. Today's victory belongs to Alara Vanathur and the New Era!" she declared, a rosy colour on her cheeks already. Those around them cheered, raising their glasses.

"Celebrate with your friends, you've earned it," smiled Vao, heading to Onasi's drinks cupboard and pulling out a rose-coloured drink in a glass bottle before handing it to Alara. She took it nervously, looking over towards Onasi. The Captain was paying no attention. Alara smiled, finishing her glass before stepping outside with the bottle. "Ah, Commander," stated one of the communications Lieutenants, stood just outside. "Urgent transmission. Your ears only," she stated, handing Alara a communication device.

Alara gulped, heading quickly away from the noise and pressing the button. "Lieutenant Commander Vanathur," stated Admiral Kai. A small figure of him appearing on the device. Alara stood up straight. "Admiral!" she stated. He chuckled. "Relax Vanathur, consider this an informal conversation," he stated. Alara nodded. "How may I be of service, Admiral?" Alara asked, placing a soft smile on her face. "My report to the Fleet Admiral has your name front and centre. I am recommending you for a medal at the next Emperor's Ball."

Alara staggered, her eyes wide and mouth open. "Sir, I don't know if- ". He raised a hand. "Today's strategy was daring, dangerous, and devastating. It screamed of imperial quality that could have only been achieved by a member of the New Era. It was your idea that won the battle, the report deserves to reflect that and the glory that comes with it is yours, as well as the other New Era members who helped deal the killing blow," he stated.

"I-I don't know what to say, Admiral," Alara stuttered. He smiled, nodding slightly. "Modesty is a good trait, but only to an extent. Own this victory and carry it forwards. I would also like to extend an offer to you. I would like to offer you your own ship as the twelfth member of the New Era, this would be enacted immediately and your transfer from Marine to Navy ranks would occur first thing, along with my daughter."

A cold shudder passed through Alara, a sinking feeling forming inside her. "No!" she stated quickly. "Pardon?" he asked again, his smile fading. Alara regained her composure, placing a smile back on her face. "No sir. I appreciate the offer, but Astris and I are Marines and I wish to complete my training before I consider any offers, as gracious and generous as they are," she answered more carefully. A large vein began to pulsate on his forehead as he looked at her closely. "Hmph, very well. Regardless, the medal will be yours. Congratulations on today's victory. I will keep my eye on you, Lieutenant Commander Vanathur. Good luck with the rest of your training." The communication ended and Alara's legs gave out from underneath her. "Well," she said quietly to herself, holding the bottle and communicator before her. "That's something."

Chapter 51: Bad Choices

An uneasy feeling had persisted within Jayce, days after his mother had left. Once again, he found himself patrolling the Stacked Hand, early in the morning, long before anyone else had woken up. He stuck his head inside Caelie's room; for once she was buried inside her duvet. He carried on, checking in on Wicke, Bjorn, Marisha... they were all fine, all okay. He didn't need to check on Vexx – Jayce could hear him training all the way down the corridor, as he had been most mornings.

Jayce passed the training hall, peeking his head inside. Vexx stood in the middle, surrounded by six automaton dummies that Tempest and Xander had created together. They moved towards him, swinging blunt swords or wooden poles towards his body from all directions. He stood in the middle, sweat covering his body, bruises and cuts marking his skin, his knuckles wrapped in cloth, stained red, as they attempted to pummel him.

He blocked and dodged hit after hit, retaliating with a powerful blow that shattered the receiving dummy, the pieces flying away before reforming. One struck him across the shoulder. "Halt!" he ordered, the dummies freezing before withdrawing. "Again!" he ordered, the dummies approaching him. He got hit again, and again, and again, and again. "Again! Again! Again! Again!" he ordered, Jayce wincing in pain before he stepped away, heading towards the top deck before returning to his room.

"Have you seen Vexx?" Bjorn asked, later that day. Jayce shook his head. "He was training early this morning, he's probably asleep somewhere." "That lazy... Vexx, did you do the jobs I asked you to?" Bjorn called into his communicator. "Piss off," came the reply. Bjorn growled, clenching his fist. "That's the third time this week he's ignored my orders. This is becoming a problem," Bjorn said, shaking his head and staring down at Jayce. "It's fine, he's still reeling from getting obliterated by my mother. Just give him some time and some space. I'm sure he'll come around." Bjorn sighed, sauntering away. "Whatever, it's everyone's problem if it gets out of hand."

Jayce headed to the living room, grabbing a bite to eat before picking up a book and sitting down. They were only a few hours away from Caedom and, whereas the others were brimming with excitement, Jayce still couldn't shake his feeling of unease. The others passed through, most leaving him to his reading, some sitting and chatting before disappearing, but eventually a summon through his communicator drew him away.

"All crew to the main deck. Twenty minutes until estimated arrival," stated Bjorn. Jayce put the book down, stepping outside before heading up the stairs to the aft deck. Bjorn stood behind the wheel, Wicke by his side. Yuthura followed after Jayce and eventually Vexx joined as well. He reeked of alcohol and his eyes looked unfocused. "Why the summon if we're twenty minutes out?" asked Vexx, leaning against the wall of Jayce's quarters.

"The locals warned of harpies, dangerous bird-like creatures. It may just be a rumour, but I want some back-up just in case," Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded. "Makes sense, we'll keep our eyes out," he said. Vexx glanced upwards, slowly extending a finger upwards as shadows covered the deck. "Always trust the locals," he muttered, standing up and cracking his knuckles. Jayce commanded Sola and Luna to transform, the pair forming two long and thin rapiers. "All crew," Bjorn called out, "defensive measures!"

Bjorn let go of the wheel, Yuthura rushing forward without command to take his place as the first harpies took notice of the ship, diving down with their talons extended, their wings slowing the descent of their feathered feminine bodies. Jayce entered into Focus, sidestepping a blue-feathered harpy before he impaled it through its back. Wicke began to chant, Bjorn swinging wildly with his greataxe as harpies swooped towards her. "Hellfire!" she yelled, sending a stream of fire upwards towards the mast, the sails rolled up and tucked away.

"Careful of the sails!" Jayce called out, glancing as Tempest's enchantments activated, creating a small barrier around the wood and the sails. "I know, I know. I got enough of a scolding last time, I don't repeat my mistakes!" she yelled, turning a group of harpies to ash. Jayce pierced another that swooped towards him, glancing up at the full flock. There were fifty or sixty of them, their feathers a range of orange, red, and blue. Their eyes were white, their faces wrinkled and brown like that of an old woman, but their noses and mouths were sharp beaks.

One flew at Vexx, and he threw a punch straight through its skull. "Bah! Where's the challenge!" he complained, killing three more in quick succession. "Shut up and fight!" yelled Bjorn, defending Wicke as she stood near the edge of the ship, sending fire towards the flock. The harpies looped around, aiming for the area with less fire as they flew in a group towards Vexx. He tore them apart, giving up on using his fists and bashing them into the walls and floors. One dodged his strike, twisting around to his exposed back, but as Jayce went to intercept, Vexx ducked. He rocked on his feet, pulling back his fist before

throwing it at the harpy. The harpy pulled itself into a ball in an attempt to brace itself, taking the full blow as Vexx hit it across the deck.

The harpy sailed through the air, a trail of blood dropping behind it as it unfurled, its corpse crashing into the back of Wicke's head and sending her tumbling over the edge. Bjorn threw away his axe, lunging after her and grabbing her foot as she hung unconscious and upside down over the edge, suspended above the raging rapids beneath. The group stared in horror, Jayce's eyes wide as Bjorn yelled out as a harpy raked its talons across his back.

A burning rage filled up inside of Jayce, and he raised his foot before stomping hard onto the deck, letting out a roar and sending a wave of Panic in all directions. The harpies took to the air, fleeing quickly before beginning to circle the ship high above. Bjorn pulled her up, cradling Wicke's unconscious body in his arms. "Inside Jayce's room! Now!" ordered Yuthura, Jayce taking control of the wheel as she rushed inside with Bjorn and Wicke.

Jayce breathed heavily as he gripped the wheel, a fury inside of him as he continued to throw wave after wave of Panic at the harpies until eventually they fell out of sight. "Xander!" Jayce called out down to the main deck, the others catching their breath. "Everyone alright?" he asked. Xander nodded, before he frowned as he looked up at the aft deck, rushing upwards with Marisha and Caelie. "What happened?" he asked.

Jayce handed him the wheel turning around as the doors to his room slammed open and Bjorn stormed outside, grabbing Vexx by his shirt before he threw him up against the wall. "What the fuck do you think you're playing at? Do you understand what you nearly just did?" Bjorn demanded, pressing his head close to Vexx's face. "Let. Me. Go," Vexx stated coldly, as he sneered at Bjorn. "Wicke was this close to death, Vexx! If I hadn't caught her that unconscious girl would have gone into those rapids and that would have been it. Adventure over. And I swear to all of my ancestors, that would have been it for you." "Once again, Bjorn, put me down. Or do you want to go a round? See who really is the bigger man?"

Bjorn dropped him to floor, stepping away and glaring at Jayce. "That is enough, this cannot stand! He is disrespectful, lazy, and a risk to us all! Sort this out or find yourself a new Quartermaster," Bjorn stated. Jayce looked at the ground, approaching Vexx carefully, only for the anger to flare out as he wiped his hair from his face and pulled a bottle out of his bag. Jayce kicked the glass bottle, hard, the object shattering across the deck. "You know what, Bjorn is right. You're a

risk, one I should have seen a while back. Get your shit together! You're an addict! If you're not doped up, drugged up, you're drunk! You nearly killed Wicke, and this isn't even the first time you've put us at risk with your drinking!"

Vexx slowly got to his feet, he placed his hands in his pockets and looked up at Jayce. "I don't know what's wrong with you. If you need help with your inhibitions ask for it, we will do anything we can to help, but we can't force you to do anything. Get your things together, until you choose us over your drugs, your drinks - we can't trust you." Jayce grabbed the necklace from Vexx's neck. "You need to earn this back. When we get to Caedom, you're off the ship. Return when you're ready to let us help you. If you're not back by tomorrow, then I'll assume you've left us."

Vexx stared at the necklace hanging from Jayce's hand, the others glaring at him, the shattered bottle. "Fine! Whatever," he said, barging past Jayce and leaping over the railing to the main deck before he disappeared out of sight as he descended the stairs to the deck below. The others looked at Jayce. "What? What's your problem?" he demanded aggressively, only to flinch as Caelie took his hand, looking up at him with worry. "Sorry - I'm sorry..." Jayce said, dropping to his knees and taking a deep breath as his heart began to slow down. Bjorn placed a hand on his shoulder, Xander and Marisha nodding in acknowledgment. "It had to be done. It's not an easy thing, but it's part of your role as Captain," Bjorn stated.

Caelie ran her hand through Jayce's hair, drawing his attention before she attempted to pull him to his feet. He accepted it, standing up before walking to his door and knocking. Yuthura opened it, shaking her head as she stepped out and closed it behind her. "She's fine. Mild concussion: I've dealt with it," she said, her eyes slightly unfocused. She smacked the side of her head, her eyes focusing. "Then she should be fine, right?" Jayce asked.

Yuthura gently nudged open the door with her foot, a terrified wail piercing the air through the gap before she closed the door. "She's on bed rest, at least until she calms down. She's thirteen and she woke up dangling over the edge of the ship, in pain, by her foot. She's terrified, she just brushed with death and that will need processing. Give her a few minutes and then go and sit with her. She'll need you," Yuthura stated, before crossing her arms. "Is he dealt with?" she asked. Jayce nodded, holding up Vexx's necklace. "Until he gets rid of his booze and drugs." Yuthura nodded in acceptance, stepping to the side.

Jayce headed inside, sitting with Wicke until she could control her breathing. Even then she buried her head into his shoulder, tears flowing as she silently sobbed, her hands shaking, her nose dripping and her eyes red, but eventually a knock on the door provided a momentary distraction. "We're here," Bjorn stated. "All crew, brace!" he added, through their necklaces, the ship dropping from the rapids onto open water with a splash. Jayce brushed Wicke's hair over her ears, standing up and offering a hand. "Ready?" he asked. She nodded, rushing into his bathroom and splashing her face before she held onto his arm as he stepped outside.

"Welcome to Caedom," Bjorn stated as he span the ship's wheel, lowering the rear sail and sailing them forwards. The city of Caedom was built on a sloped plateau, covering the entire rocky surface with buildings. It then continued to extend outwards onto boardwalks, eventually leading into a large ring of piers, creating a colossal harbour full of hundreds of ships. The outermost ring of buildings were wooden, a dark brown colour that matched the piers. As the city progressed up the plateau, leading towards the top, the wood gave way to orange stone, the buildings getting older and larger as they formed into castle-like structures.

Beyond it all, drawing Wicke and Jayce's immediate attention to the top of the plateau, stood a lone white tower: a Dungeon. Above the Dungeon, connected only by floating hot air balloons that travelled to and from the city of Caedom below, was a floating island high in the sky. A large white circular castle sat on top, a series of large towers lining its outer walls, overlooked by three colossal towers in the middle of the island.

The various members of the crew stared at the sight before them, only snapping out of it as Bjorn began to issue commands. Jayce looked down at Wicke. "We made it," he said. She nodded, smiling faintly as they pulled into the harbour. "We made it. You got us here, Captain," she said. Jayce smiled, glancing away from her towards the other ships around them, almost all of them displaying Jolly Rogers.

He turned back towards the deck, his smile faltering as Vexx emerged from below deck with a backpack. He looked up at Jayce, glancing around before wordlessly walking to the edge of the ship and dropping down to the pier below. "Where's he going?" Wicke asked, with a confused expression. Jayce met her gaze. "He's taking some time to think if he wants to stay with us," he stated. "What? We need to go after him - it's Vexx!" she stated, moving away towards

the stairs. Jayce caught her shoulder and she turned and stared at him. "What?" "He nearly killed you, Wicke. He needs some time, he'll be back – I'm sure of it," Jayce said. She shook her head. "But he didn't kill me, I'm fine!" she protested. "Wicke..."

She looked down. "He'll be back?" she asked. Jayce glanced across the deck, the various crew assembling before him. "I hope so." They headed down the stairs to the main deck, the others looking towards Jayce as he approached. "What's the plan, Captain?" asked Bjorn, more than already aware of the full plan. Jayce rolled his eyes. "Well, I think it's best if we take some extended downtime. At the moment a month is the plan, but we may stay longer. Take the time to rest, train, make allies, get information, and explore. This is the Capital of the everything anti-empire. Keep in contact," Jayce stated. The others nodded in acknowledgement.

"What are we doing about the ship?" asked Xander. Jayce thought to himself. "For now, I'm going to keep it in its container. If we're all off ship I think that's the safest place for it to be. I'm going to find the nearest inn and wait for Vexx." "We'll wait with you. He'll be back soon," Marisha stated, the others nodding in agreement. "Okay, let's unload our cargo and find somewhere to crash," Jayce stated, the group splitting up and heading to their rooms to grab their things.

Jayce looked towards Tempest, the djinn staring upwards at the floating castle. "We'll settle into Caedom and then I'll make good on my promise and take the both of you home," Jayce said. Tempest looked down at him before returning his gaze upwards. "I thank you, Captain. You have done as you promised, and I must state that our time together has been pleasurable. I admit, I do not know what follows our arrival there. I doubt we will be welcome." Jayce nodded. "If it doesn't work out, I would be more than happy to negotiate a new deal with you. This ship will always need a Shipwright." The djinn nodded in agreement. "I think that would be acceptable. I will remain here with RK until Vexx has returned to us. Good luck. See you soon, Captain Exarga."

Jayce stepped off the ship, waiting with the others as a rather pompous-looking man wandered over towards them, a Guild emblem on his chest. "Ah, finally! You must be the Rising Aces, we've been expecting you," he stated, Bjorn glancing towards Jayce out of the corner of his eye, before taking the man onboard. After receiving their payment, the crew made their way along the pier, the Stacked Hand tucked away inside its holder in Jayce's new backpack,

stepping inside a small establishment next to the harbour. They grabbed a booth, rented some rooms, ordered some food and drinks, and waited...

And waited, and waited, and waited, and waited, until finally as Jayce sat in the booth, the third day having come and gone, he dropped his head in defeat, looking away from the door. "He's not coming is he?" Jayce asked, looking down at Wicke as she sat next to him, Bjorn on his other side, the others long dispersed. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I think he's gone." Jayce nodded, standing up and heading to the end of the booth before he slowly climbed the stairs to his untouched room.

Jayce awoke a while later to a knocking on his door. He jolted out of bed, rushing to it and slamming open the door. "Vexx?" he asked, looking down. Caelie met his eyes, shaking her head before presenting a small piece of paper to him. 'Meet me downstairs in ten minutes. Bjorn.' It read. Jayce looked at Caelie and she smiled at him, poking him in the stomach before pointing to his clothes on the floor. "Yeah, yeah, I get it," he complained, shutting the door and getting dressed.

"So what did you want?" Jayce asked, as he and Caelie walked down the stairs to the nearly empty bar below. "To see if you were still alive, for one. There's a lot we have to do, everyone else has split off to do their own thing and I'm not leaving you on your own. Tomorrow, you, Xander, Zeta, Marisha, RK, and Tempest are going to the djinn castle. We need to figure out an actual plan for what we're doing here. And you need to figure out what we're going to do now that Vexx is gone. He was our strongest fighter, either you need to step up or we find a replacement."

Jayce's face fell. "Look, it sucks – I get that, but there's nothing more that could have been done. You didn't fail him, he made his choice," Bjorn stated softly, resting a hand on Jayce's shoulder. "No, I did fail him. I should have intervened sooner, and that's on me. I also shouldn't have let him go off on his own. But... you're right. Give me some time, I'll get over it. I just... I just can't believe he's really gone. How did this happen?" Jayce asked. Bjorn stepped towards the door, Caelie in his shadow and Jayce trailing behind. "Bad choices," he said.

They stepped out onto the pier outside, a strange thrumming sound crossing the air to their right. Countless people around them stopped and turned, all looking towards the large span of water at the end of the pier – a large purple circle sat on the surface, twisting and pulsing with energy. With a boom, and a flash of purple lightning, a colossal ship crashed onto the waters, two of its masts missing

and the third one on fire. Immediately, an alarm rang out as people began to call out, their attention drawn to the flaming vessel. "Fire! Get the mages!"

People rushed towards the pier, chanting as they held out their hands, and above the flaming ship, clouds began to form, large torrents of water falling down to combat the flames. Slowly the fires were extinguished, and the colossal, spike-covered vessel drifted to a halt at the end of the pier. A lone figure leapt from the side, crashing onto the pier before making their way towards Jayce, Bjorn and Caelie.

Spiked gold armour covered his body from head to toe, leaving just his chin exposed, and a long purple cape flowed behind him, a pair of swords hanging in scabbards from his sides. "Move!" he commanded, Bjorn and Jayce stepping out of his way without thought. Caelie growled at him, and he briefly glanced down at her without stopping his stride. "Who was that?" Jayce asked, glancing back towards the giant damaged ship he had come from. "I think that was the Pirate Lord Ruyn Masse," Bjorn answered.

"That was a Pirate Lord?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded, looking at the damaged ship. "He must have been attacked by an Admiral. Rumours are there are a few other Lords here as well," Bjorn stated. A loud bell rang out from much further along the plateau, seven chimes in total. "What was that?" Jayce asked. Bjorn shook his head, a curious bystander turning as she overheard Jayce's question. "A meeting has been scheduled for later today, seven o'clock. Pirates only," she said with a smile. "Thank you," responded Jayce and Bjorn, looking at each other. "I guess we know where we have to go today," Jayce said with a smile, Bjorn nodding in agreement.

Caelie leapt onto Bjorn's back, grabbing onto his fur and clambering up until she could wrap her legs around his neck. Bjorn glanced up at her and she pointed onwards. "You heard her, let's go explore!" Jayce said excitedly. Bjorn marched ahead, but as Jayce went to follow he faltered, taking one last glance behind him. Vexx wasn't there. "I'm sorry, my friend. Stay safe, wherever you are," he said quietly. "Cap', you coming?" Bjorn called towards him, Caelie beckoning Jayce towards them. "Yeah, coming!" he answered, turning away from the pier and running after them.

Seize the Seas Tales: One Last Time

Vexx scowled as he stormed through the city of Caedom, people parting for him and the Stacked Hand falling quickly behind him. He walked until the streets

began to quieten, the people falling away as he passed from alleyway to alleyway, until eventually he found a dead-end. Letting out a long sigh, Vexx dropped his backpack to the floor, numerous bottles clinking inside. "The hell is their problem?" he asked aloud, tipping his backpack upside down before searching through his bottomless bag for any more of his booze and drugs.

"You messed up, that's what," he answered, leaning against the wall and sliding down to the floor. "Again!" he yelled, picking up a bottle and throwing against an opposing wall. He sat there for a while, his head in between his knees, his mind empty as he looked at the floor. Finally, he raised his head. "So what are you going to do about it?" he asked, looking at the stash before him. "I'm going to give it up," he answered. Vexx picked up a small pouch sat in front of him, pouring out the green powder inside onto his hands. He held his arm out, a thin stream slipping between his fingers before he righted his hand. "I guess this is it, at least for a while. I better make it count, and then I'll go back to them," Vexx muttered, taking a deep inhale before grabbing the nearest bottle.

Slowly Vexx opened his eyes, the world spinning, his vision blurry and a bright light bearing down at him. "Hey, you're finally awake," said a voice above him. "Bjorn?" Vexx asked, covering his eyes and blinking slowly as his eyes adjusted. "Bjorn? Who's that?" asked the baned jaguar looking down at him. "I want whatever you were drinking my friend. Here, take this," he said, presenting a small glass of strong-smelling brown liquor. Vexx looked at it, taking a sniff before handing it back. "I'm good. Where am I?" Vexx answered.

The jaguar shrugged, drinking the rum and offering a hand to him. Vexx took it, the baned pulling him to his feet. "You paid a lot of money to be here, my friend. Captain's appreciative, but there are limits. I get that you asked to be alone, we respect that, but any assistance you can give whilst sailing is more than welcome. The name's Oscar, you're on the Seraph. It's been a few days since you joined us."

"Sailing? Where?" Vexx asked. The jaguar's eyes widened and slowly he nodded. "Damn, one of those types of hangovers. The Frontier, we're going over the edge. You said something about, uh, people weren't where you expected. You failed them or they failed you. You looked really down, but were more than up for joining with us when you stumbled our way," Oscar said. Vexx's stomach dropped, and slowly he sat back down on his bunk. "Oh, right. I remember." "Do you need a moment?" Oscar asked. Vexx shook his head, looking up at him.

“Over the edge, huh? Figures. I haven’t got anything left for me in this fucking world, so let’s see what’s in the next. How can I help?”

Chapter 52: Shark Bait

As evening started to fall, Jayce, Caelie, and Bjorn made their way through the city of Caedom. The last few hours had passed quickly, and, by now, all three of them had learnt the basic layout of the city districts. There were eight in total, leading from the Harbour district all the way up the plateau to the Dungeon district. Each area provided a service to the city, with some districts holding more use than others.

From the bottom, connected to the Harbour district, were the Leisure and Food districts, both providing services to the everyday citizen through sports facilities, restaurants, cafés, and takeout shops. Connected to both districts was the Market district, full of countless shops selling all manner of items of the magical and non-magical variety. Further on upwards came the Guild and Pirate districts, both acting as central hubs for traders and pirates of all kinds to connect and communicate. High above all of the other districts, but below the Dungeon, was the School district, offering knowledge and training to anyone who sought it. It had quickly grown apparent to them why this city truly was the Capital outside the Empire, a safe haven from the Navy and the Church.

They stood in line outside the Pirate hall, a long queue leading through the main doors as the minutes ticked closer to seven o'clock. Caelie hung onto Bjorn's head, her legs wrapped around his neck as she snored softly, bored out of her mind from the long and arduous queuing. "Name?" asked a large man stood outside the main entrance, a list in his hands and a similarly large companion stood next to him. Caelie startled awake, readjusting her position to stand on Bjorn's backpack and look over his head.

"The Rising Aces," Jayce stated. The guards flicked through the list, a long line of names and crews of note written upon it, a directory displaying numerous bounties from across the New World. The guard paused. "Exarga, huh? Your parents have caused a lot of problems for people like us. How 'bout we return the favour?" intimidated the guard, putting the list down before cracking his knuckles. Bjorn cleared his throat, the pair of guards looking up at him. "If you're going to pick a fight, know what you're getting yourselves into," he stated. The pair looked at each other before back at Bjorn. "You're free to go, watch yourself Exarga."

Jayce, Caelie and Bjorn moved past them, entering into the Pirate hall. They were immediately greeted by a large set of black, stone doors, a carved skull across the surface. Leading above the doors, to another floor, was a large set of wooden

stairs; countless pirates were already making their way up and, with little reason not to, Jayce, Caelie and Bjorn followed. They entered into a wooden ring, overlooking a large room beneath. The area was packed, but Bjorn saw no reason for that to be an issue.

"Hey, what do you... think... woah," stated a pirate as Jayce squeezed through the crowd, Bjorn following close behind, a few other baned all looking up towards Bjorn as he passed by. With Bjorn stood behind him, Jayce had no issue making his way to the front, and he found himself leaning on a balcony looking down at a long, colossal, black, stone table below. "This is outrageous, this cannot stand!" stated Ruyn Masse, as he stood beneath Jayce, leaning over the table, his horned golden helmet placed next to him, and his long orange hair braided and exposed.

"Quit complaining, you had your ass beat – it happens," said Kitty Deliver, as she lay on a huge throne on the opposite side, her shoes on the table. "To some, not to me!" retaliated Ruyn, slamming his fist onto the table. Kitty rolled her eyes, glancing briefly upwards towards the overlooking balconies before turning her attention back to her nails and opening her mouth. "Kitty, don't!" warned a deep voice from the head of the table, an old and large lion baned, his fur a mixture of white, black, and yellow. He was missing an eye and his chest was covered in dark armour.

"Crach Leòmhann Cridhe. The baned who led the Blood War. I never thought I'd see him in person," muttered Bjorn. Kitty closed her mouth, letting out a sigh before rolling her hand, indicating for Ruyn to continue. "The New Era are getting out of hand, with each victory they grow bolder. They are getting stronger, and this is becoming a problem. We aren't at full strength and, unless we do something, we will swiftly have more Admiral-rank enemies to deal with. We need to tip the balance back in our favour – before it's too late. Jure, surely you must agree?" asked Ruyn, looking towards the last figure sat at the table.

Far away from everyone else, sat a lone figure. He had dark skin, but his complexion was slightly grey. He was dressed in a red and black suit with a high collar. His eyes were a bright white, and as he stared across the room, a pair of fangs hanging over his lower lip, and his ears pointed, a cold feeling passed through Jayce. "Continue your point, Ruyn. Don't drag me into your mess," stated the vampire known as Jure Strigon.

Ruyn scowled as he turned his head back towards Kitty and then to Crach. "We need to launch a counterattack. Reduce their numbers, send a message," stated

Ruyn. Kitty laughed, a high-pitched cackle as she hugged her stomach and kicked her legs. "You're more of an idiot than I thought!" she stated, wiping her eyes. "Do you even know who attacked you?" she asked, rolling to her feet and jumping onto the table, crouching as she antagonised Ruyn. "Kitty," growled Crach from the end of the table. "What old man? Let me teach this fool a point!" she retaliated, as Ruyn turned as bright as his hair. "I don't," he answered, sitting down and crossing his arms. "Enlighten me."

Kitty stood up, walking up and down the table. "Ladies, gentlemen, scum and villainy, today I would like to present an exclusive scoop – straight from the newsrooms!" she declared, talking to the crowd above. "The New Era are a problem, this is certainly true, but it wasn't their idea that humiliated our dear Pirate Lord: Ruyn Masse. Nay, it was a newcomer, but one with an old name. A Marine Lieutenant Commander," she stated, turning on her heels and looking directly up at Jayce with a wide and chaotic smile. "Don't," he muttered, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the railing. "One Alara Vanathur, child of Vice-Admirals Silas and Victoire Vanathur! The first member of the Marine New Era!"

Mutterings spread across the room, growing louder and louder as the name spread around. "She came up with the idea to use your own weapon against you! She convinced the New Era to ally with her and her Captain: Ex-Commodore Onasi! And she was hand-picked to be the successor of the Bloody Barbarian herself!" stated Kitty, looking directly down at Ruyn with a smug smile. "So what do we do about her?" called a voice from somewhere amongst the balcony. "Kill her! Kill them all!" came an answer, countless members of the crowd nodding in agreement. "Aye, to war!" yelled another, followed by others.

Kitty shut her eyes, gritting her teeth and tapping her foot. "Shut it!" she yelled, the room silencing. "Butt out! You're here to listen, not to contribute!" "So what does the great Kitty Deliver suggest?" asked Ruyn. She gave a small nod to him, turning to look towards Crach. "We are outnumbered, underpowered. A pre-emptive strike would be a good move, but also a stupid one. We signed our treaties with the Empire, they stay out of our business if we don't cause them trouble. You, Ruyn, caused them trouble. War would provoke the Admirals and we do not have the firepower to handle them. Not yet," she stated.

Crach rolled his hand encouraging her to continue. She bowed to him. "We have a year and a half until we can find ourselves a replacement for our lost colleague,

or maybe he will return, who knows? During this time we need to prepare a suitable replacement, we also need to strengthen our ranks. We've grown complacent. Already we are seeing new faces emerge on our side as well as the Empire's. One Jayce Exarga, for example," she stated, pointing towards him. Faces turned to look at him from all directions, including the three other Pirate Lords sat at the table.

"He's a spy!" yelled a voice from somewhere across the room, the words repeating around Jayce. Bjorn took in a deep breath, before he let out a roar, the room shaking before it fell silent. Kitty gave him a thumbs up. "Well said. Anyone who messes with Jayce, messes with me," she stated, the room quickly staring at her before glancing back to Jayce. "Oh and I mean it. Touch him and feel the Delivery Kats' boot up your ass!"

"Jayce has grown up alongside Alara, and I'm sure everyone knows who his parents are, yet he has chosen to join us. The Admiral's eldest child at our side is a powerful weapon against her, and one we shall use, don't you worry. If he betrays us, I'll kill him myself. Regardless, the divide between the Marines and the Navy only continues to grow, weakening the Marines by killing Alara Vanathur, or any other New Era counterparts only makes it more likely for the Navy to win out when they inevitably turn on each other. We don't want that. So I propose we do nothing!"

The cheers that had been building alongside her words fell silent. "Nothing?" asked Ruyn. "You want us to do nothing? To not retaliate at all for the damage to my fleet? To my ship? To let these New Era brats, this Alara Vanathur to grow stronger? Come on Kitty, that's preposterous! We need to act now!" stated Ruyn. "Wrong! We move now, we receive the retaliation of all four Admirals. I can maybe take one, with some help. Do you think the seven of us, including the three who couldn't be bothered to turn up, can beat them all? We touch a hair on Alara's head and the woman who raised her will take our skulls. We attack the New Era, and we provoke the Navy. The Navy and Marines are still allies. We will die. We aren't ready for another Blood War. We need to groom another Pirate Lord, or wait for one to emerge. Go kill yourself if you want! I'm not dying with you. Motion to deny action!" she declared. Crach and Jure raised their hands alongside Kitty.

"Denied!" stated Crach, raising a fist before slamming the end of the table, Kitty leaping off as the table lifted into the air before crashing back to the floor. Ruyn glowered, shaking his head before sinking into his chair, defeated. "This is an

error. But fine, have it your way. I can't wait to see you come crawling to me when they target your business next. Anything else?" he asked, glancing across the table. The others shook their heads. "Meeting adjourned," declared Crach, standing up and heading to the doors of the room.

Immediately the room began to empty, a few members making their way over towards Jayce, Caelie, and Bjorn. Jayce prepared himself, Bjorn reaching behind his back for the hilt of his axe. "Hi, Mister Rising Ace, can we get your autograph?" asked one, Jayce and Bjorn immediately relaxing. "Oh, sure," Jayce said, pulling out his pen and looking down at the bounty posters presented to him. They thanked him before wandering off with the rest of the crowd, but as Jayce watched them leave he couldn't help but notice the significantly larger group of people giving him dirty looks.

Jayce, Bjorn and Caelie made their way down the stairs, following the crowd towards the main doors, but Caelie suddenly grabbed Bjorn's head and pulled him away. "Woah, woah! What do you think you're doing?" he asked, as he stumbled backwards. She slid off his back, walking quickly towards the large set of doors before turning left and heading down a concealed corridor. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other before quickly heading after her.

As soon as they rounded the corner, they found her staring up at a woman. She had shoulder-length dark hair, but one side had been shaved. She wore a white tank top, that fit loosely on her skinny frame, and a pair of baggy beige trousers. She was barefoot. She was also heavily tattooed: her bones had been highlighted, giving her skeletal features and her face resembled a skull. She had a black nose ring on her right nostril and, as she looked at Jayce, she smiled.

"Anne? Is that you?" Jayce questioned, Bjorn staring wide-eyed at her as Caelie turned towards Jayce. "You remember me? That's nice. It's good to see you Exarga. You're wanted – follow me," she stated efficiently, turning around and walking along a long curving corridor lined with golden statues. Jayce looked at Bjorn, shrugging before following after her, Caelie already following Anne Muerte in tow.

She brought them to a set of green and brown doors, pushing them open before stepping inside. The room was full of cats, at least a dozen, if not more, lounging around on various pieces of furniture. A large desk was placed at the rear of the room, an auburn-haired man wearing a large red coat sat upon it. Before the desk was a large curved sofa, a huge, bald man leant across the back, his left arm made of metal. A small woman sat on the sofa itself, her shoulder-length grey hair

muddled with black and brown stripes, a green collar with a bell around her neck. She grinned as Jayce, Bjorn and Caelie stepped through the doors.

"Jayce!" she said, standing up and rushing forwards, wrapping her arms around his chest. "Kitty?" Jayce said curiously, looking down at her, his arms apart. Bjorn stared at her in horror, Caelie too preoccupied by the cats to pay any attention. "Come in, come in," she said, releasing him, returning to her seat and crossing her legs before patting the padding next to her. "I'm glad you remember me, in all honesty I was a little worried you wouldn't. It's been a few months after all."

"You were pretty memorable," Jayce stated, crossing his arms and remaining where he was. She frowned, uncrossing her legs and leaning forwards. "You're not happy to see me?" she asked, a genuinely look of disappointment on her face. "Why the hell would I be, after what you just pulled in there?" Jayce stated. Kitty's lieutenants all shifted from their relaxed positions around the room, glaring at Jayce, but Kitty held up a hand and they backed down.

"I'll let that go. Be mindful of where you are Jayce and who you are talking to. It was charming the first time, but now you know who I am. I just saved Alara's life, and yours for that matter. Don't misinterpret my actions, if I didn't declare you and Alara before the council, you both would have been targeted as an easy means of hurting the Bloody Barbarian. You should be happy to see me. Ever since I learnt you actually were who you said you were, I've been waiting to reunite with you. Sit, we have lots to talk about."

Jayce stepped across the room, carefully moving past the cats to sit on the sofa. Bjorn leant against the wall, whilst Caelie sat on the floor. Jayce opened his mouth to speak, but she placed a finger on his lips. "What do you say?" she chided. "Thank you Kitty, for saving our lives," he said, moving her finger from his lips and shaking his head. "You are most welcome. Now, down to business. I have formally declared you my ally, this will protect you for a while, but don't think that makes you immune to being attacked. Piss someone off and we won't save you, but you won't receive any trouble for being an Exarga. Once again, you're welcome."

"Thank you, do I need to repay you?" he asked. She grinned mischievously, but she quickly caught the eyes of her lieutenants, her smile fading. "No, no you don't. However, I want you and your crew to join my fleet. Become Delivery Kats and I can promise no one will mess with you again. You'd still be the Rising Aces, just under my command. I pay well, I promise," she proposed. Jayce shook his

head. "Sorry, I appreciate the offer, but no thanks." Kitty pouted. "Boo, no fun. Fine, whatever. Anyway, I suppose Alara told you we bumped into each other. She seems to be doing well. It's always nice to see people come into their own."

"Kitty," said Somme Ankor from behind the sofa. She sighed, kicking her legs childishly as she threw her arms up. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I don't have as much time as I'd like to catch up today, got some Guild business to handle. So, I'll run through what I wanted to say as quickly as I can. I want you to continue to grow stronger. I understand you've just lost your strongest crew member. I'm sorry, that sucks, but I need you to aim to be on my level, or just below."

Jayce held up his hands. "You know about that? How?" he asked. She grinned. "I'm a trader, the most valuable item is information. He also got in a drunken fight with some of my crew before boarding a ship somewhere," she explained. Bjorn and Jayce both looked down. "You didn't know? I'm sorry, he left Caedom a few days ago. Anyway, our rules mean we can't choose a new Pirate Lord, if they've gone missing, until two years have passed. When the time comes, I want to present you as the new one. You have political power, tactical awareness, a pretty remarkable crew, and I think you can do it."

"A Pirate Lord, me?" Jayce asked. She nodded with a wide smile, her green eyes flashing. "It's a big ask, a big challenge, but I want to see you succeed. Just continue experiencing the world, that's the best advice I have on the matter. Times are changing, something is coming - a war most likely. Good allies count for a lot, and I still believe you're one to have. Although it is funny to think back to how we first met. I like you Jayce, I think you're someone worth liking and we can both benefit from a continued friendship - if you want it?" she offered.

Jayce nodded, and she smiled. "Good. I need to rush off, do you have any questions?" she asked, standing up, although not changing much in height, and grabbing her large grey coat. Jayce glanced towards Anne, entering into Focus. Somme, Anne, and Rebel all tensed up, but Kitty once again made a gesture with her hand. "I'd be careful doing that around people without warning, Jayce," Kitty stated. He nodded in acknowledgement. A figure floated behind Anne, a spectral body of the deepest black, a pair of chains hanging from their hands, their arms long and extended. "Anne, you're a Shaman, right?" Jayce asked.

Anne frowned, but as she glanced around the room, her eyes settled on Caelie. "That explains a lot," she stated, Kitty raising an eyebrow. "So is your girl." Jayce nodded. "No questions for me, huh? I guess I'll catch you later," Kitty stated,

defeated, as she backed away towards the door. Jayce ignored her. "How did you deal with the haunting issue?" he asked Anne, Kitty sighing before she stepped out of the door and walked away. "What haunting issue?" Anne asked, Somme and Red following after Kitty.

"Caelie is constantly followed by spirits. Did that not happen with you?" he asked. Anne shook her head, sitting down on the sofa and looking towards Caelie. "No, that's unique to her," she stated. Jayce sighed, looking down at Caelie as she played with the various cats. "I've never come across another of our class, I thought I was the only one. We're around for at least another week. I'll take her with me, if that's okay, and I'll give her some training," Anne offered. "You would? Of course, please." Jayce stated. Caelie glanced at the pair before locking eyes with Anne. "I'll work you hard kid, prepare yourself."

Caelie glanced back towards Jayce for reassurance. He nodded and she copied him. "Okay, let's go little one. I'll drop her off in a week," Anne stated, standing up before offering a hand to Caelie. "Jayce, are you sure about this?" asked Bjorn, glancing nervously at Anne. She smirked, baring her teeth before licking them with her tongue. "I've been looking for a ritual sacrifice," she stated jokingly, causing Bjorn to shiver. "Caelie will be fine with Anne, I trust her," Jayce stated. "How will you find us?" he asked.

"That's not an issue for me, don't worry. I'll find you," she stated, walking to the door with Caelie in tow. "Kitty is a trusting person, she's naïve that way, like you. Don't use her, please. We trust her, so we trust you. I'll do my best for Caelie, see if I can help. Catch you around, Exarga," she said, stepping out of the room. Caelie glanced nervously at the pair before she gave a small wave and followed after Anne.

"That was... something," Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded, standing up from the sofa and walking towards the door. "Yeah, I'm not quite sure what I was expecting. Let's go for a walk," he said, turning to the right and walking down the corridor with Bjorn behind him. They walked in silence for a little bit, looking at the statues of the countless Pirate Lords of the past. "So, you're aiming to become one now?" Bjorn asked, reading the date on the nearest statue, and the way they had died.

Jayce nodded. "I guess so. As weird as it is to say, it lines up with our goals. If we need to break into places for Wicke, this is the best way of allowing us to do so. If our goal was to get stronger anyway, then this is where we would have ended up regardless. We just now have an official goal in mind: to have a seat at

that table," Jayce stated, glancing towards the statue of Kitty Deliver. Bjorn rubbed the back of his head. "How can we do so without Vexx? He was our strongest."

Jayce looked at the floor, before he eventually shrugged, glancing towards the next statue only to falter as he looked up. He burst into laughter, prompting Bjorn to stare at him, confused, before he glanced at the statue. It was of a man. He wore a large coat, a cutlass and a pistol by his side. He had a goatee, was unremarkable in looks but had a determined smile on his face. On his head sat an overly large and ridiculous feathery hat. "I guess that makes sense," Jayce stated, wiping his eyes as he looked at the name: Pirate Lord Richard 'Dick' Valentine. Jayce looked at Bjorn. "I don't know how we can do it without Vexx, but we will certainly try."

Seize the Seas Tales: An Old Dog

Jayce returned with Bjorn to the harbour, Jayce releasing the Stacked Hand out onto the pier. With little reason not to keep the ship available for the various members of the crew, and after a reassessment of their funds, Jayce and Bjorn made the executive decision to pay the docking fees and keep the ship docked. With various members returning, Jayce left the ship behind, heading deeper into the city in search of a quiet place to disappear for a while. He found a small bar called the Lost Age. It was quiet, containing only one other patron and the bartender.

He sat down at the counter, a few seats away from the other patron. "What can I get you?" asked the bartender, setting down a book and wandering over towards him. "Something you recommend and something strong," Jayce said, leaning on his knuckles. The barkeep nodded, pouring a glass of strong-smelling whiskey. "I'll start a tab," he said. Jayce nodded and the barkeep headed back to his seat at the end of the counter, going back to his reading.

He swirled the glass, taking a sip that quickly turned into a much deeper gulp. The barkeep glanced over, returning and just handing him the bottle. "Thanks," Jayce said, reaching into his coin pouch and pulling out a black pearl and placing it on the counter. "Do you want change?" Jayce shook his head, the barkeep pocketing it and heading back to his book. Jayce poured himself another drink, glancing towards the other patron.

He was an old man, late sixties or early seventies, it was hard to tell, especially since his body didn't match his face. He was a big guy, his muscular arms

exposed in a blue sleeveless jacket, his legs covered in a pair of black baggy trousers and his feet wearing a pair of white socks in a pair of wooden sandals. He had a wild mane of white hair that lead all the way down his back, the top of his head tied into a bun. A small clump of hair was loose and hung over his grey eyebrows, held up by a blue ribbon and coloured blue at the tip before fading into white. He had a full white beard, a large bushy moustache accompanying it.

Jayce looked at the numerous scars covering his huge arms, another noticeable one on his neck as well, mostly hidden by his beard. A long overcoat sat on the stool next to him, a dark black with white highlights, a Navy insignia stitched onto it. His blue eyes glanced towards Jayce, Jayce quickly turning back to his drink and clearing his throat. The old man stood up: he was easily six-and-half foot, slightly hunched, with boulder-like shoulders. He picked up his coat, walked along the bar and sat on the stool next to Jayce, gently placing his coat onto the seat next to him.

"What are you drinking to, son?" he asked, placing his own glass down next to Jayce's. Jayce looked at him curiously, before he picked up the bottle and refilled both glasses. "I lost someone, due to my mistake," he said quietly. The man nodded, picking up his glass and presenting it. Jayce clinked his own glass to it. "To lost companions," said the man. Jayce nodded. "Were you close?" he asked. Jayce faltered, but eventually he nodded. "He was one of the first to join my crew."

"You're a Captain?" asked the man. Jayce smiled, refilling his glass before refilling the stranger's. "Aye, Captain Jayce Exarga, pleasure to meet you," Jayce said, extending a hand. The old man smiled, gripping it tightly and shaking. "Evandril," he said. "I know what it's like to lose someone. It's never easy, least of all your crew. You're... young to have a crew already. You have your own ship?" he asked. Jayce nodded. "Mighty impressive, son. Brings me back to my own days as a Captain."

"Navy?" Jayce asked. Evandril nodded. "Your overcoat," Jayce added. "Ah, good eye. A long time ago. When the seas were simpler," he said, nodding slightly as he reminisced. "Would you like some advice from an old man?" he asked. Jayce looked at him, before he nodded. "Learn from whatever mistake you made, but don't think too harshly upon it. I lost someone a long time ago, I failed him, let him go down a path I should have stopped. If I could take back my decision and change the outcome I would, but in some way I know it was his nature, his destiny to end up the man he's become. Your crewmate likely made

his own choices as well, remember there's only so much a Captain can do for his crew."

Jayce nodded. "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind." Evandril smiled, pouring himself another drink. "You remind me of some apprentices of mine, a right mess of youngsters far too young to go out on the seas," he stated, chuckling slightly. "How so? What did they do?" Jayce asked curiously, pointing to a slightly sweeter crimson drink on the top shelf. The barkeep passed it over, along with two fresh glasses.

"Oh, they were trouble, a full squad of them. Eleven of them to the ten of us, along with the rest of my crew. Two in particular come to mind: Glasses was always a thinker, always the glorious strategist. Could never make a move on his own however, too cautious. You could have a conversation with him, and he'd always search for hidden meanings, often missing the point altogether. He grew up alone, an orphan, so I guess that came as a consequence. A hard worker, a good, kind man."

"And the other?" Jayce asked curiously, trying to figure out the point Evandril was getting at. "Pumpkin, a quiet girl with a temper like no other. She'd flinch whenever her name was called, but the moment she was irritated, normally by Antlers or Gray, she'd switch in an instant. Ah, she was a menace, dangerous, but honest. She was also horrendously unlucky, and whenever someone got hurt around her she'd take it personally, even if it had nothing to do with her. She lost two brothers, if I recall, blamed herself for their deaths. She enlisted to try and find them, against her family's wishes. They were gone, and her father disowned her. But Glasses was there for her, and so were the others. They were a good group of kids. Good Navy. Good people."

"What happened to them?" Jayce asked, setting his drink aside, devoting his full attention. "They outgrew us, left the crew and continued onwards and upwards. They're still out there, albeit separated and much older. A happy enough ending," he said with a smile. "My point, young Exarga, is that the world moves on. Your friend would want you to continue, even without him, and there are better things to do than sit in a quiet bar with an old tired man." Jayce nodded, finishing off his glass before standing to his feet, the room moving a little. "Thanks, I think I needed that. It was nice to meet you, Evandril." The old man nodded. "And you, I'll keep my eye out for your name. May the seas be fair to you."

Chapter 53: Reasons for Banishment

The ship felt empty as Jayce wandered around early in the morning. The majority of the crew had dissipated across the city, leaving only those who wanted access to their workstations behind. As he passed the various bedrooms on the decks below, he paused, standing outside of Vexx's old room. Gently he nudged open the door, the room a mess – as it always had been, but now with a small layer of dust building on the surfaces. He let out a sigh, backing away and shutting the door. Vexx was gone, there was nothing he could do to change that. He could only move on, as the old man in the bar had said.

After his patrol, Jayce returned to his room, the sunlight trickling in through the windows. His backpacks sat resting against his bathroom door, a reminder to finally take the time and sort through his old equipment. A nervous shiver ran through his body as he picked it up, the bag worn and damaged from years of use and the more recent months of activity. He picked up his new backpack with his other hand, both items feeling lightweight in his grip. He paused, glancing down at his exposed forearms, muscle taut against his skin.

A smile spread to his face; he didn't feel he had changed, but his body proved otherwise. He looked older: he hadn't been shaving for the last few days, the stubble giving way to the start of a dark and rough beard. He was more muscular, but the muscle was lean, it felt stronger. And every time he looked in the mirror, there was a weariness to his eyes – a tiredness he couldn't get rid of. His smile faltered, he placed the bags down on his bed, stepping inside his bathroom and grabbing his scar cream, rubbing it gently on his ribs before he stretched his body.

Eventually he picked up his old backpack, opened the top and poured out the contents onto his bed. He scolded himself as sand poured onto his duvet amongst various other items: mouldy food rations, bottles of water, rope and travelling equipment, a few spare coins, and other junk he had collected along the way. Last to hit the bed were four sets of items: a black curved knife in a leather sheath, a pair of black, taloned gauntlets, a few sealed letters, and a red and black ceramic mask.

Jayce frowned as he looked at the items, his mind coming up blank as to where he had procured them. Gently he picked up the taloned gauntlets, glancing inside them before trying them on. The grips inside adjusted to fit his hands, feeling tight, condensed around his fingers, the gauntlets easy to move as he flexed his fingers. As he tried to take them off, they remained stuck to his hands. Gently he

pressed them towards his forearms, the grips inside loosening and allowing him to remove them.

All the more curious about the items, he placed them gently onto his desk, picking up the ceramic mask and looking it over. Dark markings lined the edge of the mask, the eyes also darkened. It formed a blank face, a flat nose and mouth carved into the ceramic. Jayce pressed it to his face, the item remaining there without the need for straps. He pressed it again and it released. He then looked at the knife, pulling it out and glancing at it through his Gaze. It wasn't magical, in fact, it seemed the opposite.

As he placed his fingers onto the black blade, faint etchings of bronze colouring the metal, something pulled inside him. His fingers tingled and slowly they went numb. He took his fingers away, the numbness fading. All the more curious, Jayce placed it down on his desk with the other items, finally turning to the letters. As he glanced at the seals, his mind flashed with an old memory, the seal of the Imperial Arena staring up at him as he remembered where he had found the items.

He cut open the first, pulling out the document inside. It was documentation for the procurement of slaves, handled by the administration of the Serpent. He crunched it up and threw it in his bin, opening the next one. It was a report on the earnings of the arena, the true earnings as opposed to what was presented for taxation. Jayce sighed, throwing it away and picking up the last letter. It was a private report, a note written by the old arena owner herself, titled: Vexx.

Jayce glanced across it, reading it multiple times over before eventually setting it down. He glanced at the items he had laid across the desk, picking up the mask and looking at its eyes, a pair of red eyes staring at him through the holes. Jayce sighed, picking up the last letter and tearing it up until only the smallest of fragments remained. "You idiot," he muttered, carrying the pieces outside before throwing them into the waters below. "Vexx, you stupid idiot!"

He returned to his room, taking the gauntlets and hiding them in his personal safe underneath his bed. He then rested the mask on his desk, the face acting as a reminder. Finally, he picked up the knife and attached it to his belt, heading out of his quarters back to below deck. Jayce descended down to the second deck, the heavy sounds of clanging echoing from down the hallway. Xander was already hard at work, utilising the high-end materials Caedom allowed him to access, whilst Tempest floated behind him, observing his work. Every so often, as

Xander finished a section, he would demonstrate the next step, or even allow the djinn to take over.

"Captain," Xander greeted, as Jayce entered the workshop, the extradimensional room hot, almost too much to handle, as the forge burned brightly. Tempest nodded a greeting. "Hey, can I borrow you two for a minute? When you're next free to do so," he asked. Xander nodded, carrying over a thin piece of metal over to a large vat of liquid, placing the glowing item quickly into the vat before turning and facing Jayce. "Aye, how may we help?" he asked.

Jayce pulled out Vexx's knife, presenting it to the pair. "This belonged to Vexx, more specifically an order of assassins he once belonged to. Can you tell me anything about it?" he asked, Xander taking it cautiously before showing it to Tempest. The pair began to discuss, complicated words flying past Jayce as they discussed the craftsmanship, the styling, the materials. Jayce just stood there blankly until finally the pair nodded in agreement, Xander handing it back to him.

"The make is old, really old, and it uses a mixture of metals fused together in a method I don't quite understand. One of which is Daesang Bronze, an anti-magic metal. This is definitely an assassin's blade. The curved style is designed to strike surgically, less plunging, more slicing. This opens wounds in a manner that can, and will, kill quickly whilst giving little chance of recovery. It could also be used to slice tendons and joints to disable. Its anti-magic would also drain spellcasters of their magic with each hit, provided the first didn't kill," Xander stated, Tempest nodding in agreement.

Jayce held the item gingerly, carefully placing it back into its sheath on his belt. "It's a killer's weapon, but I don't recognise the maker. It's not of this century at the very least. If you're going to use it, use it carefully." Jayce nodded. "Thanks. Is Daesang Bronze something we should use more often?" Xander weighed his hands. "Yes and no. It would be useful to train with, get the magic users of this crew practiced with how to escape its uses. Shackles are often deployed by the Church. Some Navy guns use it in their ammo. As weapons, not really. You may remove a single spell from a mage's arsenal if you land a good hit, but ultimately, if you can land a hit, you can kill or disable them. So it's not that beneficial."

Jayce nodded. "Okay, makes sense. Thanks again," he said, turning to look at Tempest. "Today's the day I make good on our deal. Prepare yourself, we'll leave in a few hours. Is there anything I need to know about your home?" he asked.

"Only that I am unlikely to be welcome. I require access to my laboratory to retrieve my notes. Then I am yours, until I am no longer of aid to your crew and your goals, Captain Exarga," stated Tempest. Jayce nodded, glancing towards Xander. "I'll see who else wishes to join us," he said, nodding to Xander as he silently offered to join them. "Do we need to bring RK with us?" Tempest nodded. "Although the rokken may be a liability, it has been his home for his lifetime. Through one way or another, we have been paired, I wish to treat his desires as well as my own. His size may also be of use if we are engaged in combat, particularly against the sentinels."

Jayce raised an eyebrow, Tempest taking a moment to recognise his facial expression. "Ah, curiosity. Do not worry, they are mere automatons," he reassured. Xander and Jayce looked at each other. "Aye, it'll be fine," Xander stated, patting Tempest on his armoured shoulder. The djinn turned and looked at him, nodding in agreement. "Okay then, meet on the deck in three hours. We leave then for the city in the sky."

Of the crew available to join them, Jayce was surprised by the roster he managed to collect. He had thought the floating island would have drawn more attention, but as Bjorn had put it: "You want me to float on that death balloon into the sky, hell no!". Some had naturally opted not to join: Caelie and Wicke were both busy training, Wicke was enrolled in a magic school, and Caelie was under the tutelage of Anne Muerte. Instead, he found himself looking at Xander, RK-227, Tempest, Marisha, and Zeta.

They made their way through the city of Caedom, climbing upwards towards the Guild district. RK found himself safely stored within his magic ball, the giant rokken shrunk to fit perfectly into Jayce hand, whilst the rest of them squeezed into the small basket of one of the hot air balloons travelling between the two cities. Slowly the city of Caedom began to shrink, the people falling away as they floated upwards, the group staring over the sides in wonderment as their pilot took them upwards.

"How high does this thing go?" asked Marisha at last, trying to glance upwards towards the approaching city. "A kilometre and a half, that's how high the Guild negotiated for the city to float. The city normally is much higher, but since they're trading with Caedom that was the designated amount," stated the pilot, pulling on a rope to guide the balloon. "Trading? What are they trading?" Xander asked. The pilot looked towards Tempest, floating alongside the balloon. "Shouldn't they know?" she asked.

“Tempest isn’t aware of the ins and outs of the city. What’s being traded?” Xander asked again. “Magical items, mostly. The Guild’s buying them in bulk in exchange for raw materials, the sky knights are planning a trip, so say the rumours,” she answered. Xander, Marisha, and Jayce glanced at each other. “Where to?” Jayce asked, glancing towards Zeta as she stared blankly over the edge, a green colouration to her pale skin. “Where else? The Frontier of course! One city left a few months back. Have you been living under a rock? People are making the crossing more and more - not for me personally, but I get why. The world seems more and more dangerous with each passing day. Between those zealots in the Church and the Navy, well I guess some people would rather chance the unknown,” she stated, floating them over the edge of the island before throwing down a rope. “Anyway, enjoy your visit.”

She unlocked the basket for them, encouraging the group to disembark as she beckoned her next customers over. Zeta didn’t need another word, she rushed forwards, kneeling on the floor and resting her hands on the marble. The entire circular castle was white, a smooth marble finish coated everything in sight, except for the numerous golden fountains and blue stained-glass windows. They had landed on the outside of the castle, the sky port consisting of a long winding path that ran around the outside with a series of piers extending outwards.

Jayce glanced at them curiously; their addition unusual for a floating city. He couldn’t quite imagine why they were needed, as surely no ship would be able to float and dock there. He shook it off, turning away to face the large curved archways leading into the castle. The others looked towards him, waiting for him to take the lead, but instead Jayce glanced towards Tempest. “This is your home, your city, your castle, you have the lead,” he said, a cold gust of wind flying past them. Tempest bowed his head, floating onwards without further input. “Let’s go then,” stated Xander.

They followed after Tempest, entering into a large round courtyard spanning several hundred metres, countless entrances led inside the many towers, and other passageways led to long curving corridors. There were many sky knights floating around, talking to each other, dressed in their full plate armour, each design unique and intricately decorated. There were also a couple of rokken moving around, almost all of them smaller than RK and dragging around carts full of equipment. Jayce took out RK’s container, pressing the rune carved onto the item and releasing him. The giant rokken drew a few eyes, but most chose to ignore him.

"Stay here, wait for us," Jayce instructed, the giant boulder slowly looking down at him before looking around at his surroundings. He grumbled and slowly began to move away towards the centre of the courtyard. "Does that mean he listened or not?" Jayce asked himself, only for Marisha to poke him and point across the courtyard. He followed her finger, staring at a small group of baned stood around. They were all based on birds: an eagle, a falcon, all of them had feathers and a set of wings emerging from their backs. "Baned? Here?" Jayce asked curiously.

"Have you ever seen bird baned before?" Marisha asked, only turning away as she noticed Zeta and Xander following after Tempest towards a corridor. Jayce shook his head. "I heard rumours they existed, same as any other non-mammal baned. I guess a flying city would be a safe place for them," Jayce stated, watching one spread his wings and take to the air, the others following behind. "Come on, we're falling behind," said Marisha, grabbing his arm and pulling him after the others.

They entered into a bright corridor, the walls and floors white and clean, following after the others. Tempest floated ahead, the other djinn turning and looking at him with surprise, or at least what Jayce assumed was surprise. Still, they carried on, moving further and further into the city. As they continued, Jayce had expected for the number of humans to thin out, but instead he saw more and more, some following after djinn wearing simple white cloth clothes. There was also a new appearance of automatons: sentinels, large walking machines that patrolled the city in case of an attack or a threat. They observed the group curiously, the large red eye in the centre of their headless golden chest glowing ominously.

Zeta whistled a tune as they walked, the calm and plain nature of the city adding to a sense of rest in their minds as they explored, apart from Xander. He walked closely after Tempest, his eyes glancing nervously at everyone who came into sight. Jayce sped up, stepping to walk next to him. "What's up?" Jayce asked. "It's too... tidy. It doesn't feel real, not quite right," he said. Jayce glanced around, nothing stood out to him. "I think you're imagining it," Jayce said, nodding a greeting to a dark-skinned man as he passed by them.

Jayce faltered, he had seen that man only moments before. He shook it off, continuing onwards. Tempest took a left, floating up a set of stairs to lead them to another corridor above. A pair of humans walked past them, both identical. They blanked him as he greeted them. Jayce once again faltered, a strange feeling

passing through him. "Tempest, are there a lot of humans who live here?" Jayce asked. "Only those we created," he stated, prompting the entire group to stop in their tracks. "Created?" asked Zeta. "What do you mean created?"

Tempest glanced over his shoulder, realising the group had stopped. "This city requires labour. My kind are master geneticists, we also possess knowledge of alchemy. Through the combination of the pair we create artificial humans to serve us," he stated. They looked at him with absolute horror. "What?" he asked. "You create humans to serve you?" asked Marisha. "Isn't that a little immoral?" Tempest tilted his head. "I do not understand. These artificial humans have no thoughts, they are simply living machines. We only create them because unlike automatons they can be taught magic. They feel no pain, no suffering, they also have no awareness. I find it no less immoral than the breeding of animals for certain traits. I do not see your point."

Xander rubbed his head, glancing around before returning his gaze onto Tempest. "Let's finish what we came for and leave this place," he stated. Tempest nodded, turning around and floating onwards. "Artificial humans," stated Marisha quietly. Jayce nodded, an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. "I think it goes way beyond just that. Tempest stated it as if it was nothing, who knows what else is going on here. Let's just make this quick," he said quietly, the others nodding in agreement as they followed after Tempest.

He let them to a large set of metal doors, a glowing blue word written in arcanum marked the surface: 'condemned', it said. "This is my laboratory," stated Tempest, placing his gauntlet on a small glyph next to the door. It glowed and the doors slid open, the djinn quickly floating inside. "We'll stand guard," stated Xander. "Make it quick," added Marisha, leaning against the nearest wall, Zeta mirroring her. Jayce nodded, stepping through the doors after Tempest.

It was a large room, a metal table sat in the middle and a ring-shaped desk lined the wall. A series of empty storage racks decorated the walls, rising all the way up to the top of the cylindrical room. Tempest floated around, searching through the numerous drawers in his massive desk, but eventually, in a rare display of emotion, he slammed his hands onto the desk in frustration. "My research is not here - it has been taken," he gargled.

"Jayce, Tempest," came Marisha's voice from their communicators. "Come outside," she quickly added. Jayce and Tempest glanced towards each other before they quickly made their way towards the door. It slid open; Marisha, Zeta, and Xander were all stood outside, their arms up in surrender as they stood

surrounded by a squad of sentinels, artificial humans holding orbs of lightning, and a djinn wearing black plate armour.

"Mutation, why have you returned?" demanded the djinn. Jayce quickly assessed the situation before he too raised his arms in surrender, the group vastly outnumbered. "Where is my research?" Tempest quickly countered, the djinn floating forwards in front of Jayce and the others. The two stared at each other, lightning sparking throughout the metal of Tempest's armour. The other djinn had no such effect, their armour didn't glow, it didn't spark, it just floated. "Your works have been confiscated, it is in the council's possession. You are to meet with them immediately. You, humans, until further notice you are to be placed in holding. Do not resist," garbled the djinn in a masculine tone. Jayce's crew looked towards him, he nodded, and they remained with their arms up.

They were escorted through the city, their weapons confiscated, although Sola and Luna remained unnoticed, before they were placed in a dark cell, a few tourists locked inside as well. Tempest was taken elsewhere, leaving the group to sit and think. "What if they don't come back?" asked Zeta, as she paced back and forth. "Settle down, we can trust in our companion to sort this out," stated Xander. "Besides," inserted Marisha, "worst case scenario we are forced to break out or call for help from the others." Zeta shook her head, continuing to pace back and forth.

Eventually, a djinn floated towards their cell, opening the doors and pointing to Jayce. "You, follow," she garbled. Jayce shrugged and followed after the djinn, the barred door shutting behind him. "I'll see you all soon," he stated, winking behind him as a pair of sentinels began to escort him out of the jail. He was taken through the city into the largest tower, finding himself placed onto a small circular platform before it began to rise up towards the ceiling above.

He emerged into a dark room, another circular platform to his right, Tempest floating above it, as well as five pillars in front of him all holding their own djinn. Each member of the council wore ornate and decorative armour, glowing etchings covering the metal and ornaments mounting their bodies. "Jayce Exarga," boomed a masculine voice from the centremost figure, a suit of platinum armour that glowed red. "Yes?" Jayce asked, glancing around before focusing his eyes on Tempest. The pair nodded to each other, before looking up at the djinn council. "Are you the one responsible for bringing the Mutation and the Destroyer to this city?" asked the leading djinn.

"I am. I did," he answered honestly. The djinn council members looked at each other. "Guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty," they said one after another. Jayce quickly held up his hands in protest. "Woah woah, hang on just a moment. I brought them here, that is true. We only came here to retrieve Tempest's work," he stated quickly. "Tempest?" asked the djinn on the far left, a bronze djinn that glowed green. "My companion, the Mutation, or whatever you refer to him as."

"That research has been confiscated, it is deemed too dangerous, too destructive for the safety of this city," stated the djinn on the far right, a silver djinn with glowing pink glyphs. "Then there is no issue for it to be taken away from this city? We came here for it, we never intended to stay long. Let us go and we will take the research and never return," he argued. The djinn looked at each other before looking back at him. "No," they stated in unison. "Rules have been broken, there must be punishment."

Jayce thought to himself quickly. "What punishment?" he asked, his mind racing. "Eradication," stated the platinum djinn. Jayce's eyes widened and he quickly looked towards Tempest, the djinn looking down at the floor. He held his breath, before letting out a long exhale as a thought came to him. "I disagree," Jayce stated. "This research has already been deemed dangerous to this city, Tempest and RK-227 are already both exiled, that's your right to do, fine. But we, me and my companions, are not yours to judge. Because if you truly wish to play that game, we can. We will judge you for your actions. Your creations, your manipulation of life."

There was a moment of utter silence, before Jayce grinned, sensing an opportunity. "You are reliant on trade with those on the surface, you need the Guild, you need us humans. How do you think the view of the city would change if it became common knowledge that you create slaves, artificial human slaves? The Guild may not initially care, but I can tell you they will care about the other things you have going on here. I've already passed on the information to my companions on the surface, they can easily repeat what I've told them."

"You bluff," stated a golden djinn that glowed purple. Jayce's smile widened even more. He touched his necklace. "Marisha, say hello to the council," he said. "Hello," echoed her voice around the room. The silence was palpable, and once more Jayce took the lead. "Now, if that's not convincing enough of the consequence of eradicating me and my companions, Tempest and RK included, I am also under the protection of a Pirate Lord. Kitty Deliver herself. Surely even you understand the consequences of a Pirate Lord's wrath?"

“What are you proposing, human?” asked the platinum djinn, a clear sound of irritation muddled into their voice. “Let us go, with Tempest and RK and Tempest’s research. In exchange we will never return, you will never see the Destroyer or the Mutation again, you will not have to worry about the consequences of his research, my crew will not repeat what we have seen here, and we all benefit from this encounter,” Jayce stated.

The council floated there silently, looking down at the pair. “Very well, your proposal is accepted,” stated the last djinn, one wearing black armour with a blue glow. “You will be treated as hostile the moment you depart this city, return and you will be eliminated. The research will be returned, and a means of travel to the surface will also be provided. Dismissed,” concluded the central djinn, the podium Jayce had been stood on lowering into the floor before the entrance above sealed.

It wasn’t long before the group reconvened, Jayce quickly returning RK to his ball before they were paraded across the city. The walk was quick, and as they crossed the central courtyard, they noticed the thin veneer that covered the city had been cracked, the white marble giving way to a dark grey stone underneath – a consequence of RK’s misbehaviour. They found themselves led into a chamber, a series of holes decorating the surfaces of the room.

“Step inside,” ordered their guard, the group looking at each other before squeezing inside the small capsule, a large book getting thrown in after them. The entranceway sealed behind them, and an immediate feeling of weightlessness hit them all as they fell through the sky to the city below. The pod hit the ground hard, but the group felt next to nothing inside, the entire item cracking open and releasing them out onto the dirt of the plateau. They lay there for a few moments, grasping quickly what had just happened, apart from Tempest who slowly floated around, picking up his research. Eventually he turned to look down at Jayce. “Thank you Captain, our mission was successful.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Somewhere to Come Back To

“Wicke, you coming to Erago’s?” asked Faraday, his grimoire held tightly in both hands as he and the seven other Wizard students looked towards her. “I’ll catch up, there’s something I need to check out first,” she stated. Her various classmates nodded before they departed, heading down the plateau towards the lower districts. Wicke turned away, looking upwards towards the lone tower at the top of the plateau as she hugged her grimoire. “Just a peek,” she muttered to herself, taking a slow step upwards before taking another and another.

The climb was slow, the long expanse of the city of Caedom stretching behind her, but she wasn't alone. All around her, numerous groups of people were making their way up and down the slope, some dressed in armour and holding weapons, others ferrying wheelbarrows or carts full of sparkling purple gemstones. They were hard not to notice, but Wicke's vision had funnelled, the tower the only thing in her sight.

As she reached the top, panting and with a faint sweat on her forehead, a deep rumbling ran through her body, a pulsing sensation passing through her feet. It beat, slow and disordered, but the Dungeon was calling out to her as it had continued to do ever since she had set foot on the plateau. The rumbling eased, the pulse fading, but the heartbeat sound continued in the back of her head. "You alright, missy?" asked a worker sitting on the back of a cart. She blinked, turning her head and looking towards him. "Yes, yes I am. Thank you for asking. Can I get a lift back down?"

Chapter 54: The Cat with Demon Eyes

Tempest had completely disappeared into his work, something Jayce had expected, just not to the level that it had become. Every morning, without fault, Tempest would emerge from his workshop, sometimes with a tired Xander by his side, with a long list of materials he required. By no accounts were they cheap, by no accounts had Tempest stated what they were for, but Jayce was happy to provide what was needed.

It was the afternoon of the ninth day in Caedom that Jayce received a letter: a neatly addressed piece of paper presented directly to him by a large man Jayce recognised from long ago. "Yo Jayce, this is from the Captain. No, uh, no hard feelings right, for last time?" asked Davarick, rubbing his jaw whilst he held out the letter. Jayce laughed. "No, it's all good. Thanks for bringing this," he answered. Davarick nodded, glancing up at the Stacked Hand, before giving a shy little wave and turning around and walking away.

Jayce sat down on one of the many nearby cargo crates - a stark reminder of Bjorn's temporary absence - tearing open the letter and reading it curiously. It was an invitation, an unsubtle suggestion of a date, or, at the very least, a formal invitation to her ship. He smiled, glancing back at his ship before he stood and walked away, following the directions given to him. It didn't take him long, it was very clear that the more important figures in Caedom were issued their own places to dock and the Delivery Kats were more than included, their own dockyard very close to the plateau itself.

She was waiting for him, her legs dangling over the edge of the Great Seacat as her crew members moved cargo up and down the small ramp that extended out from one of the bay doors on the side of her ship. She was wearing her usual grey coat, her hair floating in the breeze, and her green and yellow eyes glowing in the sunlight. As she spotted him, her pondering blank expression changed into a small smile.

"I'm glad to see you accepted my invitation," she called out to him, as he walked towards her ship, a few of her crew glancing towards him as he approached. Jayce entered into Focus, a quick moment of tension crossing the crew as they observed him more closely. He concentrated on his legs, leaping high into the air to land on the deck next to her. "That's new," she stated, rolling backwards and landing on her feet. Jayce grinned. "It is! As of this morning, I can now proudly state I can use all advanced forms of Focus."

She softly clapped her hands together. "Congrats rookie, you can now officially join my crew," she stated, to the soft laughter of those across the deck. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "All of them?" he asked, looking around. She shook her head. "I was kidding, but most. I am a Pirate Lord, my crew should represent that. However, the Delivery Kats will always need loaders and workers, so it's not a requirement for all if they prove themselves. Anyway, down to business. Follow me."

She led him across the deck towards the prominently displayed captain's quarters at the rear of the vessel. She opened the door for him, and he stepped inside. The room was well furnished, soft rugs decorated the floor, and a large bed was placed against the rear wall, the entire surface covered in countless blankets and stuffed toys. A large tabby cat lay buried underneath the pile, her soft face protruding from the pile as she slept.

Kitty led him away from her bedroom towards the meeting table and the adjacent desk, a large pile of documents decorating both surfaces. "Excuse the mess, we're leaving soon so this is pretty much everything we need to sort for our voyage. Hang on, it's in here somewhere," she stated, rummaging through the pile before eventually pulling out a pair of documents. "This is a declaration of our alliance, one for you and one for me. Give it a read, it basically stipulates that if we're nearby we'll help each other, but if we're apart we won't race across the world for each other. If someone sinks us, the other will try their best to take revenge, no sharing of loot, no tributes, no crew swaps and so forth and so forth."

Jayce read through the documents, frowning as he briefly glanced over a statement buried within, returning back to it to give it a more thorough read. "You know I am in a relationship, right Kitty?" he asked, taking out his pen and scratching through the outlying statement on both documents. "Can't blame a girl for trying," she said with a mischievous smile. "That was the only one, don't worry." Jayce reread the document, checking it over one last time before writing his signature at the bottom and stamping his signet ring on both documents. She did the same.

"There we go, we are now allies. Congratulations on this great honour. As thanks, you're taking me out for drinks," she stated with a wide smile, taking her copy and placing it on her bed. "Uh," he began, tucking his own copy into his bottomless bag. She faltered. "You don't want to?" she asked with a sad expression. "No, it's just... Never mind, let's go," he corrected, a quick smile reforming on her face. "Great, you choose the place."

Jayce led her across the city, every person along the way stepping to the side to let them pass. Kitty seemed unbothered, but Jayce couldn't help but glance at the people as they began to mutter, some speaking out of admiration, others fear. Eventually they arrived at the Lost Age, a place Kitty almost walked past until Jayce pointed it out her. "Here? I've never noticed this before," she stated. He nodded, holding open the door for her - she walked unhindered underneath his arm.

As Jayce had expected, the place was empty – the barkeep was the only person inside. "Wow, what a dive," muttered Kitty. "I like it." She sat down on one of the stools, patting the seat next to her as she beckoned Jayce over. The barkeep stood up, placing his book down as he wandered over to them. "What can I get you?" he asked as Jayce sat down. Kitty stared across the rows of bottles, her tongue slightly out as she thought. "Uh, that one," she stated, pointing at a colourful green and gold bottle. The barkeep nodded, grabbing the bottle and a pair of glasses before placing all three items down and returning to his seat.

"That's bold," she stated, opening the bottle and filling both glasses. Jayce nodded. "The barkeep is a little laid back here," he laughed, lifting up the glass and tapping it against hers. It was a sweet drink, one with a strong essence of citrus, and a powerful kick, but it was drinkable, and Kitty immediately refilled both of their glasses. A Guild radio was playing in the background, but an uneasy silence quickly filled the room as Jayce realised just who he was sat next to.

Kitty leant on her wrist, looking up towards him. "You can relax, you know. I'm not a threat, not a danger. I have no reason to hurt you. I mean, look at me, am I really that scary?" she asked. Jayce met her eyes, the green surrounding a bright yellow that flared and flickered as he stared into them. He glanced away, towards the green collar around her neck, the tiny gold bell chiming slightly with every movement. He then looked back to her face, the slightly pointed chin, the round cheeks, the faint freckles across the bridge of her nose.

She met his eyes, a sadness buried within, a vulnerability covering her face as she looked at him with a longing expression. "No," he answered, a brightness returning as she blushed, before she quickly turned away. "Good," she stated, picking up her drink. Her face twitched and she quickly grabbed her right cheek with her gloved hand. "Are you alright?" Jayce asked. She glanced back towards him, her right pupil a vertical slit. She blinked and her eye returned to normal.

"Yeah, sorry. Tell me about yourself. Last time I saw you, you and Alara were on your way to the Capital to enlist. What happened, why didn't you go with her?"

Jayce let out a long exhale, picking up his glass and swirling the contents within. "That's a long story," he stated. She looked at him curiously, nodding in acknowledgement. "I can imagine. It was because of that Wizard girl you have, Wicke? You couldn't hand her over," she guessed. Jayce nodded, taking a shallow sip of his drink. "Yeah. Alara and I had different opinions, but Wicke was terrified of being handed to the Navy - I couldn't just leave her. So Alara enlisted and I didn't."

"Do you regret that choice?" she asked. Jayce shook his head, pausing as he collected his thoughts. "I don't think so. A part of me, yes, definitely, but I think one way or another I'd be here regardless. I'd have joined the Navy over the Marines and everything Bjorn has told me, everything I've seen. I just can't imagine I'd have stayed. Or, at the very least, I would have become such a thorn in their side trying to change everything I'd have been thrown out anyway," he said with a soft laugh. "Wicke needed me, my crew... I wouldn't trade them for anything."

"Even Alara?" questioned Kitty, a look of genuine curiosity on her face as she slowly took her hand away. Jayce faltered. "I don't know. I love her, she is everything to me - my past - my future, but we are so different on our views. I don't have an answer, I just don't know. I think if I was given a chance to reset, to leave the Aces and join the Marines, to choose her over the crew... I wouldn't take it. I don't like that - it doesn't feel right," he admitted.

"I don't think it's meant to feel easy. You clearly care about her, and she cares about you, but you're in two very different worlds, neither of which are safe. I'm sure you'll see her soon, and then you'll make your choice, or she'll make it for you. She's a smart girl, she wouldn't take a bad deal," Kitty answered. Jayce nodded. "What about you? Who is Kitty Deliver?" Jayce asked. Kitty laughed. "Good question. I am twenty four, I am the Captain of the Delivery Kats, and I am a Pirate Lord."

"You're twenty four?" he asked. She nodded, tilting her head curiously. "Do I look older?" Jayce shook his head. "Good, how old did you think I was?" "My age. Twenty one, twenty two," he answered truthfully. Her eyes sparkled. "You little baby, you're so young! I thought you were older than that," she coddled. "Yeah, yeah, you old crone," he retaliated. She laughed, a wide grin on her face. "Ouch. So how did you find this place? I like it," she asked.

"Just by chance." Kitty's face twitched again, and she once again placed her hand against her cheek, this time standing up. "Sorry, I, uh, I need to go," she stated quickly stepping backwards towards the door, both of her pupils forming cat-like slits in her eyes. "Oh, right, are you okay?" Jayce asked, standing up. She stepped outside, the door shutting quickly before a green flash illuminated the doorway. Jayce pulled out some coins, placing it on the counter – the barkeep not even looking up as he quickly headed to the door, stepping outside into the cool night. She was gone.

Jayce returned to the Stacked Hand, confused, more than anything, but otherwise glad to have spent the afternoon with Kitty. The rest of the evening passed quickly, and Jayce once again returned to his bed, another day in Caedom over. He woke up early the following morning to a foot pressed hard into his back. With a confused look, he glanced behind him, the familiar form of Caelie spread out on top of his covers. Jayce chuckled to himself, shaking his head before readjusting his body to avoid her.

He awoke sometime later to Caelie staring down at him as she sat cross-legged next to him. "Good morning," he said, stretching widely before she buried herself into his open arms. She was covered in bruises and scratches, but otherwise seemed quite happy. "I thought you weren't due back for another day or two," Jayce said as she rested her head on his chest. She sat back up, shaking her head before pointing to the door, a piece of paper held to the frame by a knife.

He frowned as he stood up and pulled the knife out of the door. "Did you do this?" he asked. Caelie quickly shook her head, using her fingers to create a skull shape on her face. "That's concerning," Jayce muttered, before he took a look at the note. "Hiya Jayce, I've done my best with Caelie. We're leaving a little early, but I've shown her some tricks and given her some things to work on. We couldn't solve her haunting issue, she indicated she once had a mask she used to concentrate with, an inhibitor to her surroundings – it might be worth getting her a new one, I'm not sure. Otherwise she's been good, very fun, hardworking. I'll see you on the seas. Anne Muerte."

Jayce glanced back at Caelie. "A new mask? You sure?" he asked. She shrugged forming a pair of circles with her fingers before placing them over her eyes. "I guess it's worth a shot." He glanced back at the note, a small scribble at the bottom. "Hey Jayce, sorry about running off – personal problems, you get it. It was fun seeing you, and thanks for the drinks. Stay safe, I'll see you soon enough, I'm sure. Kitty xx."

“Personal problems?” Jayce muttered curiously, prompting Caelie to poke him on his arm before placing a finger to her lips. “What’s that supposed to mean?” She rolled her eyes, walking over to his wardrobe before stealing some of his clothes and waltzing into his bathroom. “Hey, you have your own!” he protested, only for her to tuck her head out from behind the door and stick out her tongue before shutting it. Jayce sighed, tearing up the note before placing the remains into his bin.

A while later, the pair of them departed Jayce’s room, stepping out into the sunlight of the late morning. Surprisingly the deck of the Stacked Hand was busy: Tempest and Xander were moving around supplies with the aid of RK, Zeta and Marisha were sat on the grass talking to each other, and a large group of baned were walking around the ship. “Ah, Captain, there you are!” called Bjorn, waving him over. “Your Captain is not one of us?” asked an ox baned amongst the group of eight. Bjorn looked at him curiously, before turning back towards Jayce and Caelie.

“Hey, who are your friends?” Jayce asked curiously, as the baned all looked down at him, an uneasy air about them. “Some guys I met a few days ago in the baned quadrant. Am I good to show them around?” Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded, extending a hand out to the nearest one. “Of course, welcome aboard the Stacked Hand. I’m Jayce, thanks for keeping my Quartermaster company. Tell me if he’s any trouble,” Jayce said with a smile, attempting to break the clear tension. The nearest baned took his hand, shaking it before the others did so as well. “Will do, thanks for the hospitality,” stated a leopard baned next to Bjorn. Jayce nodded to Bjorn, and he quickly led them away to explore the ship.

As Caelie and Jayce were eating their breakfast, a plateful of buttered toast and some eggs, Bjorn came and sat down with them. “Hey,” Jayce said as he sat opposite them. “Hey,” he returned quietly. Caelie smiled at him through a mouthful of bread. “You okay?” Jayce asked, sensing an air of discomfort coming from Bjorn. “Yeah... I think, yeah,” he answered unconvincingly. Jayce raised an eyebrow, sliding his plate across the table. Bjorn quickly helped himself. “Okay, now tell me what’s really bothering you.”

“You guys... like me, right?” Bjorn asked uneasily. Jayce scoffed and Caelie immediately shook her head. Bjorn’s face fell. “You’re being serious?” Jayce asked. “Dumbass, of course we do! You’re my right hand, my best friend. Do we like you? You idiot, I’ve sailed half the world with you, of course I like you.

Where is this coming from?" Jayce asked, as Caelie ran around the table to hug Bjorn.

"I don't know. It's been eating me up and I don't know why. When I'm around the other baned I feel happy, felt, understood, but the minute I leave I feel tense, exposed, like I can't truly relax. I think it becomes noticeable when I'm with them how on edge I am. I think we're all that way: defensive," Bjorn unloaded. Jayce looked at him curiously. "Do you feel unsafe with us?" he asked. Bjorn shook his head. "It's not a feeling of unsafeness, I can't really put it to words. An anxiety, of waiting for something bad to happen, I guess."

Jayce nodded. "I'm not surprised," he said. Bjorn stared at him, shocked. "Well, think about it. If people treat you with hostility all the time, albeit not on this ship I hope, I'm not surprised you feel on edge. It could be why you can't change back, you're defensive, trying to protect yourself. If you're surrounded by people who feel the same way, it's probably only heightened. Doc might have more of an insight, but I think that makes the most sense."

Bjorn nodded, helping himself to the rest of Jayce's breakfast. "I think you're right. How much longer are we staying here?" Bjorn asked. Jayce shrugged. "Do you want to leave?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded, then he shook his head, then he nodded again. "I don't know," he answered truthfully, Caelie sliding the remainders of her breakfast across the table towards him. "Okay, it might be worth talking to the others and coming to a decision as to whether we want to leave earlier than planned, but definitely talk to Doc about this. Anyway, we're heading out and you're coming with us. That's an order," Jayce stated. Bjorn poured the remainders into his mouth before standing up. "Where are we going?"

The three of them stared at the large building in front of them, a steady stream of patrons walking in and out of the giant diner. A rolling rumble echoed across them as the strong smell of food flowed out of every door and every window. "I heard about this place a few days ago, best eatery in the entire city," Jayce stated, as Caelie stood drooling next to him. "I hope you're hungry for another breakfast," he said with a grin as he looked at Bjorn. Bjorn laughed, patting his stomach. "Always!"

They stepped through the swinging doors, a young waitress smiling at them as she pointed to a table near the corner next to a large window. "Welcome to Erago's Eatery," stated their waitress, handing them all menus before rushing off to attend another table. They stared dumbfounded at the multiple-sided menu,

an array of fried foods available. Caelie immediately pointed to an image on the menu, a large stack of syrup-covered waffles, poking Jayce repeatedly until he acknowledged her. "Yes, yes, I hear you. Waffles it is," he said, waving her off before glancing at Bjorn. "Still on edge?"

"No, but... yes. I know nothing is going to happen, but I just can't help but feel ready for something," Bjorn answered, watching Caelie as she stared at a large pile of pancakes float past, only for her to immediately change her choice and point towards them instead. He struggled not to smile as Jayce let out a long sigh as she resumed poking him. "Fine, I'll order pancakes, you order waffles, and we can share. Okay?" Jayce reasoned with Caelie, before turning back to Bjorn. She nodded, standing on her seat as she stared across the room at the other options.

Jayce sighed as Bjorn laughed, only for the three of them to immediately glance towards the door as an unsettling feeling ran through them. A small figure walked out of the entrance, the doors remaining closed as the knee-high goblin exited the eatery. He had green skin, pointed ears tucked underneath a large straw hat, and a small sword hanging from his belt. A large black cloth robe covered his body, a white flower marking the back, and his feet were covered in white socks tucked into a pair of wooden sandals.

"Hey little guy, come back!" slurred a heavily tattooed patron as he walked out after the goblin, a few other goons trailing behind him. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other, before they glanced out of the large window, watching as the goblin walked past. The front of his robe was open, a white tunic hidden within. "Hey, I'm talking to you!" called the pirate after the goblin as the group followed him down the street.

"One," stated the goblin, turning around and looking up at the much larger man. "One? What's that supposed to mean? Are you picking a fight?" asked the pirate. "Two," stated the goblin, his eyes completely hidden underneath his pointed straw hat. "Oh I see how it is. He's mocking us, the big bad bounty hunter doesn't think we're worth his time!" said the pirate, turning to his allies before he reached into his belt and drew a large sabre. "Three," stated the Ronin with a sigh.

Jayce blinked and the entire row of windows turned red, the group of six pirates dropping to the floor as their heads rolled away, the goblin completely out of sight. "By the ancestors," muttered Bjorn, as screams filled the air. Jayce turned away, Caelie completely unbothered by the sight as she waved over a waitress. "Did they say bounty hunter?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded, a significant portion of the clientele quickly paying before leaving. "Then that must have been..."

"The Ronin," answered Bjorn, shaking his head as Caelie sat there disappointed as the waitresses ignored her. "That makes two. I didn't even see him move. Did you?" asked Jayce. Bjorn shook his head, glancing at the blood dripping down the windows as a crowd formed around the corpses. "First the Oni, now the Ronin, an ogre and a goblin. I never thought I'd actively fear a goblin before." The pair of them looked at each other then back at Caelie as she sat there pouting. "Is second breakfast cancelled?" Jayce asked. Bjorn glanced across the room, looking towards a few of the now empty tables. "I could still eat. What do you think Caelie?" he asked. She grabbed her menu, vaulting over Jayce as she ran to the nearest free booth. "Guess that solves that," Jayce said with a chuckle, before the pair of them glanced nervously out of the red window.

Seize the Seas Tales: Opening the Well

It had been quite a few days since Jayce had last seen Wicke, but eventually she returned – summoned along with the others to discuss the crew's next steps. "I would rather leave sooner rather than later," Bjorn stated, as she climbed onto the main deck. "Caedom has been good, but there is more out there for us to see." "What's this?" Wicke asked as the others glanced towards her. Jayce grinned at her, and she returned the smile.

"We were just discussing when we should leave Caedom, and if it's worth moving the date forward," Jayce summarised. She looked across the group wide-eyed. "Leave? Already?" she asked. There was a collective sense of agreement as the various crew members nodded. "We've been here nearly three weeks already. We have a goal, and a next destination. It'll take at least a month to reach the south of the Rockies. And we're also hoping to reach my home before the end of Flos. I think it's time we move on," Jayce stated.

Wicke's face fell. "Oh," she said softly, the others glancing towards her before looking at Jayce. "If you want to stay..." he said softly. Immediately she shook her head, holding her hands up defensively. "No no no, I'm ready – let's go now!" she said loudly. "Wicke," Jayce said softly. She took a moment, calming herself before letting out a sigh. "Sorry, I made some friends. I thought we'd be here longer. I'll make my preparations. Let's leave tomorrow."

The crew glanced at each other, nodding in agreement. "Tomorrow then, let's make it happen!" Jayce declared, clapping his hands together before moving towards the stairs to the aft deck. "Wait!" Wicke called out, the others stopping in their tracks as they headed off in various directions. "I've got a gift for a few of you – provided you want it," she said, pointing at Marisha, Xander, and Bjorn.

"Now, I don't know how these things work with baned, you're innately magical anyway, but..."

She began to chant, tattoos forming on her exposed hands and forearms before the markings liquified, dripping a shiny blue water. "If you want, I can unlock your spirit fonts, give you the ability to learn magic," she said, looking at the three of them. They stood there dumbfounded, as she held out her hands, the liquid dripping off her fingers before evaporating into rainbow-coloured steam. Marisha stepped forwards without hesitation. "What do I do?" she asked. Wicke looked at her, a wide grin on her face. "This is so weird, but drink it. Drink me, ugh, that sounds horrible."

Marisha lowered her head, a droplet falling into her mouth before she recoiled away. "Why's it spicy? That's a horrible flavour! You taste awful!" she said quickly, backing away. "Did it work? Are you okay?" asked Bjorn, placing his arms on Marisha's shoulders and looking at her as she glanced around wide-eyed. "I don't know," she said softly. "How do we tell?" Wicke shrugged, but Jayce stepped forwards, thinking to himself. "Now I learnt this from some weird guy a long time ago, but let's see if it works," he said. "Trust me?" he asked. "Always, Captain," answered Marisha.

Jayce tapped her on her sternum before he tapped each of her shoulders, he then drew a circle in front of her chest before bringing his fingers back to the centre of her chest. There was a quick flash of gold light and Marisha turned translucent, her organs missing and a large cascading tower of bowls inside her – a tiny drip of water falling down into the top bowl. "Woah," stated Marisha, wide-eyed before there was another flash and the translucency disappeared. "What was that?" asked Bjorn.

"Remember the Monk I met in the afterlife?" Jayce stated, the newer members, Marisha included, all staring at him with mild horror. "Right, long story," Jayce stated. "Regardless, it worked." Bjorn and Xander glanced at each other before they looked down at Wicke. "We're in," they said. A moment later they stepped back, Xander unfazed, but Bjorn with an odd look on his face. "You okay?" Jayce asked. "Yeah, I think. I don't feel any different. Can you give me a look?"

Jayce repeated the ritual, Bjorn's outer form fading to reveal the man inside. Beyond that was a large spirit font, the waters overflowing from the edges, the bowls wide and full. "Huh," Jayce said, the others looking at the form beneath with deep curiosity. "Huh what? What Jayce? Am I going to die? Did it go wrong?" he asked quickly, the members who hadn't seen Bjorn's real form all

staring at him intently. "No big guy, its already unlocked and it's overflowing. I don't think it made a difference," Jayce stated, patting Bjorn on the shoulder before looking over the group. "I guess we're all mages now. Can you teach us how to do it?" he asked Wicke. She nodded. "Perfect. Right, get your things together - we leave tomorrow morning!"

Chapter 55: The Price of Success

Alara leant on the railing of the bow of the Lone Wanderer, thoughts running rampant through her mind as the Capital slowly grew bigger on the horizon. "Something bothering you, Lieutenant Commander?" asked Astris as she leant next to her, the pair enjoying the brief moment they had off-duty. "No, uh, yes," she admitted. "It's been a while since we've been back here, the downtime will be nice, but... it's nothing," she said softly. Astris nudged her, catching her eye. "Jayce?" she asked. Alara nodded. "You'll see him soon with luck. You've planned to meet for your anniversary, right?" Again Alara nodded, a soft smile building as she looked at the water.

Voices began to build, the various members of the crew calling out behind her as they were given orders. "Commander! Commander!" called an out of breath Ensign as she ran towards them. "There you are! Captain's told all crew to assemble on the main deck," she said. Astris grinned as she looked towards Alara who dismissed the Ensign with a nod. "Another speech?" she asked. Alara shuddered, shaking her head as they began to walk away from the bow. "I really hope not."

The ship docked and the crew assembled on the main deck. The majority of the command crew had collected above them on the aft deck, with Alara to Captain Onasi's left and Commander Vao to his right. "Right," called out Onasi, the crew immediately standing to attention as they looked up towards him. "We will be docked here for three days, after which our next destination will be the Salvation Isles for our rookies' final tests. Enjoy your time off, it's a long voyage, and be back on this ship at noon. Until then, get! Grab your pay, splash out, have some fun, but remember you're representing me!"

The attitude immediately relaxed, and Onasi's face fell a little as he watched his crew slump, break order and start walking to the gangway. "Hey, wait, no I didn't... Oh hell, fine! Dismissed, see you in three days!" he yelled out to the remaining rookies as they stayed in formation. Letting out a sigh, he turned towards Alara, Vao already making her way in pursuit of the numerous Marines, a bag slung over her shoulder.

"You've done well these last few weeks, I would say I'm proud, but I know Commander Vao has long weeded out a need for my approval. Be careful, Vanathur, your face has been plastered on the papers and the news: 'The Marine New Era', and all. Keep your wits about you and watch what you say to any

reporters,” he said with a smile. Alara saluted, before he tilted his head towards the stairs.

She collected a few of her personal belongings from her room, heading quickly after the crowd as the Marines made their way from the docks towards the main headquarters. As she walked down the main path, a few recruits stopped and stared at her, along with several other more senior Marines. Some saluted, others gave her compliments, but most didn't notice her, or at the very least they kept their thoughts to themselves.

She followed the long stream of Marines, a ship's worth of Navy joining the mob as they entered through the rear entrance of the headquarters, making their way through large hallways as they headed deeper inside the base. Eventually, she found herself stood in a long line inside a large room. A large row of attendants sat at the far end of the hall behind counters, handing out pay to numerous Navy and Marines.

She stood on her tiptoes, trying to spot her squad somewhere up ahead, only for a hand to grab her arm and drag her out of the line. “With me,” stated Vao, as she walked alongside the diverging lines, Alara following closely and quickly behind her. “You're an Officer, that comes with privileges,” she stated, the lines around them standing to attention as they passed. They arrived at the front of the queue, the Marine second in line stepping to the side to offer her place. Vao nodded to her, and she smiled proudly, stepping back in line just behind Alara.

“Commander Vao,” she stated to the attendant before turning back to Alara. “Use the rank, someone else will,” she said with a wink, before turning back and taking a money pouch off the counter. “Have fun, see you in three days!” she said, walking quickly away. Alara stepped forwards. “Rank and name?” stated the man behind the counter. “Lieutenant Commander Vanathur,” she said. The attendant nodded, pressing a few switches on his desk before he grabbed a cloth pouch and held it up to a small tube extending down from the ceiling. Alara watched with amazement at the network of interconnecting tubes, a few coins rattling down the pipe into her cloth pouch before the teller slid it across the counter to her.

Alara smiled as she glanced inside, the months of pay finally available, as well as the hazard pay, only to falter as she looked at the rather paltry amount inside. “Excuse me, this seems a little low,” she said. The teller raised an eyebrow, stepping away before quickly returning with a document. “There's an expense

charge billed to your name: an incident in Utarune,” he said. Alara’s chest fell, and she looked down disappointedly. “Oh, I see. Okay, thank you.”

Alara stepped away dejectedly, heading towards the marked exit as she counted the coins. As she stepped into daylight, she found the rest of her squad waiting for her. “There you are!” stated Violette, as Astris pointed her out. “Why the glum look?” she asked as Alara approached. Alara rattled the nearly empty coin pouch. “Someone submitted an expense report in my name, my pay got slashed by eighty percent,” she grumbled.

Violette laughed, only to falter as the others didn’t, the group staring at Alara sympathetically. “Uh, that sucks,” she corrected. “Anyway, lads we’ll see you this evening for food and drinks. Meridew Way at seven. Ladies, time to go shopping!” stated Violette, turning on her heels and heading towards the bridge to the central island. Wulf caught Alara’s eye as she glanced towards him, the boys of the squad heading off together in a different direction. He reached into his coin pouch, pulling out a black pearl and flicking it towards her. He winked, before turning and following after the others. She smiled to herself, Astris and Riley glancing towards her and offering a coin each. “Hurry up!” yelled Violette, from off in the distance. The trio smiling to each other before heading in her direction.

They crossed the long, curved bridge to the central island, continuing onwards until they reached the Isle of Sanctity, the countless shops readily available as the money in their coin pouches felt heavier and heavier with each step. They grabbed bagels from a small bakery, tried on and bought bags full of clothes for all varieties of weathers, and explored the islands to their fullest. Alara smiled as she swung the bags in her hands, enjoying the company and the spectacle, her Marine coat hanging over the casual outfit she had changed into.

Yet, every so often, her attention would get drawn away by the onlookers observing her. Most would stay away, muttering to themselves and pointing towards her, but a few would approach, asking for autographs or a photo. She didn’t mind, but it felt strange, alien, and she didn’t yet know if it was a good or a bad feeling. Astris and Riley would make jokes every time it occurred, fawning over her in an overly dramatic fashion, but Violette would just turn pale and look away.

“Excuse me, are you Alara Vanathur?” asked a young man, a woman by his side. Both had Guild badges on their chests and notepads in their hands. “I am,” stated Alara. “Ah, wonderful! We’re with the Guild, could we take a moment of your

time for an interview?" asked the woman reporter, only for Astris to step between her and Alara. "Sorry, the Lieutenant Commander is very busy today. If you wish for an interview please enquire through the main headquarters. Thanks!" she stated, grabbing Alara's hand and pulling her away. The pair of reporters opened their mouths to speak, only to stare in disappointment as the group quickly fled. "Sorry!" Alara called back to them, as she was pulled around a corner.

"Now tell me Miss Vanathur, is it true you single handedly took on a Pirate Lord in a duel to the death?" mocked Riley, as she stood scribbling into her palm with an imaginary pen. "Ooh ooh, what about the heroic rescue you made of your Captain, pulling him to safety after a stray cannonball," mocked Astris, the pair laughing loudly as Alara swore at them. "This isn't funny!" yelled Violette out of nowhere, startling the trio as she stood red-faced with her arms crossed. "It's not fair!"

"Sorry?" asked Alara, looking at her with a confused expression. Violette grit her teeth. "I've had it, it's not funny. Your inside jokes, your comments! I've had enough. For one afternoon, can you please just not act like you're better than me?" she stated. Riley and Astris looked at Alara then each other and then back to Violette. "We're not," said Astris, prompting Violette to glare at her. "You are! You have been for weeks!" she protested, stomping her foot. "Violette, I don't get what you mean. We haven't said anything," Alara said softly. Violette scoffed, picking up her bags and turning away. "Whatever, let's just go. We're going to be late," she stated, storming off. The other three looked at each other. "Where did that come from?" Alara asked. Astris shrugged. "Jealousy?" suggested Riley. "But she is right, we're going to be late. Let's go."

Alara awoke groggily many hours later, the lights bright, her chest heavy, and the room spinning slightly as she lay in a bed in a room she didn't recognise. "Ugh," she groaned, a sharp piercing sensation rolling through her brain as she slowly blinked, glancing down to see two heads resting on her chest, one blonde, the other with black hair. She attempted to move, only for the two girls laying on her to re-adjust and press harder down upon her. "I don't want to go to school, Mother," muttered Astris as she lay face down, Riley next to her, prompting a slight smile from Alara as she lay her head back on her pillow. "Okay, no school today," she said softly, placing her hand on Astris' head as she resumed snoring.

She glanced around the hotel room, a partially open balcony looking out across the central island, the spring skies clear and the sun shining into the room. She

lay there for a while longer in silence, flashes of the night before coming to her mind: the restaurant, the drinks, the club, the streets, all of which seemed to include her holding a different bottle of some kind. She smiled widely and she covered her eyes with her forearm, a soft realisation crossing her mind as she remembered the date, her face falling and her eyes beginning to water. It was her birthday, the first one away from home, the first one without Jayce.

She bit her finger, the tears rolling silently down the edge of her face as she looked upwards at the white and gold ceiling. Her stomach gurgled and the spinning intensified, prompting Alara to kick Riley and Astris violently off her as she rolled out of their bed and rushed to the bathroom. As she emptied out the contents of her stomach into the toilet, her half-asleep companions stumbled in after her. "Morning," yawned Astris, stripping off and stepping into the shower before promptly throwing up as Riley took hold of Alara's hair. "Ugh," groaned Alara, sitting back onto the floor as Riley looked down at her. "I need to pee," she stated. "Use the sink," scowled Alara, her stomach gurgling again.

"You have the sink, I'll have the toilet," stated Riley, moving Alara out of the way with her foot. They traded, Alara horrified by what she saw in the mirror as she leant over the sink. "How much did we drink?" she asked. Riley sat up straight, adopting a stern expression and forming a pair of glasses with her fingers before pressing them to her eyes. "My memory indicates the tally was: three bottles of rum, a bottle of whiskey, two vodkas, cocktails in the tens, possibly twenties, uh, apologies Commander, my report is inconclusive," she mimicked, as she channelled Witchford.

"A lot," muttered Astris from inside the shower, only to bend over and make a horrific noise as she threw up. Alara chuckled slightly, splashing her face with water before sitting down on the floor. "Do you remember what happened?" she asked. "I remember you paid, apart from when you got us into that club," stated Astris. "Great," groaned Alara. "How did we get here?" she asked, throwing Astris a towel and a bathrobe before trading places with her. "Oh yeah, I remember! We wanted to splash out for the special occasion, so we split the room three ways. Happy birthday!" Riley stated, Astris repeating the statement shortly after.

Alara smiled within the shower. "Thank you," she said, turning the water as hot as she could. "How are you so with it? You drank at least double what we did," asked Alara, as she peeked over the top of the shower towards Riley. Astris' face went white, as Riley glanced away from her. "My bag! You threw up in my bag!"

she cried. The other two laughed. "Is there room service? If so, you're buying, Riley," asked Alara.

Riley wandered out of the bathroom. "Aye aye, Commander," she stated, prompting both Alara and Astris to grin. "No ayes Marine, I asked a question, I didn't give an order!" they recited in unison, mimicking Instructor Gibbs before laughing. Riley scowled as she sat down on the bed flicking through the room service menu. "What do we want?" she called out to them, as Alara stepped out of the shower, donning a matching robe to Astris. "Protein," stated Astris, as she explored the numerous cupboards of the room. "Bread," answered Alara, glancing around as she searched for their bags. "Where is...?" she asked, trailing off as Riley made the call into the communicator provided.

"It's on its way," Riley stated, putting down the communicator before she sniffed herself as Alara threw her a towel. "Eh, I'll be fine." Astris and Alara looked at each other before looking back at Riley with a shared look of disgust. "Animal," stated Astris. "I take offence to that. Maybe I'll throw up on something else of yours. Fine," she stated, wandering into the bathroom before shutting the door. The door rang, and Alara and Astris raced to open it, startling the young woman stood on the other side. "Miss Vankailey?" she asked, glancing at the mess of a bed beyond. "Yeah, that's us," stated Astris, staring hungrily at the large trolley laden with covered dishes.

"Right, here you go. Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked. "Do you know where our bags are?" Alara asked, helping pull the trolley inside, only to stare in bemusement as Riley reached around the corner and grabbed a few pieces of toast before disappearing back inside the bathroom. "Ah yes, we have them stored downstairs. Would you like me to bring them up for you?" Alara nodded and the attendant quickly disappeared. A yell came from the bathroom. "My toast! I dropped my toast!" cried Riley from inside the shower. "Don't eat it!" yelled out Alara and Astris in unison.

The three of them lay there on the giant bed they had rented, wearing matching robes as they munched on the food that had been brought for them. Alara frowned as she looked out towards the balcony, the other two quickly noticing her change in expression. "Something wrong?" asked Riley, poking Alara with her toes. "What do you think Violette meant yesterday? About acting like we're better than her?" she asked, setting down her toast, a quick scavenging hand snatching it away.

"We are better than her," stated Astris, prompting Riley and Alara to stare at her with judging expressions. "I mean, she's ordinary – not that that's a bad thing. Think about it, daughter of an Admiral," she said, pointing to herself. "Ex-baned, street urchin turned master sniper," she said, pointing at Riley. "And you, Marine New Era, chosen by the Red Admiral, young Lieutenant Commander, child of—" "I get the point," intercepted Alara. "But I still don't get what you mean."

"She's jealous," stated Riley plainly. "Astris is right, she feels out of the place. It's the four of us in our squad. Why do you think she isn't here?" she asked. "Because she ran off with Delex for another rendezvous," stated Astris, prompting a look of surprise from the other two. "Oh quit it, don't act like you don't know!" she protested. "But she was always the jealous type. She hated you, Alara, back when you first arrived. In all honesty, I think most of us did." "Thanks," muttered Alara. Astris threw a grape at her, the small berry bouncing off her temple. "We didn't know you. There's not much we can do about her. She was always going to fall behind, and with our promotions on the way—" "Astris!" scolded Alara.

"Riley already knows, anything you tell me you've already told her!" she retaliated. "Neither of you should know! You caught me red-handed, no one else knows," stated Alara, throwing several grapes of her own at Astris. "What's this about promotions?" asked Riley, only exasperating Alara's glare. "Sorry," muttered Astris. Alara just sighed, nodding as she gave Astris permission. "The Captain asked Alara for a report on us, well, the recruits. Our strengths, weaknesses, recommended career paths and progression. Alara recommended a few of us for officer roles," stated Astris, a knock echoing from the door.

"Naturally you recommended me for Fleet Admiral, right? Emperor?" asked Riley. Alara ignored her, opening the door, the poor attendant pushing a large trolley containing their countless things inside. "Thank you," Alara said to her. "This mail also came for you, your beacon is still at the desk ready for pick-up whenever you're ready. Thank you for staying at the Everglow hotel, check out is in two hours' time," she stated, handing over a few letters. "Thank you - Astris tip her," ordered Alara, stepping away and sitting back down on the bed. "Thank you for your generosity," said the attendant before leaving the room.

"What did you get?" asked Riley, her large brown eyes glancing over the letters scattered in front of her. Alara smiled as she glanced at the various handwritings:

Damian's, Jayce's, Admiral and Vice-Admiral Exarga's, Holli's, Sara's, and several other people from back home that she'd been writing to from time to time. One felt significantly heavier than the others: Jayce's, so she picked it up, tearing open the paper with a bit too much force. Several photographs scattered across the bed, along with a single coin. The three of them stared in shock at the item: a single platinum pearl. "Woah," they stated in unison.

Immediately, Alara took out the letter still inside the envelope. "Happy Birthday! I'm sorry I can't be there with you to celebrate it, but I hope your squad and crew can act in my place. I couldn't think of anything to send you, I'm not sure what I'm allowed to send you, so I hope this more than makes up for it – and the various expenses I've placed in your name – sorry in advance. We're just about to leave the city of Caedom. I think you'd hate it, but maybe someday I can show it to you. Anyway, sorry it's late, here's the photos. Happy birthday, love you. See you soon xx. Jayce."

Alara looked up, Astris and Riley were flipping the platinum pearl to each other whilst they looked over the numerous photos, all but one face up. "This is a good photo. Do we know who these people are?" Astris asked, looking at a photo of Jayce and his crew. "Other side," stated Alara. Astris flipped it over, revealing notes giving the various names on the back. Riley laughed as she showed off a photo of Jayce dressed in full plate armour, a pair of silver longswords in his hands, in a heroic pose. Alara rolled her eyes.

"Is this his ship?" asked Astris, her mouth agape as she showed off Jayce stood in front of the Stacked Hand. Alara stared herself, a look of shock covering her face as she took the photo in her hands. "Wow, he gave descriptions but, wow." Riley nodded in agreement as Alara passed it to her. "Ship, crew, money, magic, damn. Did we pick the right side?" she asked. Alara and Astris glared at her. "Kidding." She set it down and flipped over the last one. "Score!" she stated, Alara lunging for it immediately.

Astris snatched it first, vaulting off the bed with Riley on her heels as they ran for the bathroom, Alara hot on their tails. "Give it back! Give it back!" she yelled, as they slammed and locked the door. The pair laughed manically from the inside, Alara letting out a long sigh as she returned to the bed and tore open the other letters. Eventually, once they realised Alara was no longer biting, they returned, handing the indecent photo back over to her. Alara snatched the photo back from them, tucking it quickly into her robe before she handed over Cassandra's letter. "What's this?" Astris asked, Riley looking over her shoulder to read it.

"An invitation to lunch, get dressed. We're meeting her outside the headquarters in an hour and a half."

They got dressed, retrieved their mail beacon from the main desk, and then headed quickly across the bridge to the Navy island. They headed straight to the docks, boarding the Lone Wanderer, a few members of crew walking around, but the majority of the ship empty. They went to Alara's personal quarters, opening the door and dropping off their items. "I don't get why you get to use my room for your things," protested Alara, as Astris and Riley opened up her wardrobe, hanging up their clothes and storing their other effects in her drawers. "You have more space than we do. Besides you don't need spare clothes for your shore leave, we do," stated Astris. Alara watched as Riley pulled out a large bottle of crimson liquid, storing it under Alara's bed. "Hey hey, no contraband!" Alara stated. "I will charge you," she threatened. Riley glared at her, retrieving the bottle before waiting until Alara's back was turned and quickly placing it back.

With their things stashed, they headed back to the front of the Navy headquarters. Admiral Exarga was waiting for them, dressed in full uniform. "Admiral," Alara stated, standing at attention, her two companions mirroring her. "Happy birthday Alara," she said with a wide smile, stepping forwards and hugging her tightly. Alara froze, unsure of how to act. "Relax, today I'm just Cassandra. Is this everyone? I said up to five," she said, releasing her and looking at Riley and Astris.

Riley and Astris remained at attention. "That means you two as well. At ease, Riley, Astris," she said, the pair taking a breath before relaxing, looking at the Admiral with pure awe. "Yes Admiral," they stated, prompting Cassandra to roll her eyes. "The others are scattered across the city, we had a busy night," said Alara. Cassandra laughed. "I bet. That's fine. Now, I was originally going to take you shopping, and out for drinks, but I figured you'd have already done that. So instead, I'm taking the three of you somewhere a bit more special."

Cassandra extended an arm to Alara. "Grab on," she instructed. Alara looked at her curiously, placing a hand on her arm. Cassandra then looked at Riley and Astris. "That means you two as well." Nervously the pair placed their hands on the extended arm, sparks of red lightning flickering around them before a flash blinded them. The ground fell out from underneath them, their feet dropping down a second later onto a hard wooden floor. The light faded and their eyes quickly refocused.

“Welcome,” stated Cassandra, spreading her arms and stepping back. The three of them stared in wonderment at the high ceiling decorated with giant chandeliers, the walls covered in large paintings and artwork, and the giant varnished wooden floor. A consistent theme of platinum and pearl decorated the entire room, the room bright and sparkling, offset by the various paintings detailing key events of the Empire’s past, along with various platinum statues of key figures. In the centre of the room sat a very long table, large throne-like seats lining the sides and ends, the surface decorated with vases full of flowers and numerous glass candelabras.

“Where are we?” asked Riley, as she glanced around, her eyes quickly glancing to the neat row of butlers and maids stood quietly near the colossal wooden doors at either end of the room. “One of the benefits of being an Admiral of the Empire is that you meet a lot of people in very high places. The Emperor has graciously leant us the dining hall to celebrate the special occasion. So, welcome to the Imperial Palace.”

Cassandra pointed to the end of the table, a set of plates and cutlery laid out to seat six people. “Follow me,” she stated, leading the way before sitting at the head of the table. The other three sat around her, Alara on one side, with Riley next to Cassandra on the other, Astris to her right. Cassandra held up a hand and four of the various maids and butlers stepped forwards. “As part of this, the Emperor has bestowed each of us his personal Hand. They will serve you throughout this meal, request whatever food or drink you can imagine. This meal is anything you wish it to be – within reason.”

“Anything?” asked Riley. Cassandra nodded. Riley’s eyes went wide, and slowly she turned in her seat, looking towards the butler stood nearest to her: a tall red-haired man with a sharp beard, dressed in a black three-piece suit, a pair of white gloves covering his hands. “How may I aide you? Miss...” he asked, bowing his head low with a hand placed on his chest and his other arm behind him. “Riley,” she stated. He smiled kindly, looking up towards her. “Miss Riley,” he corrected.

Neither Astris nor Alara had ever seen Riley act bashful before, around new people she was quiet, measured as she calculated whether or not they were an enemy, but she was never shy. She blushed heavily, her eyes glancing nervously everywhere and anywhere else apart from towards the butler. Astris and Alara exchanged a curious look before eventually Riley spoke up. “Can I have some cheesy garlic bread, chicken and mushroom soup, and bread pudding for dessert?” she requested.

"At your command. A drink perhaps?" he inquired, standing up tall. She thought to herself. "Warm milk with honey?" He bowed once again, departing quickly out of the room. "Strange request," stated Cassandra, looking at Riley curiously before she ordered a steak, Astris matching her order, down to the accompanying wine. Alara ordered herself diamond fin tuna, prepared whichever way the chef recommended. "Surprise me, I trust the chef's recommendations. I'll have the same wine," she concluded to her maid, the older woman bowing her head in an identical manner to the butlers, her hands similarly gloved, before she departed.

"So," began Cassandra as she looked at the three of them, Riley still staring around the room in awe. "I suppose congratulations are in order, for your birthday and for your achievements out on the seas," she said, looking at Alara. Alara blushed. "You met two Pirate Lords and lived to tell the tale, something few can boast. Well done Alara, you've made me proud." She then glanced across the table towards Astris.

"And Miss Kai, I'm pleased to see you have taken to the corps well. Your Father is still furious at me, but seeing your progression makes it worthwhile." "Thank you, Admiral. I couldn't have done so without your support. I'll continue doing my best to repay your kindness," stated Astris. Admiral Exarga smiled at her. "Do your best for yourself, you have a long career ahead of you. I expect to see you in command uniform before the end of the year." Astris nodded vigorously.

The Emperor's Hand brought out their drinks, the food arriving not long after, the conversation recounting the group's experiences out on the seas as well as their experiences during their training. "Dig in," stated Cassandra, the food before them smelling exquisite and plated to perfection. Astris and Alara needed no further statements, picking up their platinum knives and forks as they looked down at their food, only to falter as Riley drew their attention, her shoulders shuddering and silent tears dripping down her face as she looked at the meal before her.

"Riley?" asked Alara, trying to draw her attention. "Is something wrong?" Riley glanced up at her, a child-like expression on her face, her eyes wide and her nose dripping as she sat in her chair, her body almost shrinking as she made herself as small as possible. She blinked, wiping her nose with her sleeve, her butler immediately presenting a handkerchief to her instead. She took it, blowing her nose and wiping her eyes before she chuckled. "It's perfect," she said, laughing

softly and looking down at her food. Astris placed her arm on her shoulder, pulling her in closer and squeezing her tightly. Cassandra glanced towards Alara for an explanation, but Riley spoke up.

"I... I didn't think I'd make it this far," she said, glancing across the table at the small, dirty, jackal baned girl sat in the chair next to Alara before glancing towards the Admiral. "I was baned, it's why I only have one name. Wiley Riley, the Jackal. Food was rare, the nights cold, but once a year on the Emperor's birthday, the vendors would flock to the streets, stepping out of their shops. The local bakery would sell their breads. Cheesy garlic bread was the most popular, so they would make loads. The basket it was kept in would be full of crumbs by the end of the night, eventually thrown out to the birds. You could just get a taste, nothing substantial, but something."

Astris looked down at her steak, her wine, a guilty feeling stampeding through her. Riley then looked at her soup. "The butcher specialised in chicken, they'd throw out bones all year round, that if you were quick enough you could take before the foxes or dogs got to it. We'd brew them, make it into a continuous broth that we'd keep adding to, me and the others on the streets. Sometimes we'd scavenge mushrooms from the woods – but you'd have to be careful which ones you ate, a wrong one and you'd see the Gods."

Alara met Riley's gaze and she nodded reassuringly. "And the pudding? The milk?" Cassandra asked curiously, her knife and fork set down as she looked at Riley with fascination. "Sometimes the bakery would throw out old stale desserts. Bread pudding was the most common, but the local mayor also had a fondness for it, he'd order it once a month, but his son hated it. When someone wasn't looking he'd throw it out of a window, to try to get on his Father's good side, pretend he liked the old guy's favourite dessert, so they had something in common. Then you could get it fresh," she said, her mouth watering.

"Milk and honey puts the soul to sleep, keeps the Demons away – breaks the curse," muttered Astris, answering the final question. "That old superstition," she said, still holding Riley tightly. Riley nodded. "I thought it would cure me, so did others," she shook her head, pulling herself away from Astris. "I'm sorry. If the younger me could see this, could imagine having money in my coin pouch, hot food in front of me, eating lunch in the Emperor's home. She'd call me insane."

Riley dug into her food without further thought, tears still rolling down her face as she ate the bread with her hands, switching without care between the dessert

and her starter whilst also drinking straight from the bowl. "Animal," muttered Astris as she smiled into her wine, receiving a sharp kick from Alara from across the table. Cassandra nodded, eating her steak quietly as she glanced every so often between her three guests. She caught Alara staring at her, the pair exchanging silent words as she nodded in approval. "Happy birthday," she stated with a wink, Astris and Riley raising their glasses.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Final Test

The remainder of shore leave had passed quickly, Violette apologised for her behaviour, but Alara, Astris, and Riley could all sense it was Delex who had triggered it, all the more obvious as he stood watching her do so. Otherwise, little else apart from drinking and exploring the Capital had occurred. They found themselves back on the Lone Wanderer, the large crew assembled before the Captain as they had been just before they left. Alara once again stood on his left, Commander Vao, wearing a pair of sunglasses and still clearly hungover, on his right.

"Welcome back," called out Onasi. "I hope you've enjoyed your leisure because we now have a long and uninterrupted voyage ahead of us. We are headed to the Salvation Isles for the final test that befalls all who wish to become Marines. A trial of survival, of endurance, and of willpower. It won't be easy, I assure you, but, provided you pass, afterwards you may all truly refer to yourselves as Marines. Stand strong, now get to work!" ordered Onasi, the crew rapidly spreading apart as they headed to their stations. He turned to Alara, smiling at her as he leant back against the railing. "A few weeks more and then you're officially my Lieutenant Commander. Are you ready?" he asked. She nodded. "Yes sir," she stated confidently.

Chapter 56: The Progression of Duty

Arthuria let out a sigh as she looked up at the approaching horizon; it had been a long voyage, weeks of work away, and finally the Capital was in sight once again. "That's not a reassuring sigh," stated Sister Meredea as she announced herself from behind, her footsteps silent. "Are you ready to get back to work?" she asked. Arthuria glanced up through her blindfold, a small orb hovering just above the deck of their ship, watching them, listening to them. "I guess not," answered Arthuria. "Well, you better be. There's a lot to catch up on, I'm sure," said Meredea, turning and looking at the Blue Company Captain they had hired as she approached. "Drop my Sisters and I on the external pier of the Isle of Sanctity, outside of the Palace. They know we are coming," intercepted Meredea. The mercenary nodded, turning around and barking out orders to her crew.

Arthuria glanced back at the mercenary's crew, they were all women, as Meredea had requested. She did not know how much Meredea had paid them, but given they had been personally escorting them on their missionary work for multiple weeks now, it had to have been a sizeable fortune. Meredea reached out, patting Arthuria on the shoulder. "I think we've all earnt a bath first, you can tell me your woes then," she instructed in code. Arthuria nodded, picking up her staff and heading to collect her things.

The mercenaries dropped them off as instructed and the group of Sisters wasted no time before making their way across the island to the convent. As soon as Arthuria crossed the threshold the observing orb disappeared, allowing her to finally let out a sigh of relief. Gently, Meredea nudged her forwards, and Arthuria continued onwards, holding her façade until she entered into the locker rooms of the true Sisters.

"By the Gods, do they not rest?" complained Arthuria, as she tore off her habit and threw her filthy clothes into a wash basket. A few of the other Sisters already inside chuckled, Meredea and her group of missionaries entering after Arthuria. "You made yourself noticeable, and they were mostly observing us for safety reasons," stated Meredea, taking off her habit with a bit more grace and dignity before heading to the showers, Arthuria close behind. "But I do agree it was excessive, even for them."

Arthuria stepped out of the showers, Anzu throwing her a fresh towel from across the room. "Welcome back," she stated with a soft smile, before turning to look at Meredea. "The Church is in a bit of panic at the moment. There was an incident, a misplay, so they're acting a little bit more cautiously." Meredea

noded in acknowledgement, dressing quickly into a fresh habit. "That could be to our advantage. Arthuria, I'll set up a meeting with your Elder. Finalise your report, it'll be soon," she said, departing the room.

Arthuria sat down, letting out a sigh of relief. "I don't remember Sister Meredea always being this intense," Arthuria said quietly to Anzu. She chuckled. "To you maybe. She has always been very driven, it's a powerful tool of hers," stated Anzu. Arthuria nodded, dressing before glancing back to Anzu. "Is Athena back yet?" she asked. Anzu shook her head, handing Arthuria her blindfold. "She won't be back until the summer, but she is doing well. I'm sure you'll see her soon. I can pass on a message if you wish?" Arthuria shook her head. "It's nothing urgent."

Arthuria headed to her room, a thick layer of dust covered everything. With a sigh, she opened her window, the loud sounds of the busy Capital rushing in quickly. She had missed that sound, the quietness of the Gardens had been nice, the people friendly, but the Capital felt alive. As she cleaned her room, the beating heart of the Empire pounding in her mind, she began to strategize, thinking on her current objectives, her mission, and what she needed to say to Elder d'Arc.

Meredea knocked late the following morning. "Head to your old room, now. Quickly, and discretely," she ordered. Arthuria nodded, grabbing her notebook and tucking it deep into her habit before she grabbed her staff and headed past Meredea towards the stairs. The streets of the Capital were busy as she walked through the Isle of Sanctity. The citizens were talking intently, most looking at newspapers or Guild devices displaying the news. She glanced as she walked, the headlines were all the same: 'Marine Hero'. She ignored it, carrying onwards, her mission the only thing that mattered.

She walked with purpose, quick enough to aid her journey, but not enough to stand out or look like she was rushing. No one paid her any attention. Meredea's training had become instinctual, and she felt all the more grateful to have had her personal tutoring during their travels. She headed around a corner, walking wide and narrowly avoiding collision with a man dressed in bronze armour. She glanced away from Sentinel Metz, a tired look on his face. She almost faltered, catching herself as she felt pulled to talk to him. He stopped, turning and glancing at her as she continued walking away.

Arthuria knocked on her door, her eyes widening slightly as she stared at the figure dressed in her own armour. "Come in," said Mona, stepping to the side to

glance behind Arthuria before she shut the door, locking it. Arthuria glanced around, immediately locking her gaze on the figure sat comfortably on her old bed. She was dressed in her usual black and gold armour, her helmet and gloves placed next to her.

Arthuria opened her mouth to speak, but the Elder ever-so-gently shook her head. "I'm glad you're here," stated Elder d'Arc, standing up. "My Paladin, Arthuria, has been struggling recently with nightmares. We would appreciate your counsel." Arthuria looked up, spotting the familiar orb watching them. Jeanne began to chant, raising her hand and sending a small bolt of light through the orb. It disappeared and Mona reached into a small bag on her belt and pulled out a bronze orb: an artifact. She twisted it, the orb taking to the air and glowing blue before a bubble expanded out from it, filling the entire room.

Jeanne's shoulders dropped as the antimagic field took effect, the stern and serious look fading, a tired and resigned one taking its place. Mona took off Arthuria's helmet. "Ten minutes," she stated, picking up the orb as it fell to the floor and then leaning back against Arthuria's wardrobe. "Elder," Arthuria said quietly, before she knelt before Jeanne. "Stand, Arthuria. There's not enough time. What do you have for me?" she asked, extending a hand.

Arthuria took it, standing up and looking down at Jeanne. She reached into her habit, pulling out her notebook and handing it to her. "I've done as you asked. I've begun my investigation into the other factions, starting with the Daughters of Shade. I managed to enter into their crypts, deep within this island. They have a network of elevators connected to the various statues across the island that they use for quick access to the surface."

Jeanne flicked through the notebook, reading whilst Arthuria detailed her experience underground. "They are creating a ritual circle within their library using blood. I'm not certain on its purpose, but it clearly important. They have a large area full of slaves: humans, goblins, ocean crawlers and others, in an area called the pantry. They seem to be harvesting materials from them, organs and other parts."

"Humans, and monsters?" Jeanne asked. Arthuria nodded. "Carry on." "Six minutes," stated Mona. Arthuria glanced towards her before looking back at Jeanne. "They have their Serving Girls harvesting fluids and parts from corpses, I don't know what they do with it, but there were too many to count. The corpses are thrown in pit, leading further down. They also have a livestock

farm, they're receiving shipments from the World Guild. The place felt... evil, corrupt."

Jeanne let out a sigh, closing the notebook and placing it inside her armour. "Thank you for doing this for me. This is... disturbing, but I need more information. I'm sorry, it's still too early for you to return, but you have done well. This is a start, a powerful weapon for our faction. Your notes mentioned a contact: Morgana. Press her, use her to get more information on how they get their powers, how they operate, how they create more of themselves. The Witches are egoists. If she's not open, try to get her to boast. Further her goals, help her rise and see what comes of it."

"Two minutes," stated Mona. Jeanne nodded, stepping forwards and taking Arthuria's hands, looking up at her. Her green eyes looked sad, tired. "You've missed a lot. Things are..." She let out a sigh. "Complicated. We've been put in a position where we are now having to take a more active role in this Empire. Metz misses you, as does Proctor Gujin. I've kept Sister Mona mostly away, but assassins are still hunting. I'm not sure if that will change any time soon, so she will be returning to the convent for a while, Arthuria will disappear, sent on a long voyage east to hunt an artifact. I wish I could do more to aid you, but my hands are tied. Remain strong Arthuria, I believe in you."

"Twenty seconds," stated Mona, putting on Arthuria's helmet. Jeanne let go of her and stepped back, reaching for her gloves and helmet. "Elder, is everything alright?" asked Arthuria, looked at Jeanne with concern. Jeanne glanced back, putting on her helmet. "No, no it's not. But I will survive. Good luck, Sentinel Pendragon." The orb powered down, the bubble collapsing as Arthuria stood stunned, her promotion everything she could have ever wanted. The spying orb quickly reappeared in the corner of the room. "Thank you for your time, Sister," stated Mona, bowing her head. "You may go," ordered Elder d'Arc, nodding her head to Arthuria. Without further word, Arthuria left her room, looking directly ahead as she walked away, her heart racing, her orders clear.

Arthuria waited a few days, her time occupied with simple chores and jobs, she helped in the palace gardens, educated children, cleaned, but eventually she knew she had to act. She posted the letter she had been holding onto, her message sent out. The Witches and the Warlocks were both groups not known to the general public, as such members of either faction were not given public identities - their entire lives dedicated to their orders. Arthuria found this a useful tool, in the spirit of friendship she had created an account under Morgana's name, linked

to the Church as a general point of delivery. With no one writing letters to her, other than Arthuria, it allowed for direct and easy communication. Morgana would check for any post under the name, whenever she was in the Holy Palace, and then would write a response, to be sent to the Sister's convent.

Arthuria would suggest a meetup, Morgana would specify a date and time, and Arthuria would confirm it. It was easy, precise, and discrete. However, Morgana's time was often limited, and it had been multiple weeks since their last meetup, so as Arthuria sat waiting she couldn't help but feel worried. A knock came at her door, Arthuria glancing at it as Anzu stepped inside, handing over a letter. "Thank you," Arthuria said, taking it and opening it.

Morgana was waiting for her, which she was surprised by. She was by no means late and it looked like Morgana had been waiting a while. "Morgana?" she said, the young girl turning quickly, a smile on her face as she looked towards Arthuria. "Sister, it's good to see you. How was your trip?" she asked, quickly readjusting her expression and taking on a more serious demeanour. "It was good, thank you. Have you been waiting long?" replied Arthuria. Morgana nodded slightly. "A little bit, it's okay though. Anyway, where did you want to go?"

Arthuria indicated with her hand, leading the way with Morgana walking beside her. Arthuria led her to one of the island's many gardens, the conversation quiet and casual, but eventually Arthuria sensed Morgana falter. "Is something wrong?" Arthuria asked, stopping and looking at her before pointing to a nearby bench. Morgana opened and closed her mouth before she nodded. "I think this is the last time I can see you," she stated, looking down at her feet, a sad expression on her face.

Arthuria's stomach dropped. "Why's that?" she asked a little too quickly. "Uh, I-I've fallen behind on my work. I'm not where I should be, and I can't risk my position. I'm sorry," she said, rubbing her wrist as she avoided Arthuria's face. Arthuria's mind raced as she desperately searched for a solution that wouldn't stand out. She glanced around with her eyes, searching for an observing orb – ever since her meeting with the Elder the orbs had avoided her, her cover re-established, but she still felt exposed.

"I understand," Arthuria stated, Jeanne's advice echoing in her mind. "I can imagine your work is hard, competitive, but I'm sure there are some things you're bound to be much stronger at that make up for your weaknesses. What are your strengths?" she pried. Morgana looked up at her, meeting her gaze,

Arthuria's eyes covered by her blindfold. "Well, I guess my translations skills are pretty good," she said with a nervous chuckle, biting directly onto Arthuria's bait. "And no other Serving Girls are nearly as good at creating ritual circles as I am, my wand work is pretty good as well. I can work hard. I'm pretty damn smart. It's just I struggle with making potions... and that's kind of the most important part, you know?" Morgana blabbed.

A plan formed immediately in Arthuria's mind. "The Daughters of Shade often place members of your group in amongst the Sisters. At the convent, we do have potion brewing equipment. If potions are what you're struggling with, provided you brought the necessary books, and the ingredients, I could help you practice?" she suggested. Morgana's face lit up. "You would?" she asked. Arthuria nodded, an uncomfortable feeling in her chest as she manipulated Morgana's feelings. "Why wouldn't I help a friend?"

Morgana's ears turned bright red. "Friend," she muttered quietly, before nodding energetically. "We are friends!" she stated with a bright smile, standing to her feet, before she quickly looked embarrassed. "I-I-I've got to go. I'll send a letter, figure out a time and date, friend," she said, backing up before turning on her heels and running away. She paused at the gates to the garden, turning around and waving before disappearing. Arthuria held her head in her hands, rubbing her face before leaning back on the bench and letting out a long exhale. She sat there quietly for a while, thinking, as guilt ran rampant through her body. "For the mission," she eventually muttered, picking up her staff and taking the long route back to the convent.

Morgana wasted no time sending a letter, and a few days later she found herself stood nervously outside of the Sisters' convent. She held her bag loosely in her fingers, the numerous items inside heavy. She knocked on the door awkwardly, an uncomfortable feeling rolling through her as she adjusted the Sisters' habit Arthuria had lent her. Slowly the door opened and Arthuria glanced down at Morgana with a confused expression. "I thought I said to just come in?" stated Arthuria. Morgana nodded, stepping quickly inside. "You did... the door is really heavy," she answered quietly. Arthuria looked at the door as it slowly closed. "I guess it is. Anyway, follow me."

Morgana stared at the building around her as Arthuria led her through the halls. She paused, placing her hand onto one of the many walls decorated with coloured handprints. "This way," stated Arthuria. "I'd advise not exploring, there's a few enchantments scattered throughout the place." Morgana quickly

pulled her hand back, picking up her pace and following much more closely behind Arthuria.

Arthuria led her to a small offshoot room, shutting and locking the door behind them as Morgana stepped inside. "I think this is everything we need," stated Arthuria, pointing to a large workbench laden with equipment and a cauldron suspended over a fire rune. "Uh, wow. Yeah, this is... perfect," said Morgana, setting down her things and rummaging through the glassware before testing the runes.

"Did you bring the books?" asked Arthuria. Morgana nodded, quickly opening up her bag and pulling out the various heavy tomes within. "Everything you suggested, including the books on Demon's Tongue and Arcanum," she said quickly. Arthuria handed Morgana the potion book, briefly flicking through the other two before setting them down. "Right, where shall we begin?" she asked. "A lot of the potions require a bit of preparation, most use an identical base so I think let's work on that, then we can go over the languages whilst that's brewing."

Arthuria nodded, reading through the instructions and acting as an aide whilst Morgana created the potion base, a simple task that gave her the time to isolate the parts of the other books that she was interested in. "You look confused, Arthuria," stated Morgana at last, as Arthuria concentrated on the moving words in the book on Demon's Tongue. "Do you understand this sigil?" asked Arthuria. Morgana set her ladle to the side, stepping away from the cauldron and taking a look at the book.

"Ah, that's actually a glyph not a sigil. It's depicting a spell rather than an instruction. Have you had much training in Demon's Tongue?" asked Morgana. Arthuria nodded slightly. "A little, not much really. The Sisters call it God's Tongue, rather than Demon's Tongue, but I guess it's the same thing," Arthuria admitted, all the more glad to have had Meredea teaching her personally during their time away from the Capital. "Interesting, but fair enough. The base needs to sit a while, so let's practice a little."

Arthuria sat quietly as Morgana educated her on Demon's Tongue, holding back the information she did know, allowing Morgana to teach her fully. Morgana only slowed down as Arthuria pointed out the base had taken on a creamy white formation. "Oh, I think that means it's ready. To be continued, I guess," stated Morgana almost disappointedly. "Which potion are we making?" asked Arthuria.

"A potion of greater healing. It's the most important one we're taught, or at least, it's the one we make the most. We sell them to the Guild, who then sells them on for a higher fee - it's how we make most of our money. We can't really ask for public donations like you guys," Morgana stated. Arthuria nodded, taking a look at the instructions before grabbing the necessary ingredients. "Okay, let's do this."

They worked through the steps, following it word for word until Arthuria grabbed Morgana's wrist. "We missed a step," she stated, pointing at a line on the page, the entire document written in Arcanum. "This is an incantation, not an instruction. It needs a magical infusion alongside the ingredient," Arthuria stated. Morgana took the book, reading across the page before rereading it. "Good catch, I hadn't noticed that. I guess that explains why mine kept going wrong."

Morgana pulled out her wand, chanting as she ran the tip around the edge of the cauldron, a soft glow forming on the brim before travelling into the now clear liquid. The potion turned a deep crimson, bubbling before settling as Morgana dropped in the last ingredients. Morgana filled up a small vial with the liquid, holding it in her hand. "How do we know it worked?" asked Arthuria. Morgana handed her the vial. "Only one way to try it," she stated nervously, before she quickly grabbed a blade from the workbench and sliced across her wrist without a flinch. "Why? Why? Why?" protested Arthuria, wincing as Morgana calmly took the vial and poured it over her wrist.

"Better me than you," she stated, watching as the blood evaporated and the skin sewed itself together. "There were so many other options: a needle prick, a graze, someone who was already injured!" scolded Arthuria, taking her wrist and looking over it. "Now that you mention it..." muttered Morgana. "Anyway, it worked. Good thing too, failed ones make potions of poison." Arthuria's mouth fell open. "It's fine, it worked!"

"Don't do that again!" scolded Arthuria. Morgana smiled, nodding slightly as she took back her wrist. "Try some, the greater potions work against disease." Arthuria glared at her, as best as she could with her eyes covered before she picked up the ladle and tasted the potion. It was sweet and fizzy, but it also had a cinnamon-like aftertaste. "That's not what I was expecting," stated Arthuria, handing over the ladle. Morgana tasted it, nodding in agreement. "It's nice, I was always expecting something more sour," she agreed.

"Well what do we do with it now?" asked Arthuria, tidying away their used equipment after filling up several flasks with the potion. "We could sell it, the Guild pay well for them," proposed Morgana. "Otherwise, I think you should have them. I don't make mistakes twice and now I know how to make it, thanks to you. I'm sure you'll find a use for them." Arthuria smiled, looking at the various potions. "Are you sure?" she asked. Morgana hesitated, but then nodded. "Yeah, you always pay for things for me, take this as a return on those payments." Arthuria chuckled before she nodded, tying the flasks to her belt. "Your generosity is most appreciated."

"I think I best get going, it's been a few hours. Keep those books until next week, I doubt anyone will notice they're gone. Thank you, Arthuria," she stated. "It was fun, I learnt a lot and I'm always happy to help," said Arthuria, leading Morgana through the hallways of the convent. "Same time next week?" asked Morgana. Arthuria nodded. "I'll be waiting, stay safe," she said, opening the door for her. "And you, Sister."

Morgana departed quickly, stopping at the gate to smile and wave before she disappeared out of sight, still disguised as a Sister. As soon as she was gone, Arthuria let out a sigh of relief, shutting the door and jumping out of her skin as Meredea stood leaning against the wall behind her. "Don't do that!" scolded Arthuria, quickly tracing Meredea's gaze to the potions on her belt. "I take it went well," she stated, extending out her hands. Arthuria sighed, handing over the potions. "You could say that." Meredea chuckled, patting Arthuria on her shoulder. "Good. Well, since you now know how to make healing potions, and it is flu season, time to put you to work," stated Meredea. Arthuria let out a long sigh. "Please no."

Seize the Seas Tales: Grandmother's Boons

Of the many mysteries and strange occurrences Jayce and Bjorn had witnessed across the world, the pair of them had never been unable to come up with some explanation for the occurrence. Yet, as they stood there on the aft deck, next to the ship's wheel, as the crew continued sailing through the canyons of the Rockies, they had no answer as to why Caelie was stood on the main deck holding an ice cream.

"Where did it come from?" Jayce asked. "Do we have any in the freezer?" Bjorn shook his head. "We ran out almost as soon as we left Caedom," Bjorn stated. "We also never bought any cones." Jayce nodded, crossing his arms and continuing to watch her as she aimlessly wandered around the mast. "It kind-of

looks like one of those desserts you could get at Erago's," he said. Bjorn shook his head, casually adjusting the wheel. "No, that cart in the Guild district: Vorom's."

"What are you talking about?" asked Wicke, as she walked up the stairs to join them. Jayce pointed at Caelie and her ice cream. Wicke raised an eyebrow, glancing over and faltering as she too noticed the oddity. "Did we buy some more ice cream?" she asked, standing on Bjorn's other side and leaning onto the railing. "No," they said in unison. Wicke glanced at them and then back at Caelie. "Maybe she hid some, somewhere in the back of the freezer. I saw Falconer snacking on some almond cookie dough he had stashed in there the other day. It's all gone now, but... could be an explanation," she offered.

Bjorn and Jayce shook their heads. "Doesn't explain the cone," Jayce stated. The door opened underneath them, and Zeta wandered out onto the deck. She turned around, glancing up at the three of them. "What's going on?" she asked. In unison they pointed towards Caelie. "Where did she get the new clothes?" Zeta asked, oblivious to the ice cream. Bjorn, Jayce, and Wicke all faltered, noticing Caelie's new boots, her new skirt, her new belt.

Marisha emerged from below the deck sometime later, a quick look of confusion spreading across her face as she looked up at the collection of crew members stood on the aft deck, observing Caelie as she lay on the grass kicking her feet in the air. She looked down at Caelie and then back up at the group. They pointed to her. "What?" muttered Marisha, wandering over to Caelie and squatting down next to her.

Caelie smiled widely as she looked up at Marisha. "Heya darling, what's going on?" asked Marisha. Caelie shrugged, rolling backwards to land onto her feet. A quick sparkle drew Marisha's immediate attention as she noticed a new set of sapphire earrings hanging from Caelie's ears, as well as a blue metal clip on the top of her right ear. "Those are new, you didn't have those yesterday," Marisha noted. Caelie nodded, looking up at her. "Did Yuthura do it for you?" Caelie shook her head. "Who did it for you?" Caelie pointed towards Jayce. "Jayce?" Caelie shook her head. "I don't understand. Show me."

The group watched as Caelie and Marisha disappeared below deck. "I guess she's showing Marisha her stash," stated Zeta. The others nodded, letting out a disappointed sigh before dispersing, as Marisha returned carrying a small cool box a little later. "What did you find," Jayce called down as Marisha opened it, revealing an assortment of cold treats inside. "Caelie's been on a shopping spree.

Did you buy her jewellery?" she called up. Jayce shook his head, the pair turning back and looking at her as she fiercely defended her stash.

Caelie sat in her room a few days later, her belly rumbling as she looked at her empty cool box, the various thieves having picked her room clean of the various treats she had reserved. She sighed, looking at her clock: nearly six in the morning. Slowly she slid out of her bed, already dressed, creeping to her door and peeking outside. Jayce raised an eyebrow as he spotted her from down the hall, as he headed towards the training room. He raised a hand in greeting, but she quickly disappeared back inside her room, shutting the door.

Caelie reached underneath her bed, grabbing hold of the small red, black, and gold hand axe embedded in her wall, pulling it out and placing it on the floor of her room as the clock struck six. There was a bright red flash and a tall woman stood in its place. Cassandra Exarga looked down at her with a bright smile, her uniform replaced by casual clothes. "Morning Caelie, you hungry?" she asked. Caelie nodded vigorously, taking Cassandra's hand before they disappeared in a quick flash of light. There was a knock at door moments later, Jayce peeking inside. "Caelie?"

Chapter 57: A Mask of Many Faces

Jayce woke up late for once, only realising as he heard commotion outside of his room. He glanced at the clock sat on his desk, Vexx's mask leaning against it. "Shit!" he muttered, rolling out of bed. "The one day Caelie sleeps in her own bed!" he grumbled, as he grabbed a set of clothes off the floor. He dressed quickly before he stumbled through his door, directly into the back of Bjorn as he and Falconer stood by the ship's wheel. "Good morning! So much for leaving before ten," Bjorn said with a grin. Jayce waved it off as he headed quickly to the stairs, his various crew members rushing around in a panic as they made their own final preparations.

Jayce headed to the edge of the ship, glancing over the side to the pier below. "Jayce," called out Bjorn. He turned, looking at his Quartermaster. "I've dealt with the cargo, don't worry. Supplies are aboard and sorted, trade goods as well. I've handled it," he said. Jayce let out a sigh of relief, turning back and hanging his head in shame. "Sorry, that was my job," he called back, looking up and spotting Marisha, Xander and Caelie waltzing their way towards the ship with several large bags of ingredients.

Relieved his main job had been handled for him, Jayce turned back, heading back to the aft deck. He narrowly avoided Wicke as she barrelled past him, searching for her grimoire, before glancing towards Bjorn as he presented a map in Jayce's direction. "Silvalan?" Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded, tracing out the marked route Falconer had noted. "Then we'll head to the southern breach and take the route through Nowhere back to my home," Jayce clarified.

"How long do you think it'll take?" Bjorn asked Falconer. Their Navigator crossed his arms, his wooden one now covered in a thick layer of moss, with small white flowers muddled within. "A month to reach Nowhere, then through that region... it's hard to tell. I do not have much information, most ships typically avoid it," stated Falconer. Jayce nodded, thinking intently to himself as he calculated his calendar. "Problem?" asked Bjorn, glancing towards him. "No, no. That works quite well with my anniversary."

Falconer and Bjorn looked at each other before back at Jayce. "Anniversary?" they asked. "Six years dating Alara. It's not till Fragaria, but it would nice to be in the Capital for then. If possible, of course," Jayce stated. Bjorn shook his head, with a smile. "Lucky for some, we'll approach it when we get nearer the time." Jayce nodded, turning to his crew assembled on the deck before him. They looked

up at him. "If we're all ready, let's get moving!" he called out, smiles spreading around. "Aye Captain!" they called.

They sailed quickly out of the docks, heading towards the southernmost exit, the waters funnelling away to join into the fast moving rapids of the Rockies. "All crew brace!" Bjorn called out from behind the wheel, the ship falling as it dropped over the edge. Jayce grinned as the sails raised and the canyon walls began to fly past them, a feeling of exhilaration rushing through him as the wind flew past his ears.

Bjorn took a hand off the ship's wheel; now long versed in sailing the rapids, he needed to only adjust the wheel when there were turns. He glanced towards Jayce. "I have her, I'll call you when I want to swap," he stated. Jayce nodded, patting him on the shoulder before waving over Caelie. She bounded up the stairs, looking up at him curiously. "Follow me," he stated, heading into his room.

She trailed after him, faltering as he turned to her holding a small red mask in his hands. "I've been thinking about it for a while - I know we said we'd make one together, but... this belonged to Vexx. As much as I look at it as a reminder of him, I will use it to punish myself. I feel you can turn it into something better. It's yours now," he stated, holding it out to her. She slowly approached the object, reaching out before hesitating. She met his gaze, looking between him and the mask. "It's okay," he reassured. Gingerly she took it, placing it to her face and looking at him.

She then glanced at the spirits hovering around them, extending out her hands and pushing them back. They cowered, floating away from her. Slowly she lowered arms, pressing the mask and detaching it from her face, before she smiled at Jayce, nodding in acceptance. "Take it to Xander and Tempest, they have some paints you can use to decorate it. Tempest may also be able to enchant it," he advised, stepping back and sitting down on his bed. She looked the mask over, thinking to herself before she nodded, stepping forwards and grabbing Jayce's arm before pulling him towards the door.

After helping Caelie decorate the mask, the pair deciding on a deep blue colour with black and white markings to match the ship, they sat together in the workshop. Caelie dozed as she leant on Jayce's shoulder whilst he watched Tempest create an attachment to connect the mask to her fur and feather cloak as well as shaping the mask's nose to match the image of an owl. He then inscribed

some runes on the inside, adding extra protection and utility before finally, it was ready.

Although Jayce was grateful he had given it to her, a few of the other members of the crew weren't quite so happy about the decision. All the more so once Caelie realised if she hid in various points of the ship she could spook the more frightful members of the crew. Even Jayce couldn't ignore the slightly perturbing sight of a masked teenager staring at him through his window, but as the days rolled away so did the novelty of the item.

It took them a little over two weeks to reach Silvalan. Multiple rest stops had made the voyage more interesting, but a general sense of fatigue had begun to plague the crew: the rocky faces of the canyons repetitive and boring compared to their time in the city. Yet, as they stared at their destination, drifting across the waters towards the awaiting pier, the fatigue faded away instantly. To all but Jayce, they had never seen a sight quite like it before.

A giant tree rose high into the sky, its foliage breaking beyond the clouds, several smaller trees scattered around its base. Colossal vines hung from the branches, dripping water into large pools that lay beneath. In its shadow, illuminated by the showers of glowing spores that fell from the tree, was a garden: a large expanse of neatly organised flowers separated into numerous areas of colour and season. Pebble paths split the areas apart, with numerous people wandering around, observing, caring for the plant life.

They pulled into the main dock, the crew assembling together on the main deck. "Right, well, we made it. We'll explore, see what there is, and move on. Stay together, meet back here in a few hours," he stated. The crew nodded, picking their groupings before wandering off. Jayce turned to Falconer, his gaze unbroken from the tree since their arrival. "Everything okay?" Jayce asked. Falconer nodded, glancing towards him. "It's quite a sight," he said, looking down at his wooden arm. "I can feel a leyline within it. It's at peace... I believe. It's calling for me."

"That's good, I think," Jayce answered. Falconer nodded, glancing around the gardens before returning his gaze to the treetop. "It is. I will make my way to the top with Wren. I'll return when you call for me. If that's okay, Captain?" he asked. Jayce nodded. "Of course, do what you need to." Falconer nodded, walking away towards Wren's nest. He climbed onto her back and took to the air, flying quickly towards the tree.

"Where's he going?" asked Wicke as she and Caelie approached. Jayce pointed towards the tree. Wicke rolled her eyes. "You don't say. Why?" she probed. "He said it was calling him, usual Druid stuff I guess. Are you waiting for me?" he asked. They nodded. "Marisha's buying seeds with Bjorn, Zeta's gone somewhere with Xander. I want to see the gardens," Wicke stated. Caelie prodded her. "We want to see the gardens. You coming?" Wicke restated. Jayce nodded. "Lead on."

They departed the Stacked Hand, climbing down onto the surprisingly busy docks. Numerous ships were entering and leaving, their crews carrying large pots of saplings or bags of seeds. Jayce looked at the plants curiously, they looked like miniature versions of the giant trees. "I think they're for building ships," Wicke stated. "I can't imagine they get as big as that one, but after a few years, they may get close." Jayce nodded, turning his attention away from the docks towards the main warehouse that most of the sailors were entering and exiting from.

A tall figure was managing the traffic. She stood around Jayce's height, and looked mostly human. She wore a long dress made of orange leaves. If it weren't for the pointed ears, and the wooden antlers, the back of her head was indistinguishable from a human. She had long, curly, vibrant green hair, and her skin was a pale cream colour, that, as the trio approached, Jayce quickly realised was wood. Wicke faltered, reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling out her bestiary. "A dryad," she answered, drawing the attention of the figure.

She turned, looking at the trio curiously. "Hmm, hello. May I help you with something?" she asked, her eyes a bright, glowing green. Jayce stared at her intently, prompting her face to flash a deep green. "Ahem," she attempted, clearing her throat and looking away. "Sorry, no, uh, hi," he said quickly, realising his mistake. "We're new here, and were hoping to look around the gardens, if that's possible?" interrupted Wicke, nudging Caelie as she stared up at the dryad.

"Of course, we welcome all. Please treat the gardens with kindness, and there will be little issue with your visit. Some areas are to be touched, others are not, follow the signs. Bathing is acceptable in the many pools, but as we have been informed, be wary of other's perceptions. My sisters are happy to offer guidance if you wish for a more... detailed visit. Are any of you horticulturists or Druids?" she inquired. They shook their heads. "Ah, pity. Still, I'm sure you will enjoy the sights regardless." She pointed vaguely towards a path leading onwards, a small

map sat nearby to detail the numerous areas. Jayce nodded a thanks to her before she turned away to continue guiding the sailors.

After giving the map a quick glance, the trio made their way along the recommended route. There were dryads everywhere, planting seeds, watering flowers and plucking up weeds. They ranged in all variety of tones, some with much darker skin than others, but they were all quite tall and all had green hair. An aroma filled the air, floating from one scent to another as the group wandered around.

Caelie pointed eagerly at a beehive embedded within a small tree, dragging Jayce and Wicke away off the main route towards a more secluded section of the gardens. A dryad offered a small piece of honeycomb to the trio after showing Caelie how they safely collected the honey. They continued onwards with a small snack in hands, washing their sticky fingers in a small stream before Caelie found another distraction and led them away.

Eventually, after multiple hours had passed, and the trio had found a suitable place to sit in, Jayce glanced upwards. They were directly under the colossal tree, and he spotted what looked like a village, built into the canopy high above. "So, Falconer's up there, right?" asked Wicke, as she lay down on the grass. Jayce nodded. "Most likely. If this is where the Frontier began, I wonder if all the other trees are just like this one?" Jayce asked. Wicke nodded, pointing upwards as a small shape flew through the air, diving down quickly towards them.

Wren flew past them, Falconer dropping from her back and rolling to his feet. He wore new armour, and it took Jayce a moment to recognise him. "Falconer..." he said softly, getting to his feet and staring at him. Falconer's skullcap helmet had remained, its colours faded and now a muddled brown and grey – his lenses were still red. He still wore his long serrated cloak, the strands forming long feathers, it was also muted, a deep brown and grey, matching the feathers of Wren.

Underneath, however, his armour had been completely changed. The leather scales were gone, his chest covered in simple dark wrappings. Through the gaps in the cloth, Jayce spotted glowing green veins. The wood on Falconer's arm had twisted, the rough bark smoothing into a tighter and leaner form, but it had spread, now carrying onwards to his shoulder, with green markings carrying onwards through his neck. His bow remained the same, its red, green and gold bright against the much more muted outfit he wore, as he hung it across his body.

"What happened?" Jayce asked, as Falconer looked over his arm and body. "I received the leyline's blessing. It is nothing to be afraid of," he said calmly, and with little emotion. Wicke and Jayce looked at each other, but Falconer ignored them, crouching down and placing his wooden palm onto the floor. Flowers sprouted around his hand. "That's new," Jayce muttered. "Falconer, what happened up there? Your arm... it's spread, changed."

Falconer nodded, glancing up towards the tree. "As much as I'd like to explain, I am not overly certain I have an answer, Captain. The world, it called to me. It's wounded," he said. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, I'm not making much sense, am I?" he stated. "I'm going to return to the ship, I'll explain more thoroughly once I've processed my thoughts." Jayce nodded and Falconer whistled, summoning Wren before climbing onto her back and flying away.

"That's concerning," stated Wicke, Caelie nodding in agreement as they watched him fly away. "You looked into Druids right?" Jayce asked. Wicke nodded. "A while back. I don't have my notes on me. Shall we head back to the ship?" Caelie shook her head, pointing onwards to a small area full of large and colourful plants before quickly wandering off. "I guess not," Jayce stated, following after her with Wicke trailing behind.

As soon as they entered the secluded garden, the air felt thick, soup-like and sickly sweet. The plants were bright, luminescent colours of pinks and purples and reds that seemed to change colours depending on how close you got. Caelie got closer and closer to the largest of the plants, their petals the size of her hand, pushing her nose forwards to try and take a sniff. A hand grabbed her from behind, pulling her swiftly backwards.

"I would advise not to do that," stated a dryad, her skin a bright ochre. Caelie looked at her curiously, swiftly realising why, as the dryad pointed at all of the warning signs. "This is a garden of poison, the air is fine to breath from a distance, but I wouldn't touch anything without gloves or get too close," she advised, tapping Caelie gently on her nose with her finger, plucking a small bud out of seemingly thin air. The bud turned into a small black flower that quickly changed to white and then blue.

"I'm sorry on her behalf, we'll be more careful," Jayce stated, as he and Wicke finally caught up to her. "No harm caused, my advice to you is the same to her. These plants are deadly, even to me and my sisters," stated the dryad. Wicke tilted her head, looking onwards with curiosity. "What about her?" she asked, pointing beyond at a dark figure running her hands across the plants.

Jayce followed Wicke's finger, his eyes widening as he looked at the plainly dressed shadow, her hair short and styled into a bob. Wisps of black smoke trailed off her body, and, as she looked up at the group, her eyes glowed a bright orange. "She has become accustomed to the poisons of the plants through years of exposure. I would pay no heed to her, the Willow will cause you no trouble if you leave her to her work," stated the dryad. Jayce and Wicke froze. "Is something wrong?"

The Willow turned her entire body towards the group, plucking a single petal from a black flower before crushing it in her palm and placing it in a small vial. She stared at the three of them, taking a slow step forwards. Jayce and Wicke backed away. Caelie stared at the strange creature, uncertain as she looked at her face. It changed, morphing until she stared at her own visage, the body shrinking and changing in colour until she stared at a copy of herself. Wicke grabbed her arm, pulling her backwards.

The Willow kept walking forwards, placing one step slowly after the other as she looked them over. As Jayce, Caelie and Wicke backed away the dryad frowned, confused as to what she was seeing until she turned to face the Willow, spreading her arms. "You're not to harm visitors, bounty hunter, that was your pact," she stated. Shadows formed around Caelie's copy, the figure growing and morphing back into her original form. "Hmm, so it was. And I shall abide by it. Run little pirates. I know your faces and I shall see you very soon, I'm sure," she said with a wide and dark smile.

Jayce needed no further warning, he backed away quickly, turning on his heels as he pulled Caelie after him, Wicke running quickly behind him. "All crew, get back to the ship immediately. We're leaving," he said into his communicator, racing through the gardens of Silvalan. Jayce stared at every figure they passed, questioning if it was her, every time he received an odd glance. They arrived quickly at the Stacked Hand, the rest of the crew confused and waiting as Jayce, Caelie and Wicke clambered on board.

"What's happened? What's going on?" asked Zeta. "What did you do?" "The Willow, she's here," Jayce panted. Bjorn moved immediately towards the ship's wheel. "Get us moving!" he called out, the others springing into action without need for another word. Jayce headed towards the aft deck, the ship beginning to move away from the docks. "You saw her?" Bjorn asked. "Yep, she's a shadow. She can shapeshift - turned into Caelie before our eyes," Jayce stated. "Well, great, that's wonderful to know - the three best bounty

hunters in the world are an ogre, a goblin, and a shapeshifter, and we've seen all of them in less than a year. Did she follow you?"

Jayce shrugged, glancing back towards Silvalan. "All I know is that she was interested in us, and that's really worrying," Jayce stated. Bjorn nodded, angling the ship towards their exit. "We managed to get our supplies, it's smooth sailing until we reach the southern breach. Let's keep our eyes out, maybe work on some codes, but for now there's little more to be done," Bjorn advised. Jayce nodded, stepping away into his room.

Paranoia constantly clouded his mind over the following days, but eventually Jayce began to settle, the figure of the Willow disappearing from his mind. He found himself exploring the ship, looking for something to distract him from the repeating days of travel through the Rockies. He headed to the training room, getting in a quick workout using the weights they had bought in Caedom before practicing with Sola and Luna against the training dummies.

With his workout over, he headed back towards the top deck, passing by Wicke's room. A soft fragrance wafted through him, it smelled sweet, pleasant, but was hardly noticeable. He continued onwards, bumping directly into her as she made her way down the stairs, glancing behind her as she walked. "Careful," Jayce stated as she bounced off him, getting a small prick from one of her coats pins. "Sorry, my bad," she stated with a smile, stepping around him.

Jayce faltered. "Did you get some new perfume or something? Your room smells," he stated after her. She twisted on her heels, shaking her head. "Does it? I bought some candles, but I didn't think they smelt of anything. I think I've gone nose-blind from being around you guys," she stated, sticking her tongue out before stepping into her room. Jayce shook his head, continuing onwards back up to the top deck.

"Ah, Jayce, there you are," stated Marisha, as he stepped out into the afternoon sun. "Hey, what do you need?" he asked. She stepped close to him, reaching out and placing a hand onto his chest. "Nothing, I was just curious. I've got some free time, if you want to do anything," she stated, looking up at him with an unfamiliar expression on her face. "Marisha, are you okay?" he asked. He paused. "Did you manage to get a reply from your mother?" he quickly followed up with. She stepped back, looking embarrassed. "Sorry, don't know what came over me. No, of course not. Did you hear from Vexx?" she asked, confirming their code phrases. "Okay... right," he said, stepping past her. She tapped the side of her head, walking quickly away, muttering to herself.

Jayce headed to his room, a similar sweet smell in his room, only more nutty than vanilla. Jayce glanced behind him, locking his door and tinting his windows as he headed into his bathroom. He ran a hot bath, sitting down in it and accidentally falling asleep, only waking as dinner was called. He dressed quickly, Sola and Luna sleeping soundly on his bed. "Come on you two, dinner," he stated, extending his arm. Slowly and sluggishly they roused, binding to his wrists before falling back asleep.

He made his way quickly to the living quarters, the others all sat around the table waiting for him. "You okay?" Marisha asked as he sat down next to Wicke, taking his bowl and serving him a thick broth. He looked at her. "Yeah, just a little tired, that's all. What did you want earlier?" he asked, reaching over for some bread and butter. Marisha frowned. "I haven't seen you since this morning." Jayce's stomach sank. "Are you sure?" he asked.

The door opened, the numerous heads in the room glancing towards the door. "Sorry, I was taking a nap," stated Wicke as she walked in through the door, a little out of breath. Silence quickly fell across the room, the numerous faces looking between the Wicke sat next to Jayce and the Wicke by the door. "Oh shit," they both said, the crew leaping to their feet and drawing their weapons, apart from Marisha who grabbed a spoon. The Wicke next to Jayce pointed at the figure by the door.

"An impostor!" she said quickly. The Wicke by the door looked affronted. "No, you're the impostor. Look at her, she's obviously the fake!" The crew looked between the two, they were identical in every way. The Wicke next to Jayce turned to him. "Jayce, it's me." The other immediately repeated it. Jayce shook his head, holding his hands up. "Say the passcode," he stated. Both Wicke's scowled. "It was dumb, I don't know it," stated the Wicke by the door. "Agreed, and I'm regretting that choice. It's in my bin," said the other.

Bjorn looked between them. "Say something only Wicke would know," he said. The Wickes looked at each other. "You first," said the one by the door, crossing her arms. The other looked towards Jayce with a look of fear. "This is stupid, it's me. I've been here with you guys since the Capital, since the arena. You know me, we've been together for eight months, we started this crew together," she stated, backing up.

The other Wicke rolled her eyes. "Pathetic. Anyone could tell you that," she stated. "It was me, you, Bjorn, and Vexx to begin with. We've been together for closer to ten months, ever since you saved me from drowning. If you need more

proof, fine. Out of everyone in the crew the only person whose farts smell worse than Jayce is Marisha. Zeta is the most annoying person I've ever met, but she's really good at sewing, and... she's quite fashionable and good with advice. Bjorn's terrified of lice, Falconer smells like mulch. Xander isn't actually bald, he's mostly bald but he shaves the rest. Yuthura is old, and grumpy, but she only pretends to be as old and as grumpy. She is still old," she stated.

The rest of the crew, apart from Yuthura, turned to the impostor, Marisha's face a bright red. "There will be hell to pay little one," stated Yuthura, before turning to face the Willow. "H-h-how are any of you still alive? There's enough poison on this ship to kill a crew ten times the size," she stated, backing away towards the rear door. The crew looked towards Marisha as she threw her arms up in the air in dismay.

The Willow bolted, changing into her normal form as she slammed through the door to the rear deck. "Get her!" yelled Bjorn, as Jayce and Xander charged after her, only to bounce off each other as they both tried to squeeze through. She turned as she ran, peddling backwards as she glanced at the crew. "I'll be back!" she warned, rolling over the edge of the ship, her body growing gills and webbing between her toes and fingers as she dropped into the water, swimming quickly into the rapids before getting swept away.

"Damn," Jayce muttered. "Is everyone okay?" The various members of his crew nodded. "We should do something about the poison on the ship," stated Yuthura. "Agreed," said Xander. "Falconer, do you have any ideas as to how?" Falconer nodded. "It will take time, I recommend we put the more vulnerable into a safe area as we work." There was a pause, several eyes widening. "Has anyone seen Little Witch?" Wicke asked quickly.

The crew spread out, calling her name as Falconer went to check on his birds. Jayce entered into Focus, glancing around to see if she was hiding. Finally he glanced up, spotting a small shape tucked into the crow's nest, covered underneath a much larger bird. "In the crow's nest!" Jayce called, climbing quickly up the ladder. Wren let out a loud call as he approached, moving aside to let him through. The large cat let out a meow, otherwise unharmed. "I'm glad you two are okay. It's probably best you stay here until we've dealt with the poison," he stated. Little Witch tilted her head, before she lay down and curled up into a ball.

Jayce dropped down onto the deck, stumbling as he landed awkwardly. "Ow, still don't quite have that down yet," he muttered. "She's fine, they both are."

"Thank goodness," stated Yuthura. They glanced towards Falconer as he slowly climbed up the stairs. Jayce's heart sank as he stared at him, a dead falcon in his arms. "Horus..." he said softly. "The others?" Jayce asked. Falconer shook his head. "I'm so sorry," said Wicke, placing a hand gently onto Falconer's arm, as slowly he sat down, cradling the bird. The crew stood around him, looking down at the falcon that had led them through the deserts, through the caves, and across the seas.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Squad's Glue

Alara wandered quietly through the decks of the Lone Wanderer, a bottle tucked neatly into a small bag as she headed to her squad's quarters late in the evening. She quietly pushed open the door. "Commander in presence!" stated Witchford, standing to his feet at attention, the entire squad following suit. "I told you guys you didn't have to when it's just me," Alara stated quickly. The group relaxed. "Well last time we didn't, it turned out to be a different Commander," stated Luke Ryker as he sat down and put his feet up, his long dark hair tied into a bun.

"Yeah, I ain't doing anymore laps of the ship if I don't have to," agreed Raine Delex as Violette Bancroft sat leaning her head on his shoulder, and tracing her fingers along the veins on his dark exposed forearm. "So why has the great Commander Vanathur graced us with her presence?" asked Violette as she glared at Alara. "Lay off her Violette," stated Lyon Axel. Alara reached into her bag, pulling out the bottle of rum. "I came to return this," she stated, handing it to Riley.

"How did that get in your room?" questioned Riley unconvincingly, as she took it quickly. Violette rolled her eyes, kissing Delex before she stood up and headed towards her bunk. Delex looked towards Alara. "Sorry," he mouthed, before he lay back in his bunk and turned away. Riley pulled the cork out of the bottle, a few of the other members of the squad emerging out their bunks with canteens or cups before they disappeared. Alara turned away, heading towards the door. "You joining us Alara?" asked Axel. Alara faltered, glancing back to look at Riley as she held out the bottle to her before looking at Axel, Wulf, Corenthydallos Witchford, and Astris Kai. "Okay, just a little bit," she said softly.

She found herself sat on the floor, the room mostly in darkness as the majority of the squad slept soundly. Riley sat nursing the dregs of the bottle as Alara and Astris sat back to back, the gentle sound of snoring indicating she was asleep. Wulf lay on the floor, a pillow under his head, with Witchford's glasses on his

face as he slept. Axel sat next to him, looking at him curiously as he slept. "You know, I still find it weird that's what he looks like," Axel stated quietly.

Alara glanced over at Wulf, his fair skin and silver hair bright in the darkness. He wasn't particularly tall, or muscular, his hair was long and messy, a patchy beard on his face, and even as he slept he seemed to scowl: a fierce look ever present. "I know," stated Alara. "I didn't think he'd have white hair. It's almost like Gibbs'." Axel nodded, glancing over towards Riley as she swayed a little as she sat, her eyes opening and closing very slowly as her head started to droop.

"Okay, come on," he said, standing up and extending an arm to her. She hugged the bottle defensively. "No, bed," he clarified. She looked at the hand, before glancing towards Alara. She nodded and Riley took his hand, allowing him to pull her to her feet. He crouched, holding his hands together and allowing her to step off him onto her elevated bunk. She rolled over with a crash. "Whoops," she giggled, accidentally kicking him.

Axel backed away, rubbing his forehead. "Goodnight," she said a bit too loudly. "Goodnight Riley," Axel and Alara said. Axel returned to the floor, as Alara stood up, gently picking up Astris and stumbling with her over to her bunk, narrowly stepping over Witchford as he too was asleep on the floor. "Come back, don't leave me..." muttered Astris as Alara lay her down. Alara faltered, questioning if she was still awake, but her shut eyes and soft snoring said otherwise.

"You heading out?" asked Axel, as Alara headed towards the door. She nodded. "Do you want an escort?" he asked. She smiled. "Dangerous ship this time of night," he added. She rolled her eyes and tilted her head towards the door. They departed the cabin, heading along the corridors in the direction of Alara's quarters. "I..." he began, faltering and stopping in his place. Alara glanced at him curiously. "I wanted to thank you," he said quietly, stepping to the side as a pair of patrolling Marines walked past them, stating a greeting to Alara.

"What for?" Alara asked, leaning back against the wall, observing him as he tried to figure out his words. "For everything, I guess. I was an asshole when you first joined, I think we all were in some way or another, but we were assholes to you. We were jealous, and I let Brett get away with things I shouldn't have. I'm sorry," he confessed. Alara nodded, waving it off. "Don't worry about it." He nodded, then he quickly shook his head. "I do worry about it. I joined the Marines looking for a purpose, a meaning, and when you joined, you gave it to me, to us. Violette says horrible things to you and I-I just wanted to say thank you. For the first time,

I'm actually excited for tomorrow, for the future. I hope someday, when you reach Commander, or Captain even, and you are choosing your crew you can count on me as your ship's Doctor."

Alara's mouth fell open and Axel quickly backed away holding his hands out and turning crimson. "Crap, too much to drink. Sorry that was..." Alara nodded. "I would be honoured to have you as my ship's Doctor," she said. A smile spread quickly. "Thank you, Commander." She nodded, turning and heading onwards down the corridor. "See you in the morning," she called backwards, sensing him watching her. "Goodnight," he returned, waiting until she was out of sight before pumping his fist.

Chapter 58: Out into Nowhere

The remainder of the evening hit hard for the Rising Aces. They lit the brazier, collecting around the raging fire as Falconer burnt the corpses of his birds, all except for Horus who lay wrapped on the grass in his cloak. Even for the crew members who hadn't been there when Jayce had first met Falconer, they could tell how much the animals had meant to him. As the fire died, the group looked towards Falconer.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Yuthura asked, watching as Falconer picked up the still hot ashes in his wooden arm and walked to the edge of the ship. Falconer paused, holding his arm out over the edge. "Be at peace and return to the world's current," he said quietly, releasing the ashes into the waters below. Slowly, he then walked to Horus, picking up the bird and cradling him in his arms before he turned and faced Yuthura. "I am not ready to part with him. Can you help?" he asked.

She looked up at him, meeting his bloodshot eyes before nodding. "Of course." Yuthura took some of the ashes, creating a ring on the wooden floor of the deck before filling it with sigils as she created an alchemical circle. Eventually she nodded to Falconer, and he placed Horus in the middle. She reached into her pocket, pulling out her small, red, philosopher's stone before holding it to the circle. "Recreate," she spoke, in Demon's Tongue, the bundle igniting in glowing red fire before crumbling away and collapsing into a small ruby in the shape of a falcon's head.

She picked up the crystal, handing it to him before smudging the circle with her foot. He nodded to her before turning to Jayce. "The ship is likely still tainted with the Willow's poisons, Wren and Little Witch likely can smell it even up there," he said, pointing to the crow's nest. "I know of a spell that can help remove the poison, but it will take time. I will begin immediately." Jayce nodded and Falconer turned away. "I can help," Wicke stated, stepping after him. Falconer simply nodded and the pair departed below deck.

"Is he going to be okay?" asked Zeta, as she glanced towards Yuthura. Yuthura shook her head. "Not for a while. He was there when Horus was born. He wasn't there when he died. However, he is tough. Just give him the respect and space he deserves." Zeta nodded, swaying slightly before rubbing her nose, a small smear of blood spreading onto her hand. "That's not good," she muttered, glancing towards Caelie and Xander, both of whom had similar problems.

"Right, the three of you - with me!" stated Yuthura, grabbing Caelie and Zeta's hands and dragging them to the living quarters. Jayce glanced towards the remainder of his crew: Tempest technically didn't have an organic body, neither did RK, and Bjorn and Marisha seemed unaffected. "We'll be fine. Marisha's made us immune," Bjorn stated, patting Marisha on the shoulder. She let out a long sigh, nodding. "Stay together, sleep in shifts," Jayce stated. The pair looked at each other before quickly, bashfully glancing back at Jayce. "Right, yeah," Bjorn stated, clearing his throat. "Of course, will do," added Marisha.

Jayce nodded to them, stepping away and walking into the living quarters. Yuthura was rummaging through the cupboards as Xander held a cloth to his nose and opened all the windows. "Here it is!" Zeta called out, sliding a small bag out from underneath one of the sofas, only for the strap to get caught on one of the legs. She tried to lift up the sofa, but it remained stuck to the floor. "Hang on," Jayce stated, running his finger across a small rune next to the door. The sofa unstuck, allowing for Zeta to lift up the sofa and pull the bag free. The gentle rocking of the ship caused one of the chairs to begin to slide, but as Jayce hit the rune again, it stopped in its place.

Yuthura opened the bag, pulling out a syringe with a long needle and a clear vial. Caelie shut her eyes as Yuthura injected the three of them. "You'll be fine, but don't sleep this evening. Take whatever you need to keep yourselves awake and watch each other." Zeta opened her mouth to protest, but Yuthura pointed a long finger at her. "Better to go without your beauty sleep for one night than to remain a sleeping beauty for the remainder of your life," she warned. Zeta grumbled, but eventually nodded, as Yuthura took Xander aside and spoke to him quietly.

"Anything I can do to help?" Jayce offered, Yuthura held up a finger as she finished advising Xander on what to look out for before she turned back towards him. "Entertain them, brew some coffee, whatever you want. We just need to wait for Wicke to learn Falconer's spell and for them to purify the ship. We'll be fine, so get some sleep when you can." Jayce nodded and she stepped closer to him. "Falconer will be fine, it was nobody but that bounty hunter's fault. Am I understood?" she asked. He nodded and she stepped past him and out onto the main deck.

Jayce entertained the three prisoners with board games, snacks and drinks, long into the night, but eventually he felt his body giving out on him, and with each passing yawn he realised he was causing more harm than good. He awoke to a knock on the door; after unlocking it and letting a very tired Wicke inside, he

clambered back into his bed. She glared at him as he watched her work, extending her arm out as she presented a pulsing white orb to various points in the room. Her usual purple grimoire had been replaced by a copy with a light green cover.

"How is he?" Jayce asked at last, as she let out a long sigh and dropped the spell, her work finally complete. "Miserable, unsurprisingly," she answered, taking off her boots before climbing into his bed and kicking him out of it. "You have your own bed!" he protested. She ignored him, opening her grimoire to the front page before shutting her eyes. The cover changed back to the usual purple as she swapped the books in the infinite library. She opened her eyes, placing the grimoire on Jayce's bedside table before shooing him away.

After showering and dressing, his own room and privacy robbed by his crewmate, he stepped outside onto the aft deck. Bjorn stood by the wheel making the final preparations as he glanced down at the map. "Morning," Jayce stated. Bjorn returned the greeting. "Sleep well?" Jayce asked. Surprisingly, Bjorn flinched. "Uh, yes, nothing happened," he stated quickly. Jayce frowned. "Falconer has requested the day off, I've given it to him. I assumed that was okay?"

"Of course, are we ready to sail?" Jayce asked, glancing up towards the crow's nest before glancing further along the deck to quickly spot Wren back in her nest and Little Witch rolling on the grass. "Yes, the ship has been cleansed. The route is prepared. And I don't think the Willow will return, at least not for a while," stated Jayce's right-hand man. "Agreed, but we should still keep an eye out just in case. Great, let's go!"

After the Stacked Hand had taken to the rapids, Jayce made his way down the stairs. Little Witch ran to him, leaping into his arms before he made his way into the living quarters. Caelie and Zeta lay curled up onto Xander, Caelie with her head on his lap and Zeta tucked under his arm. "Morning," he said quietly, as Jayce crept to the kitchen. "Morning. Everything go okay?" Jayce asked. Xander nodded, brushing Caelie's hair with his hand as she lay sucking her thumb. "Good, take the day to rest. We're three days out from the breach, no need to push ourselves." Xander nodded, shutting his eyes and immediately falling asleep.

Falconer returned to his normal duties the following day. He was quiet, diligent as always, but the crew could tell he was grieving. They gave him space, and he appreciated it, but as they finally came to the end of the Rockies, things returned

to normal. "So, this is it," Jayce stated, as he, Falconer, Bjorn, and Caelie stood by the ship's wheel, watching as the rapids widened before forming into a delta. "This is it," stated Falconer, grasping his new necklace tightly as the ship dropped out from the rapids, drifting into open waters. "Onwards to Nowhere," called out Bjorn, spinning the ship's wheel and lowering the sails as he angled them east.

Caelie's eyes widened as she stared out at the open expanse before them, the waves throwing the ship side-to-side, the wind rushing across the deck. Jayce grinned as he gripped the railing, the crew finally back onto the seas after months in the Rockies. "It's good to be back!" roared Bjorn, Jayce and Falconer sharing his sentiment. Jayce glanced down at the main deck, Wicke looking up at them. He nodded to her, and she nodded back, turning around before flexing her fingers and beginning to chant.

Her grimoire opened, three glowing purple rings spinning in opposite directions appearing on the cover as she began to chant in Demon's Tongue. "Mighty winds bow to me, take my power, follow my command!" she chanted, the words translating through Jayce's necklace directly into his mind. "You understood that right?" Bjorn asked, as the winds dropped across the deck, funnelling according to Wicke's will directly into the sails. "I did!" grinned Jayce. Caelie nodding along. "By the ancestors, I love Xander and that djinn!" whooped Bjorn.

The Stacked Hand tore across the waves, the giant landmass of the Rockies falling swiftly away into the horizon before eventually fading out of sight. The first day passed quickly, Caelie, Zeta, and Xander quickly adjusting to their new lives at sea, but, throughout the entire journey, the crew saw nothing: no islands, no ships, just an endless expanse of water in all directions. "I guess this is why they call it Nowhere," Bjorn stated at last.

Falconer shook his head, analysing his map closely. "We're not there just yet," he corrected. "Aren't we? What are we looking for?" asked Wicke, as she sat with her feet hanging over the edge of the ship, Caelie next to her. "In all honesty, I do not know. The information available was limited; few, if any, take this route, but it is the closest breach to our destination," stated Falconer. Bjorn nodded, glancing up at the sails only to falter. "Wicke, do you mind giving the sails a boost? The winds have dropped," he asked.

Falconer glanced up, Wicke grumbling as she got to her feet and chanted, only to stop as Falconer held out a hand. "Caelie, can you get Jayce?" he asked, entering into Focus and staring into the horizon. She nodded and ran off down the stairs

to the living quarters. "What's wrong?" Wicke asked, Bjorn also looking at Falconer curiously. He pointed ahead, beyond the bow, towards the sea. It was flat. There were no waves, there was no wind, and there were no islands, but far in the distance lay a graveyard of ships.

"What's wrong?" Jayce asked, as he stepped out onto the deck with a late breakfast in his hands, glancing up at his crewmates. "There's no wind," Bjorn stated. "Well that can't be true, there's got to be some wind," Jayce replied, before glancing up at the flag as it lay limp across the crow's nest. "That's not the strangest part," Bjorn added, pointing to the flat waters around them. Jayce nodded, walking up the stairs to join them. "What does this mean? How could this happen?" Jayce asked.

"How, I do not know. But this is what I assume Nowhere means: a deadzone," Falconer stated, rolling up his map and crossing his arms. "A deadzone?" Wicke queried. Falconer nodded, bringing two fingers to his mouth and letting out a long and loud whistle. Wren took to the skies, flying high and flapping her wings in quick succession to keep aloft. She circled around before flying back down and landing on the deck. "There's no wind to glide on, the Guild's albatrosses rely on gliding to fly. We won't be able to receive or send any mail."

"What about by water? The Guild otters?" Jayce proposed. Falconer shrugged, pointing off towards the countless ships dotting the horizon, getting closer as the Stacked Hand carried its momentum in a long drift. "Somehow, I doubt it," he said. "I think we are on our own. Fortunately, I believe magic will allow us to still sail, but there's only one way to find out." Falconer glanced towards Wicke who nodded, casting her spell without further input. She created wind using her magic, funnelling it into the main sail. Although, as Jayce watched it, he quickly noticed it was considerably weaker than normal.

"Well that's reassuring," Bjorn muttered. "How many of us can cast it?" "Seven. Xander and Marisha could bump that to nine, but they couldn't do it a few days ago. Their bodies are still adjusting," Wicke stated. Bjorn and Jayce looked at each other before back at Falconer. "How far out are we from Last Drop?" Jayce asked. Falconer thought to himself, letting out an eventual sigh. "Initially, I put us at two to three weeks with magical aid, now I'd estimate at least five, provided we had at least one person casting Gust constantly. We could shorten it with multiple mages, but we are still talking shifts of multiple hours for weeks. Sorry Captain, I doubt we'll make it in time for your anniversary."

Jayce nodded, rubbing his head as he paced back and forth. "Dammit! Okay, it is what it is. I'm going to be in big trouble at the end of this, when we can finally send messages again, but at least I have a few days until she should send her next letter," he said, defeated. Caelie pointed at the ships approaching in the distance. "She raises a fair point," Bjorn stated, lazily adjusting the wheel as they slowly sailed. "It is in the sailor's code to look for survivors. We're also going to need extra supplies to account for the extra voyage time," Bjorn added. Jayce nodded in agreement. "Might as well, but I'm not hopeful, who knows how long they've been here for," Jayce responded, looking out at the endless sea of ghost ships adrift in front of them.

After informing the rest of the crew of the unexpected change in plans, Jayce found himself walking across a long plank of wood onto their first ship. As he glanced down at the crystal clear water, the surface a mirror, only disturbed by the movement of the Stacked Hand, he felt immediately grateful he had decided not to swim. The waters weren't particularly deep, he could see all the way to the bottom, but ancient remains of ships littered the floor, surrounded by the consistent patrol of dozens of hammerhead sharks.

"We're definitely not getting any mail!" Jayce called back to his party, as they began to follow him across the plank of wood. Caelie stared over the edge with excitement, Bjorn, Marisha and Zeta with significantly less enthusiasm. "Why do I have to come?" protested Zeta, as she crawled across on her hands and knees. "You volunteered! You said you were bored," countered Marisha. Zeta scowled. "This is not what I would call exciting. And it's not what I thought we would be doing!"

Jayce rolled his eyes, glancing around the large deck of the ship they had boarded. It was a merchant vessel: an Ogre, with a large single deck for cargo storage, a small crew quarters, and a single sail – still in very good condition. "Hello?" Jayce called out, as he approached the stern of the ship. His eyes glanced through the walls as he entered into Focus, there were people moving around inside, three in total, with four more below deck. One shambled towards the door, slowly pushing it open.

"Shit!" muttered Bjorn, drawing his new weapons: a pair of intricate white and gold axes, made for him by Tempest and Xander. Jayce backed away from the zombies, Sola and Luna transforming quickly into a pair of silver longswords, but Caelie ran straight past him. She chanted gleefully as a blue will-o'-wisp span around her, forming a flowing fog. She leapt, tapping the zombie on the side of

its head before rushing inside the crew quarters. The zombie shuddered, its mouth open in a silent scream, before its flesh turned to ash and its bones fell to the ground in a pile.

Jayce and the others looked at each other before back at the pile of bones as slowly the skeleton knit itself together, standing up and looking at them curiously. "That's... concerning. Is it not?" Bjorn asked, as Caelie stepped out with two more skeletons following behind her. Jayce chuckled, Sola and Luna liquifying before reforming on his bracers. "Go on, have your fun. Be careful, and tell Yuthura if you get injured," he stated to Caelie. She pointed down the stairs and the skeletons walked quickly inside the hold, chattering as they followed her command.

After the ship was cleared of danger, Caelie now wandering around with a small group of skeletons at her beck and call, the group searched for anything and everything of value. Unsurprisingly, there was very little food to scavenge, but they achieved a decent haul, using the skeletons and Bjorn, to carry the heavy cargo back over to the Stacked Hand. After clearing some distance from the ship, Wicke set it on fire using her magic and they made their way onwards to the next vessel.

By the end of the day, having cleared eight vessels, most containing undead crew or otherwise being completely devoid of any life, the Rising Aces stared at the large pile of goods they had collected. Although food remained a scarcity on each ship, the small amounts of non-perishable goods they did find were quickly stacking into a considerable and very suitable amount for their needs. And where the crew found a level joy in that, most were significantly more concerned by what Caelie had been collecting.

She stood proudly on the bow of the Stacked Hand, a veritable army chattering away before her as the twenty-or-so skeletons she had collected waited for their next command. "What happens when she goes to sleep?" Zeta queried, as the crew watched her. "I think they stay around until she releases them," Wicke answered. "She can't keep them!" protested Bjorn. "What if they turn on us?" "They make clearing the ships significantly easier. I think it's fine as long as they stay on the main deck," Jayce stated. Bjorn grumbled to himself, but the moment Caelie attempted to take her herd below deck he raced forwards to intercept her.

The following morning they continued their journey, moving from ship to ship, Caelie's skeletons leading the way as they tore apart the zombies populating the ghost ships. Eventually Bjorn reached his limit, the entire deck of the Stacked

Hand covered in skeletons, as they ferried cargo from their latest ship. "Choose one," Bjorn ordered. Caelie growled at him, and very slowly the nearly hundred-fold group of skeletons turned their heads towards him. "Caelie," he said quickly as they slowly advanced on him. "Caelie!" he quickly added, a bit more urgently. She turned away. "Two, you can have two!" Still she ignored him, the skeletons of little danger to him, but still a considerable threat. "Three!"

She nodded in agreement, and the skeletons backed away before splitting into three groups, collapsing into large piles of bones. Bjorn glared at her, but she ignored him, approaching the first pile of bones and chanting. The bones melted away, coalescing into a singular skeleton with black bones. Caelie then glanced around, searching through thin air for something. Jayce entered into Focus, watching as she pointed at a spirit floating in the air, dragging the lost soul into the skeleton. The skeleton shuddered, changing in size and growing to a little more than six feet tall. Caelie then moved on to her next pile, repeating the process, before doing it once more.

What remained were three charcoal-coloured skeletons of varying heights. One was much taller than the other two: a warrior. Next came the medium-sized one; Caelie pointed to the sails and the skeleton chattered away, glowing markings emerging across its bones before it cast the spell *Gust*: a mage. The last one was a little smaller, still taller than Caelie, but it moved much faster than the other two, darting across the deck in the blink of an eye: a rogue. The three super-skeletons stood awaiting her command, and she turned towards Bjorn, sticking her tongue out before facing Xander.

He looked at the three curiously, taking a moment before he understood what she was after. He disappeared below deck, returning with various pieces of magical equipment, the skeletons quickly putting on the items, before once more looking to Caelie for instruction. "I guess we found some willing participants to test out my new equipment!" Xander stated excitedly. Caelie nodded, pointing towards the next ship.

The skeletons became a normality, and, after some convincing, Caelie even started to put them away in the evenings in special handheld containers Tempest had made for her. Jayce was all the more grateful when she consistently started to do this - waking up to three skeletons staring down at him every time Caelie snuck into his bed had not been good for his health. Finally, after multiple weeks of sailing and scavenging, the crew found themselves staring at a thinning horizon of ships.

As Caelie sent her three minions away to board the next ship - the warrior now dressed in a full set of golden plate armour with a shield and sword, the mage holding a small wooden staff and wearing a set of white robes, and the rogue wielding a pair of curved daggers and a grey cloak - a voice called out to them. "Hello?" echoed the voice from somewhere in the distance, quickly followed by another. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. "Did you hear that?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded.

They headed quickly to the bow, glancing over the edge and looking at the three remaining ships nearby. "Hello?" called an old man from a small fishing boat nearby, another old man stood next to him. They waved, and Bjorn and Jayce waved back. After leaving Caelie, Xander, and the skeletons to finish clearing the ship, Jayce and Bjorn sailed the Stacked Hand over towards the survivors, throwing them a rope to tie the ships together before Jayce leapt off the side, dropping down onto the small vessel.

"Hi," Jayce said cheerfully, glad to have finally seen some actual living people outside of his crew. The two old men stumbled backwards. "By the Gods, son, did that not hurt your knees?" exclaimed the bald one, his skin dark and beard a bright white. "No, he's young. Youngsters are invulnerable these days," stated the other, a few more hairs on his head, but not many more, a thick line of stubble on his chin. "I'm fine don't worry. Are you okay? Do you need food, water, medicines?" Jayce asked.

The pair of men looked at each other before sitting back down in a pair of fishing chairs with a collective sigh of relief. "Thank the Gods," muttered the bald one. "We're fine son, it's more of navigational issue we're having. Our partners warned us not to go this way, but my dear older brother thought no - damned be his wife's advice!" stated the younger brother. In an instant, his older brother sat up and pointed a finger at his younger sibling. "You were the one who dropped the oar. Had you packed spares like your husband suggested we could've rowed out of here!"

The pair immediately descended into squabbling, only stopping as they spotted Jayce watching the back and forth with bemusement. "Ahem, anyway. The winds died and we rowed onwards thinking they would come back. My brother dropped his oar and mine eventually snapped off. How are you able to sail, son? Do you have an engine?" said the older brother. Jayce shook his head. "No, my crew are proficient in magic. We've been using that to travel around."

"Magic? That evil stuff?" asked the younger brother, prompting his brother to slap his back.

"Church nonsense. Son, irrespective of religious beliefs or not, can you help us out of here? It's half-a-day's paddle that way to the edge. We've been here three days and I'd like to see my family again," asked the older brother. Jayce nodded, extending a hand. "Not a problem, we'll get you home. The name's Jayce, that's my ship. The Rising Aces are happy to help." The two men took it, shaking it one after another. "My brother is Manos," said the older man, standing up. "And he's Yannis," said Manos. "Thank you for the help. We tried to wave down one ship, but... well, let's say the crew were even closer to the grave than we are." Jayce nodded. "We're putting them to rest. Tie the rope to the front of your ship, we'll drag you out once we've checked the other ships for any survivors," he instructed. "Yes sir!" they quickly said, walking into each other before heading to untie the rope.

Eventually, with the last of the ghost ships aflame, the Stacked Hand took to the open waters, Wicke, Marisha, and Xander all casting Gust on the three sails. Finally, the smooth waters of Nowhere gave way to the fast and tropical waves of the Frontier archipelago, the cool weather giving way to quick heat and bright blue waters. The warm winds picked up, taking the sails and carrying the ship onwards until the mages dropped their spells, the ship continuing to sail before they dropped anchor.

The small fishing boat pulled up alongside them, the pair untying the rope and waving up at the crew of the Stacked Hand. Jayce slowly climbed down the side of the ship, a small chest in arms. "This ought to save you from too much scolding," Jayce stated, handing over the chest full of coins and treasure. "We can't possibly," began Yannis, holding his hands up, his eyes wide. "Oh yes we can!" stated Manos, taking the chest. "Thank you Captain, we'll stay well away from here on our next trip. Safe travels!" Jayce nodded, climbing back onto the side of the Stacked Hand as the bickering brothers sailed away, waving to the crew.

Jayce grinned as he climbed up, standing tall as he looked at his crew. "Let's get sailing, my home's not far!" he declared, Bjorn quickly raising the anchor and aiming the ship southeast. A little while later a familiar sight appeared in the sky, flying slightly awkwardly towards them. With a crash, the Guild albatross rolled across the grass of the deck, its mail satchels filled a little bit too much. It shook itself off, letting out a loud announcing squeak. Gratefully, Jayce opened the

bags, placing the due money, as usual, in the pouches on its foot, before giving it its treat. As Wicke took the large bundle of newspapers, laying them out on the floor, Jayce pulled out a small stack of letters.

They all matched the same handwriting: Alara's, six in total. He flicked through them, the dates varying, but he faltered on one, gripping it cautiously, a splatter of blood on the envelope, a bloody fingerprint on the front. "Jayce," said Wicke quietly, drawing his attention as she looked up at him, a collage of the newspapers all displaying similar things. Jayce glanced down at the one she held. Alara was on the front cover, an action shot with her back to the camera, her glaive across her shoulders, her bandaged hand pointing onwards as she stood next to a gurney, Marines and Doctors rushing around her. 'Marine Hero Saves Crew', it read.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Commander's Blessing

Alara sighed to herself as she strolled through the bowels of the Lone Wanderer. The night watch saluted to her as she passed, stepping to the side for her as she walked with her head down, flicking through the stack of reports in her hands. "Good evening, Commander!" they greeted, Alara quickly raising her head and nodding to them as she continued onwards. She paused, flicking over a page and scanning the details before she let out another sigh and continued walking. It had long become routine by this point: every few nights she would collect the reports written by the command crew, check for any immediate issues, act on said issues, and then present the reports for the Captain to read. An otherwise simple task.

Yet, on the final eve before her final test as a Marine recruit, she was behind schedule. She ordered the documents to match her priority: the lead Shipwright's report, the head Doctor's report, the Master of Arms' report, Navigation, the Cooks, the Helm, the Quartermaster, each report from each senior crew member that the ship required to function. She was all the more grateful they had arranged their reports to her liking, and as she stepped up the stairs onto the main deck she quickly felt a set of eyes watching her.

"Commander!" Alara quickly greeted, as she glanced towards Vao leaning against the communications room wall. Commander Vao blew out a long stream of smoke into the cold night, lowering her cigarette and tilting her head to the side as she invited Alara over to her. Alara lowered her reports, walking over and standing next to her Commander. She was out of uniform and wearing a dark set of pyjamas and boots, her blue hair loose and over her shoulder.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" asked Vao, reaching into a pocket to pull out another hand-rolled cigarette, offering it to Alara. Alara held up the reports. "I needed to finish these off," she stated, glancing at the cigarette before taking it. Vao looked surprised, but she pulled out a lighter and lit it for her. "It's an important day tomorrow, the reports can wait. Besides, Onasi is asleep, and I wouldn't disturb him."

Alara nodded, taking a long drag before leaning her head back against the wooden wall. "I didn't think you'd actually take it, since when do you smoke?" Vao asked. "I don't... well, not anymore. My boyfriend hates it, so I stopped," Alara admitted. "Better person than I, better boyfriend as well. My ex got me started. I didn't realise you were dating anyone either, someone on the ship?" Alara shook her head. "From home."

"Sounds nice." Alara nodded, glancing out into the deep darkness of the night. "You know, there's no need to be nervous," stated Vao, raising her arm and leaning onto Alara. "I'm not nervous," Alara lied. Vao just stared at her. "Okay, I'm a little nervous. It's just gotten so... real, I think. I mean, this is it, the test." "Every Marine goes through it, it's normal to be nervous, but it is nothing you can't already handle. Three days of survival training: we drop you off, you swim to shore, make camp, survive, we pick you up. Easy as that."

"But what if something goes wrong, what if we get into trouble, or-" "Or nothing. The point of the test is for Command to determine who has leadership qualities. To see who, in the absence of a command structure, steps up and leads. As well as to measure the complete opposite. You are a leader, you have lead for weeks now. It is nothing you can't handle," Vao stated. Alara nodded. "You'll be fine," she reassured, crushing the remains of her cigarette and taking Alara's before she had finished it.

She then took Alara's reports from her. "Go to bed, I'll take them to the Captain." "Are you sure?" Alara asked. Vao rolled her eyes, shooing Alara away with her hands. "Goodnight Vanathur," said Commander Vao, walking away towards the aft deck. Vao stopped next to the wheel, leaning over the railing, the Helmsman - Lieutenant Varin - glancing at her but otherwise sticking to her job. "I know what it's like to have eyes on you, expectations placed on you by complete strangers. You have to learn to ignore it. Trust me, it doesn't matter what they expect of you, just focus on what you want to achieve. You'll do great. Now shoo - that's an order!" Vao affirmed, giving a wink and a nod. Alara smiled up at her. "Aye Commander!"

Chapter 59: Lieutenant Commander

Alara slept well. Not on purpose. "Lieutenant Commander!" called a voice though her door, followed quickly by several loud knocks. Alara bolted up, glancing immediately at her clock before she raced to the door, heaving it open as she swore quickly under her breath. "Yes! Yes! I'm awake!" she stated quickly to the startled Marine on the other side of the door "Uh, right. Good morning Commander, the Captain and the Commander wish to see you when you're ready," stated the young woman known as Burrews, staring wide-eyed at Alara.

Alara collected herself. "Right, understood. Thank you Burrews, dismissed." "Aye, Commander," she stated, nodding to her before quickly walking away. Alara glanced at the few Marines around, those with any sense quickly looking away as she hastily covered herself and shut the door. After dressing and grabbing her glaive, Alara glanced around for her reports, quickly clicking her fingers as she remembered Commander Vao had already taken them the night before. She glanced at her clock: she was already an hour late, so she grabbed her backpack as well, preparing for the worst.

Speedily she made her way to the main deck, stepping out into the bright sunlight of the mid-morning seas. Thankfully, they were still sailing, and pretty quickly at that. "Morning sleepyhead!" called Axel from across the deck, Wulf, Riley, Witchford and Astris by his side. Alara stuck her tongue out at them as they jeered at her, jokes flying at her as they caught her rare misdemeanour. She carried on, climbing quickly up the stairs to the aft deck.

"Morning Vanathur," smiled a tired Lieutenant Varin as she stood behind the wheel next to Lieutenant Hawke. Alara nodded to the pair, somewhat surprised to see the Helmsman and the Navigator together, given that they often worked alternate shifts and covered each other's roles. "They're waiting for you. Captain woke up ten minutes ago. Don't worry too much," reassured Hawke with a smile. She nodded to the pair, glancing past them towards the starboard side at a large fog rolling towards the Lone Wanderer from the north-east, before she stepped inside the captain's quarters.

"Ahem," stated Onasi, as he looked at her from behind his desk. Alara bowed her head, only for Commander Vao to gently slap the back of her neck with two fingers. "Ignore him. Good morning, Alara," said Commander Vao with unusual intimacy. Alara glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. "Today marks the beginning of you fully becoming my Lieutenant. I think, provided you actually pass this

trial, that has earned a bit more familiarity. Pass, and then you may call me by my first name: Delta."

Alara nodded. "If I pass," she stated. Vao smiled at her, nodding before they turned and faced their Captain as he stood up and walked around his desk. "Do I get to refer to you two by first name?" he asked, leaning onto his desk. "Absolutely not," stated both Alara and Delta, smiling to each other. "Captain," followed Alara, with the reverence and respect befitting his rank. "Onasi," followed Commander Delta Vao, with absolutely no respect or reverence. Onasi just sighed, before he picked up the reports sat on his desk.

"Anyway, we're not far from our destination: a trio of islands deep in the Salvation Isles. We'll drop you and the other recruits off on one of the islands, it'll be down to you and your comrades to establish a hierarchy and order your priorities. Water, shelter, food, etc," said Onasi, standing up and approaching Alara, as Commander Vao took the reports from him and sat on his desk. A soft echo of multiple thumps sounded faintly in the distance. "What will-" Alara began, yelping as Onasi grabbed her in a tight embrace, only for the pair of them to get slammed to the side as Commander Vao dove into them.

The wooden walls of the captain's quarters exploded inwards, large spears of wood sailing across the room as Alara and Onasi fell. She stared in horror through the tight embrace as a large splinter of wood tore itself through Commander Vao, launching her backwards and impaling her to the rear wall. Onasi crashed into the corner of his desk, releasing Alara as they collapsed onto the floor.

Alara lay there dazed, Onasi face down on the floor next to her. Her eyes were wide, and her breathing was shallow as she stared at the holes in the roof above them. She felt the ship shudder underneath her as more cannonballs collided with the Lone Wanderer, her ears ringing. "Alara..." groaned Onasi, slowly lifting his head off the floor and looking around in the opposite direction from her. "Captain," she muttered, her senses re-emerging as the sounds of shouting and cannon fire echoed outside of the room. "Captain!" she said more urgently, drawing his quick attention.

He glanced towards her, a large slash across the bridge of his nose where a large shard of wood had torn through. She gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth only to quickly pull it away as she was distracted by a large piece of wood embedded in her palm. "Alara, where's the Commander?" he asked, glancing around, his eyes gone. Alara slowly glanced towards Vao as she hung from the

wall, a large piece of the wood embedded through her stomach. "She's..." "Alara, now is not the time!" he said urgently, standing to his feet and glancing around, eventually settling his gaze towards the Commander. "In my top drawer, there's a large diamond. Get it!" he ordered.

Alara stared up at him. "A diamond? I don't understand, what do we—" "Now!" he yelled. She nodded, scrambling to her feet and tearing the large shard out of her hand with a yelp before she pulled open the drawers of his desk, rummaging inside until she pulled out a gemstone the size of her palm. She glanced towards Onasi as he felt his way around the room, eventually grasping onto the large piece of wood impaling Vao. He yelled as he lifted up his elbow, bringing it down on the piece stuck into the wall.

It broke, dropping the Commander into his arms. Slowly he lowered her down to the floor. "Here," Alara said desperately, handing him the diamond. He nodded, gently placing the gemstone into Delta's lap before he grasped the large shard of wood and ripped it out of her. Alara turned away, only looking back as Captain Onasi began to chant. He held his hand over the large wound, a hole straight through the Commander's belly button, her insides torn and bloody. A pair of large white rings formed on both of his arms, spinning as he chanted.

The gemstone disintegrated into white dust, floating into the Commander's stomach and regenerating the damaged organs. However, the wound didn't close and very quickly blood began to pool around Vao's waist. Alara hadn't initially noticed, but Vao began to breathe again. "Thank those bastard Gods," muttered Onasi, falling backwards onto his rear. Slowly, he turned and looked at Alara, a clear liquid dripping from his ears and blood dripping down his face. "I'm sorry... Commander," he said, before falling backwards.

Alara stared in horror at Vao and Onasi, both were breathing, and both were badly injured. The ship shuddered again, another cannonball hitting the Lone Wanderer, an alarm ringing in the background. "No-no-no-no-no," Alara panicked, clambering to her feet. "What do I do? What do I do?" she cried, glancing around the room before settling her eyes on the light shining through the ceiling onto the Commander and the Captain.

She nodded, grabbing a cloth from her backpack and wrapping it around her wounded hand before pulling her glaive from her back and connecting the two pieces. "I can still save them!" she thought, racing out of the door. Immediately she stumbled, crashing into the ship's wheel, the surface slick with blood. She

glanced behind her: the mangled corpse of Lieutenant Varin lay face down on the floor, her blonde hair splattered with blood.

Alara glanced at the long streak of blood next to her, following the path towards Lieutenant Hawke as he lay slumped against the side of the ship, a large hole in his chest. Alara ducked as a bolt of golden light flew over her head, drawing her attention to the large fog cloud directly starboard of them. Cannonballs, gunshots, and bolts of light flew from the fog towards the Lone Wanderer, a few Marines stood firing the cannons and their rifles back in retaliation, but the deck was covered with the countless corpses of the crew.

"No, Axel, no!" sobbed Wulf, drawing Alara's horrified gaze across the deck towards the pair. Wulf sat on the floor cradling the body of Axel, a bullet hole through his neck and his eyes wide and unseeing. "Captain! Captain!" called a voice racing up the stairs towards her. Alara stared at Astris as she leapt across the broken stairs. "Commander? Where's the Captain?" she asked, meeting her gaze, tears marking her face. "They're down. I need the chief Doctor! Now!" Alara called out across the deck, a pair of Marines racing down the stairs below deck on her orders.

"Both of them!" exclaimed Astris. Alara wiped her face, nodding. "Commander, what are your orders?" Astris immediately followed up with. Alara faltered, glancing around as she assessed the situation. The ship was damaged, an unknown quantity of the crew were dead or dying, and the enemy were hidden in fog. Alara lunged for the ship's wheel, spinning it and angling the ship directly north.

She glanced across the deck, spotting her target as he stood by the cannons. "Witchford!" screamed Alara. "Grab the wheel!" He glanced towards her, the other Marines all looking up towards her. "I need a squad of gunners! Grab your rifles and as much ammo as you can carry! Head to the rear of the ship and lay down covering fire. Look for anything, I need identifiers as to who they are." The Marines collected together, following her orders as a squad headed to the rear of the ship, Riley amongst them.

Witchford grabbed the wheel. "Where are we headed?" he asked, pushing his spectacles up his face. "Open fire!" called out Riley from the rear of the ship, Alara quickly spotting Lieutenant Thorne dead on the deck below. "There's a cluster of islands north," Alara stated, rushing over to Hawke's corpse and gently taking his binoculars off him. "We'll try and lose them there," she added, handing the binoculars to him and pointing at the islands far off in the horizon.

The chief Doctor raced out onto the top deck, the short, dark-skinned woman bounding up the broken stairs to the aft deck. "Where are they?" asked Lieutenant Jicks. Alara pointed inside and she headed wordlessly onwards with her satchel. Alara turned to Astris. "I need a status report, get me one!" she ordered. Astris nodded, leaping onto the deck below and disappearing into the belly of the ship. A Marine emerged from the rear of the ship. "Commander, we can only see the ship's outline. The enemy is completely obscured, but the very top of their flag is visible. It's a long ship, with a red flag," stated Ensign Warde.

Alara nodded. "Get them more ammo, good work Ensign," she ordered, turning her gaze onwards towards their destination, large explosions of water splashing the sides of the ship as cannonballs landed around them. Alara glanced towards the end of the ship, the entire vessel slightly lopsided. "We're taking on water," stated Witchford. "Agreed. Will we make it?" Alara asked. Witchford shrugged, the pair immediately glancing down as Astris emerged, red-faced, onto the deck.

"Holes, decks one and three! Major flooding, medical bay overrun!" she panted. "That's a no," muttered Alara, looking at Witchford. He nodded, glancing through his binoculars at the horizon. "There! Sand banks. Provided we can lose the enemy, we might make it there," he suggested. Alara nodded, patting him on the shoulder. "Do it." Witchford adjusted the wheel, angling them on a direct course. "We've taken on a lot of weight, we need to lose some, or we won't make it!" Astris called up.

Alara thought to herself, glancing at the remaining Marines on the deck. "Marines!" Alara called out. "Cut the cannons loose! Throw them overboard!" The Marines glanced at each other before racing off to carry out her orders, Wulf taking the lead and using his strength and size to help push the cannons over the edge. Another Marine emerged from the stern. "Commander, the enemy are pulling away. They are headed east."

"Good, get everyone below decks. Volunteer your blood to the Docs, bail out the water." The Marine nodded, the squad of gunners emerging and joining the others on the main deck before following Alara's orders, all apart from Riley. Alara glanced at her, nodding before pointing at Wulf. "Take him and head to deck one, search and rescue." Riley nodded, vaulting over the railing before whistling Wulf over, the pair following after the other Marines, both unable to donate blood as per regulations.

The ship continued to list, slowly tilting as the sand banks grew closer and closer. Alara looked up at Witchford and he met her gaze. "We'll make it," she

reassured. He nodded. "We'll make it." Witchford pulled the alarm next to the wheel, a siren calling out across the ship as the crew desperately took brace positions. The Lone Wanderer crashed into the sand banks, throwing Alara and Witchford forwards as it suddenly stopped, running aground with a large explosion of sand. As Alara slowly caught her breath, her legs slid out from under her as the ship tilted over onto its side, water rushing out of the holes in the hull, as she tumbled over the railing onto the hard sands below.

"Fuck!" Alara swore, groaning as she lay on her back, her glaive in the sands next to her. "Commander!" called Witchford from above as he hung onto the wheel, the ship slowly rebalancing slightly as the water drained. "I'm okay!" she called up, slowly getting to her feet and retrieving her glaive. She glanced out across the horizon, spotting the faint fog of the enemy deep on the horizon. A soft chitter quickly drew her attention, a large blue form emerging from the waters and cautiously scuttling its way across the sands to a corpse that had fallen from the ship.

The giant lobster extended a claw towards the body, beginning to drag it backwards across the sand towards the surf. "No you don't!" Alara yelled, racing forwards and swinging with her glaive. The blade bounced off the thick carapace, the creature releasing the body and swinging a giant claw towards her. Alara ducked out of the way, jabbing once more at the creature with her weapon. A bolt flew past her, shattering the head of the creature and splattering its purple blood across the sands. Alara glanced back, Riley stood by one of holes in the lowest deck, her sniper rifle in her hands.

"I've got you!" she yelled. Alara nodded to her, putting her weapon away and dragging the corpse back towards the ship. She glanced up, spotting several more of the creatures by the surf, but they kept their distance. A few more Marines leapt off the top deck, landing in the sands around her and readying their rifles towards the waters. "You can leave her to us, Commander," said the Lieutenant Junior Grade taking charge, glancing towards the body. Alara nodded, grabbing onto a ladder as it was rolled off the side of the ship and climbing back on board.

"What are your orders?" Astris asked immediately, as Alara stepped onto the main deck. Alara glanced towards her, the adrenaline fading and a cold feeling rolling through her. Astris met her eyes, the pair staring into each other. "We're alive," Astris said quietly, reaching out and placing a hand on Alara's arm. "We're alive," Alara reiterated. She took a deep breath, raising her head and glancing around the damaged ship.

Bodies lay everywhere, Marines grieving by their sides or checking the wounded for any survivors. She glanced back towards the captain's quarters, the chief Doctor slowly walking down the ruined stairs as she took off her bloodied gloves. "How are they?" Alara quickly asked, turning to face her. Lieutenant Jicks shook her head. "They're alive, somehow. Commander, can I speak to you? Away from the others."

Alara nodded, glancing back towards Astris. "Can you get me a status report? Anything and everything you can think of," Alara asked. Astris saluted, racing off without a further word. Alara followed the Lieutenant up the broken stairs, the pair stepping inside the captain's quarters. "Commander, what exactly happened? The Commander... she shouldn't be alive. What did you, or the Captain, do?" asked the Doctor.

Alara glanced down at the pair as they lay on the floor, a large amount of gauze pressed into Vao's wounds, bandages around Onasi's head. "The Captain had a healing potion, just the one," Alara lied, meeting the Doctor's green eyes. Jicks looked up at her, faltering before letting out a sigh of relief. "Good... thank goodness. It's fortunate he had it, but both of them are still critical. The Commander... She won't ever walk again. The Captain..." Alara nodded. "You've done your best for them. Head back to the medical bay, they'll need you. I'll set up a meeting with all remaining senior staff for an hour's time." Jicks nodded, reaching out and patting Alara on her shoulder. "You've done them proud... Commander," she said, stepping past her and hurrying away.

As soon as the Lieutenant had left, Alara crouched down, hugging her knees as silent, terrified tears flowed down her face. She shook quietly, her eyes wide as she stared at the bloodstained floor, until finally she shook her head, standing up and wiping her face before stepping outside. Immediately, Marines ran up to her, looking for orders, looking for her orders. She glanced past them, meeting Axel's gaze as he lay on the floor, his eyes unseeing. "Commander?" She glanced away.

Alara stared intently at the thick report in her hands as she stood on the sands outside of the Lone Wanderer. She scanned the crew manifest, of the one hundred and sixty-three members on board, forty-one were confirmed dead or missing. Their names had been scratched out with a line – Alara quickly spotted Axel's name on the list. A following twenty-eight were considered casualties, all highlighted red and deemed critical, the Captain, Commander, and Raine Delex amongst them. Minor injuries had been highlighted yellow and deemed non-

urgent, a terrifying portion of the crew fell into that category, Alara's own name counted among them.

She looked up at the senior staff stood around her: the Quartermaster - Bran Toger, the chief Doctor - Leyna Jicks, the lead Shipwright - Verity Moire, the head Cook - Franky Bo. They were all that remained. "Continue," she stated, looking towards the Quartermaster. He nodded, rubbing his bushy, blonde beard as he looked at his own document. "Our storage got hit, we've lost our water generators and our food stores," he said defeatedly, before glancing towards the head Doctor. "Medical supplies are also running low, we also don't have any means of keeping several of the medicines we can produce at a cold enough temperature." Alara nodded, glancing towards the Shipwright. She shook her head, her red hair kept in pigtails. "I have the nails, I have the tools, I've got no wood."

A gunshot ran out above them, one of the giant lobsters scurrying away from the group back into the water. Alara nodded to Riley as she sat in the crow's nest with her rifle. "That's also a problem," muttered the Shipwright. Alara glanced towards the Doctor. "As said, I don't have the medical supplies to treat all the wounded. Even if I did, most require a hospital - surgery. If we don't get the Captain to a hospital soon, the swelling on his brain will kill him. Fortunately, our Marines have stepped up, there's no lack of donations. We've also had contraband handed over, anything they think will help."

The three of them looked towards Alara. "Well, great. Okay," she muttered, desperately searching for a solution. "Commander, why are they here? If you don't mind me asking?" asked the Shipwright softly, as she glanced towards Wulf, Witchford, and Astris as they stood awkwardly nearby. Alara stood up tall. "The majority of senior command are down, I don't know the majority of the crew's capabilities. I know theirs. Witchford, have you found us a destination?"

"Aye Commander. There's a naval base one week away, provided fair weather and we travel day and night. It's the nearest base available with a hospital and dockyard," he stated efficiently. Alara nodded, turning back to the senior crew. "Seven days and nights," muttered Jicks. "I don't know if our injured will last that long." Alara tilted her head towards the senior group, inviting the awkward trio to step closer.

"We aren't far from the islands we were due to drop the recruits off," stated the Cook. "We do have our deployable dinghies. Provided we can find the supplies we need..." muttered Toger, nodding his head. Alara glanced towards Wulf.

"Master of Arms, take this list. Prep two squads, including yourself, myself and the Quartermaster. Add Brett to that list, we'll need his scouting," she ordered. Wulf nodded, heading quickly away to follow her orders.

"Commander, are you sure you should come?" asked the Quartermaster. Alara nodded. "There's nothing more I can do from here. Prepare a list for the Quartermaster of items we should be looking out for. Food, medical herbs, the lot. We're injured, we're not dead yet," Alara ordered the senior crew. They nodded, heading quickly away. Alara then turned to Witchford and Astris. "Witchford, round up what remains of communications, put out a beacon, and gear up." He nodded, heading quickly away.

Alara glanced around at the few members of crew stood guard around the ship. "What do you need from me?" Astris asked. Alara smiled at her, Astris ever ready to follow her lead. "I need a Lieutenant. Can I count on you? And if I don't make it," she said softly, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a bloody letter. Astris pushed Alara's hand away. "You always can, but send it yourself. We're making it through this, Alara... Commander Vanathur." Alara nodded, glancing back towards the wounded ship. "I hope so."

Seize the Seas Tales: Lost and Broken

"Please, my friend is in there!" begged Anson Brett as he stood outside of the medical bay doors, desperately trying to peek through the gaps in the window. "No one's allowed in, Doc's orders. If you want to give blood, go that way," stated the large Marine outside the doors. "Please," he said quietly, looking up at the guard. "Sorry pal, I understand – believe me, but the people in there... there's nothing more we can do for them. We've just got to follow our orders, believe that the Commander can get us and them home," said the Marine.

"Fuck that! My friend is in there!" In an instant, the Marine lunged at Brett, grabbing him by his jacket and throwing him backwards. Brett stumbled backwards, landing on his rear and looking up at the red faced Marine as he pulled back a fist. "What's going on?" called a voice behind them as the doors opened. "Chief," said the Marine quickly, pulling away and turning to her before standing at attention. Brett looked up at chief Doctor Jicks, a tired and frustrated look on her face as she stared down at him. "Doc, my friend, is he..."

"What's his name?" she asked, looking towards the Marine guard before back at Brett. "Raine Delex." She walked back inside, emerging quickly with a list. "Shattered femur, critical care. I'm sorry, you can't see him," she said softly, as

Brett got to his feet. He opened his mouth to speak, only for a voice to call out from inside. "Doc! We've got heavy bleeding!" Jicks turned around, rushing inside, the doors closing quickly behind her. Brett took a step forwards, but a hand quickly blocked his way. "You heard her, there's nothing you can do here."

Brett glowered at the Marine, but, as the Marine stepped in front of the doors, he backed off, turning around and walking off. Brett headed quickly down the ship, his vision blurring as he squeezed the Marine tag in his hand, the blood on it smearing into his palm. He pushed his way into a small cupboard, kicking a bucket and sitting down on the floor, a large puddle of water covering the bottom. He dropped his head into his hands, sobbing as he desperately wiped his eyes, dropping the tag with a splash.

"No, no, no," he said quickly, dropping his hands and turning around as he fumbled in the dirty seawater. The doors behind him slammed open, illuminating the darkness. "You've been requested," stated Violette quietly. Brett looked up at her, his nose dripping. "I... I can't," he said, dropping his head and sitting in the water. Violette let out a quiet whine as she tried to cover her own sob. "You-you need to. Otherwise... They won't let me see him... and... Axel," she cried.

Brett looked down, a faint glimmer in the water. He grabbed it, pulling out the metal tag: Axel's name written upon it, and the blood washed from it. He looked up at her and she knelt next to him. "Are we all dead?" she whispered, her eyes bloodshot. He shook his head. "Not yet. Not if I can help it. Who needs us?" he asked. Violette opened her mouth to speak, but only a squeak came out. She cleared her throat. "Wulf, Kai, and Vanathur. They only need you – for an away mission on some islands."

"Those assholes?" he asked. Violette chuckled, wiping her eyes before nodding. "I guess I better go see what the Commander needs," he said quietly, before standing up and stepping out of the cupboard. Violette nodded, taking his hand as he offered it. "Raine..." she said quietly. He hugged her tightly, Axel's tag hanging from his hand. "He's still alive. I'll find a way to save him. Can you look after him until I get back?" She nodded and he stepped away from her. "Save us all," she said to him. He smiled, pocketing Axel's tag and standing tall. "Who else would?"

Chapter 60: Quenching a Thirst

Alara stood on the sands outside of the Lone Wanderer, flicking through the list of items needed for the ship and its crew. It wasn't overly long. The generic nature of their immediate requirements: food, water, helped shorten the list, but every item was truly needed, if they had any hope of sailing again, or stabilizing their injured. Alara nodded, separating the copies and handing them out to those who needed them: Wulf and Astris – the Quartermaster already had his own copy.

"Do we have everything and everyone?" Alara asked Wulf. He glanced around at the various Marines stood around them, checking their equipment. "Yes Commander." She nodded in acknowledgment, running through her lines and turning to face the group. "Attention!" she called out, they all stood up straight, all apart from Brett. "First of all, I want to thank you all. The situation is dire, I won't lie, but every one of you have stepped up and done your duty. We have lost friends, family, but we still remain. Our mission is simple, in my hands, as well as the Quartermaster, and Lieutenants Wulf and Kai, is a list of everything we need to look out for. Familiarise yourself with what we are looking for, we have lives counting on us to get them home. Squad A you're with myself and Wulf, Squad B with Kai and the Quartermaster. Let's save some lives, people!"

"Oorah!" responded her Marines, falling out into their groups and heading to their squad's vessel. "You're getting better at those," Astris said quietly to her. Alara nodded. "You're giving the next one. Meet you on shore." Astris nodded in acknowledgment, stepping away and joining her Marines. They clambered on board their vessels, waiting nearby in the waters. They were little more than two pontoons and a sail, with a mesh net between for the crew to sit on. The squad fit comfortably, with enough space for several more members, and, with the sail raised, they departed.

Alara sat near the middle, the spray splashing her face and the wind in her ears. The pair of boats sailed in tandem, Alara's leading the way as they bounded across the sea. The crew sat in silence for the majority of the hour, the weight of their task overwhelming, their losses still heavy, but finally, as they reached an equidistant point from the trio of islands, Alara spoke up. "Brett! Which island are we most likely to find water on?" she called out, across the roar of the water.

He glanced at the three: one had a dormant volcano, the other two didn't look particularly different from each other. "That one," he answered, avoiding Alara's title, pointing to the island with the volcano. A few of the Marines glanced at him,

but Alara ignored the minor disrespect. "Witchford, signal the others," she ordered. "Aye Commander," he responded, signalling with his hands and a mirror. A response of acknowledgment came from the other squad, the boats changing their course to head to the island.

They landed their boats on a small, covered beach, a vanguard quickly dropping from each vessel and scanning the area with their rifles. "All clear!" they yelled, Alara sliding off the side into the knee-height water. She glanced up at the large trees around them. "Will these do?" she asked the Quartermaster. He glanced at them, eventually nodding. "They better," Alara muttered, pointing at two Marines to tie the vessels to the trees. "Fall in!"

"Our immediate priority is getting the Lone Wanderer operational again. To do that, we're going to ferry logs for our engineers to work with," Alara stated. She pointed at four pairs of Marines. "You eight are to stay with the Quartermaster. Establish a camp, a guard, and cut down as many trees as you can." Alara then pointed to another two pairs. "You four will ferry the logs home. Create a supply chain and get additional workers if needed. The rest of you are with me. Our immediate priority is water."

"Aye Commander!" echoed almost all of the voices. As the Marines headed off with the Quartermaster, Alara turned and looked at Brett. "You're taking point. Lead on." Brett rolled his eyes, turned and headed immediately onwards into the foliage. The other Marines glanced at Alara, but she ignored it. "Let's go," she said, stepping after him, her squad following closely behind, the majority holding small empty barrels.

It wasn't long before Astris made her way along the group to walk next to Alara. "Are we just going to ignore Brett's blatant disrespect?" she whispered. "Commander," she quickly followed up with, realising her own error. Alara shook her head. "For now, it's not a pressing issue. I've noticed it, but we've got bigger problems... and he did lose Axel. So, I'm giving him some leeway." "Respectfully, we all lost Axel. That's not an excuse, and I think it may cause problems if left unchecked."

Alara nodded, glancing up only to falter as she could no longer see Brett. A whistle came from above. "We're wasting time, this way!" he stated from the top of a large rock at the base of the volcano. Alara wiped the sweat from her brow, the humidity of the island swiftly wearing her down, especially as she shook the dregs of her water container. She glanced back, Wulf was stood up straight, his head to the sky as he panted. Witchford and the other Marines also looked

exhausted from the humid march, but Alara knew they couldn't stop, time was running out. "Come on, we'll rest soon," she stated, forcing her legs onwards as she headed towards the beginnings of the route Brett had taken to climb.

The walk was slow as they ascended the side of the volcano, following a natural pathway in the side. Brett had disappeared, but, as she stumbled onwards exhausted and overheated, she couldn't care less. Finally, as they stood around halfway up the volcano, she spotted him. He was crouched down, holding his head. "Brett!" Alara wheezed. He glanced towards her before glancing back, pointing onwards.

Alara wanted to strangle him, but she ignored her urges, stepping closer and following his finger. Below them, a little ways away were several large holes in a flatter part of the mountain. Most were full of water. "Water," muttered Alara. "Water?" questioned Astris behind her, followed by the word repeating down the line. "Otter?" questioned the Marine at the back. Alara nodded, pointing. "Water!" she said triumphantly, followed by several relieved cheers. "How do we get down there?" asked Wulf. Immediately the relief faded.

After a short rest, and a bit of backtracking, the group stood on the flat rock, glancing at the multiple pools of water around them. "Check the water sources, all of them!" Brett called out, as a few Marines went to refill their canteens. "Do it, chemical tests. Don't drink just yet," Alara followed with, taking a sample and testing it using a kit in her backpack. After verifying the water was safe to drink in two of the pools, the group relaxed, their thirst quenched and a momentary feeling of joy gracing them after a horrible day.

"Well, we've completed two objectives," Wulf said, as he sat with Alara, Astris and Witchford. The group nodded. "Unfortunately, we don't have a means of creating purifiers," stated Astris. "Without the sponge... We need to set up a supply chain, get as much as we can back to the ship." Alara nodded in agreement, but Witchford held up a hand. "You can speak freely." Witchford nodded, adjusting his spectacles. "Not all of the water pools are clean, something must have purified those two, or at the very least they aren't contaminated. That one in particular is considerably deep."

"I take your point," Alara stated, standing up. She glanced down at Wulf. "Please, no," he begged, immediately guessing what she wanted from him. "You're the best swimmer. Besides given how hot it is, I'd have thought you'd be begging for a swim," she stated, crossing her arms. He let out a defeated sigh, standing up and placing his rifle and backpack on the floor. "On it, Commander."

He waddled over to the deepest pool of water, the bottom angling off into darkness towards the volcano, before taking a deep breath and jumping in.

The other Marines glanced over, standing up to investigate as they began to crowd around the large pool. Wulf swam deeper and deeper, eventually disappearing out of sight. "How long do we give him?" asked Astris, glancing at her watch and beginning to time him. "Two minutes," Alara stated. The other Marines stared at her. "He can hold his breath for longer, but I'm going in after him if it reaches that point. In the meantime, load up every container you have."

The first minute passed quickly with no trace of Wulf at all. Nervously, Alara began to pace back and forth, Astris staring at her watch whilst Witchford watched the water. "Come on Wulf," muttered Witchford. Alara and Astris met each other's eyes. "Two minutes," Astris stated. Alara nodded, diving in without hesitation and descending into the darkness. As she swam underneath the bend in the rock, a figure bumped into her.

Wulf stared at her in confusion, pointing rapidly upwards as he swam past her. They breached the surface, taking in large gasps of air as Wulf floated on his back. "There's a cave," he said at last, before holding out a lump of yellow and orange sponge. "Is this it?" he quickly followed up with, throwing the sponge to Witchford. After a few tense moments of speculation, Witchford nodded. "The Quartermaster will know for sure, but I believe this is what we need."

Several of the Marines around the group made minor celebratory gestures, quickly heading back to filling their canisters as Astris glanced towards them. "There's a lot more, the swim is short, but there's something else in the connecting cave. A crab of some kind, guarding what looked like a chest." "A crab?" asked Witchford, glancing towards Alara as she trod water. "A chest?" asked Astris.

"It might be worth a look," stated Alara. "Witchford, manage the group. Astris time to get your hair wet." Astris let out a sigh, taking her pistols out of her holsters and sealing them in a bag before tucking them inside her coat. "Why me," she muttered, taking her beret off and leaving it on the side before diving in. "Ten minutes, then send search and rescue," Alara ordered, taking a deep breath and diving down, Wulf close behind her.

Although the water was extremely clear, the darkness quickly shrouded their vision. Thankfully, the walls of the underwater cave were easy to follow, swiftly curving upwards after a deep dive. Wulf tapped her ankle as she swam upwards,

drawing her attention to the large mass of sponge on the inside wall of the tunnel. She nodded, uncertain if he could see her, before resuming her ascent, her lungs bursting.

She breached, taking in a large gasp of air and quickly assessing her surroundings. The cave wasn't particularly large, but the air smelt fresh, if a little wet. Moss had grown around the edges of the water, spreading out across the walls of the cave, the faintest shimmer of light reflecting off the water as several beams of light passed through tiny cracks in the ceiling. "Over there," whispered Wulf, pointing a little further along the water into the cave.

It took a moment for Alara to spot the creature, she had been looking for something in front of the small, illuminated wooden chest. The colossal creature hung from the wall behind, at least three meters in width with a black shell. "Woah," muttered Astris. "We've got to take a look, right?" she asked. Alara immediately shook her head. "No way. Too much of a risk. Let's get the sponge and get out of here."

"Oh," said Wulf and Astris disappointedly. Alara glanced down at the small chest, its contents a complete and utter mystery. She looked back under the water and then finally at the giant crab, before letting out a sigh. "Okay, fine, let's go. We do this quietly. A quick look, and if we disturb it, we scare it off with noise and retreat to the water. Am I understood?" she asked. The pair nodded vigorously, swimming quietly to the water's edge and climbing out.

Wulf drew his large sword from behind his lower back as Astris pulled her pistols out, checking their chambers for any water before nodding. Alara climbed out after them, following closely before creeping between them towards the knee-height chest. The crab remained motionless; its eyes hidden in the darkness. Slowly she reached out, only to get yanked backwards as a large claw lunged at her, the crab scuttling quickly to guard the box.

"Engage!" Alara stated, taking her glaive off her back and assembling the two pieces. Wulf yelled as he swung with his sword, the crab quickly blocking with its large claw, the other appendage significantly smaller in comparison. "Clear the way!" Astris called, Wulf jumping to the side and allowing her to unload the twelve shots in her two pistols. She left a delay between her first two shots and the rest, the first bullets piercing the smaller claw as the creature lifted its larger appendage.

Foam formed at its mouth, and it quickly backed away, Astris aiming her remaining shots directly in front of the creature as she encouraged it to flee further into the cave. It quickly disappeared into the darkness, Wulf stepping forwards to cover Astris as she reloaded, the faint sound of clicking echoing from down the cave. "All yours, Commander," stated Wulf, securing the chest. She nodded, wasting no time and pulling the lid open.

Metal coins and gemstones littered the inside, with a small crimson vial displayed prominently on top. "Score!" stated Astris, lowering her pistols and stepping closer. Alara reached out, picking up the glass vial and holding it to the light, the top sealed with a cork stopper. "Is this a healing potion?" she asked. Astris took it gently, shaking it slightly and watching closely – a faint silver shimmer emerged before disappearing. "A minor one, could be useful," she stated, handing it to Alara.

Alara nodded, tucking it into one of her pockets, before glancing down at the chest of loot. "What do we do with the treasure?" asked Astris, glancing at Wulf as he stepped back to join them. "Take it with us, surely?" he stated. Alara shook her head, much to both their disappointment. "We don't have the means to take it, nor is it any use for our situation. We'll leave it here." Astris and Wulf opened their mouths to protest, but they quickly both admitted she was right.

Alara reached down, sifting through the coins and collecting the various large gemstones. "These I can think of some use for," she stated, placing them deep into her backpack. "What use?" Astris questioned. Alara glanced up at her, biting her lip as she questioned what to say. "This stays between the three of us, and I mean only the three of us. No Riley, no Witchford, no one. Am I understood?" she stated. The pair looked at each other before back at her, nodding in agreement. "The Captain knows magic, he used a gemstone to save the Commander's life. Maybe this healing potion could revive him, he could... It's an idea."

"Alara, that's... that's not possible. A Captain of the Empire, a Mage?" Astris stated. "What greater weapon is there than to turn an enemy into a friend? Use an enemy's weapons against them. Both are in the Marine handbook," stated Wulf, helping to sift through the coins for any more stones. "We can't possibly be thinking of using magic to save our crew?" asked Astris, causing the pair to falter. "I don't know... it's worth the thought," Alara stated, standing up. "We'll approach it if it comes to it, let's get back to the others. Time is running out."

With the gemstones in their bags, they leapt back into the water, cutting off large slabs of the sponge before swimming back to the others. "Oh, thank goodness!" stated Witchford as they broke the surface, taking the sponge from them. "Anything to report?" Alara asked. Witchford shook his head. "Good. Let's get back to the ship. Sun's starting to set," she stated, climbing out and shaking off the water, her Marines quickly standing to attention.

They tracked quickly back through the forest, following their compass back to the camp. A large clearing had been made, the Marines sweaty and still hard at work as they dragged a log across the sands to the beach. "Commander!" stated one, noticing the group as they emerged from the foliage. "Good news?" asked Quartermaster Toger. Alara nodded, indicating with her head for the Marines carrying the sponge to step forwards.

"Drink up!" she called out to the weary Marines, the thirsty group rushing to the containers with their cannisters. "Now's your turn for good news," Alara stated, as Toger held and closely inspected the large pieces of sponge. "This is what we're looking for," he stated, pulling out a small knife and cutting out small circles in the sponge, placing the pieces into a container before discarding the majority. Alara stared at the vivisected slab by her feet. "Only that much?" she asked as he began to cut the next slab.

"Aye, but it is more than enough. It'll grow, and we can use that growth to expand our water supply. Any food? Medicine?" he asked. Alara shook her head, her stomach rumbling, a strong craving for crab in her mouth. "Damn. Still, water and wood, it's a necessary start." Alara nodded, glancing at the tired group around her. "Marines! You've all done fantastically, thank you. We have a water supply, and materials to repair our ship, due to your efforts. Stand tall, stand proud. When we get back to the ship, get a good night's sleep, we have more work to do tomorrow." Small smiles emerged, the group nodding and relief setting in. Alara turned to the Quartermaster. "If you're ready, let's go home?" she asked, offering her canteen to him. He nodded, smacking his cracked lips and drinking it quickly.

They sailed quickly back to the vessel, the weary group struggling to keep their eyes open, but they arrived without issue, dismantling the two vessels and storing them on the sands. Alara glanced at the Lone Wanderer: a workstation had been erected outside, the majority of the logs already sawn up into planks. The Lone Wanderer had been propped up, several large logs had been used to

create supports, ensuring the ship wouldn't topple any more, allowing the engineers to work safely on the hull.

A neat perimeter of guards stood around the ship and the workstation, a few corpses of the lobster-like creatures laying on the sands. As Alara listened and read through the various reports handed to her, she noticed a few of the critically injured Marines were now listed as stable – a few now also had lines cutting through their names. She raised an eyebrow curiously as she spotted a flare gun sat on a workbench, a few expended cartridges next to it. Doctor Jicks quickly pointed out a few of the names previously marked as missing, now marked in yellow, one now was confirmed dead.

"Mostly good news then?" Alara said with a nervous chuckle, as she stood on the sands with the Senior crew. "We're still alive, so I would say so. Water is being distributed as we speak, and the ship will be repaired for two days' time," stated Shipwright Moire. "That soon?" Alara asked. Verity nodded, a blue bandana covering her red hair, her Marine jacket tied around her waist as she spun a hammer in her hands.

"Provided she holds, we should be able to limp the seven days and nights needed," she stated, glancing towards Witchford. He nodded in agreement. Franky Bo the Cook raised a hand. "Food is still an issue," he stated, his small beady eyes nervous as he rubbed the back of his large, hairless head. "We might make the journey on the traces we have, but I fear we'll lose some lives on route. Also... for the sake of the away team, I've taken the liberty of diverting extra resources to feed you and your group."

"Franky, I can't possibly allow that," Alara quickly stated. He shook his head. "Apologies Commander, as head Cook it is on me to keep the crew alive. And you're our best hope." He patted his large stomach. "I have reserves, and the other Cooks agreed to give you our shares. I expect empty bowls." Alara let out a sigh, nodding. "Thank you." He smiled, nodding in acknowledgement. "Okay, good work people. Keep up the good work." They nodded, departing promptly until only Alara and her friends, and the guards, remained.

Riley let out a loud yawn. "Has a regular shift been established for the guards?" asked Astris. "What do you take me for?" asked Riley, an immediate barrage of insults flying her way. "Okay fine, fair enough," she stated, holding her hands up in admittance. "Ma'am," added Astris childishly, a few surrounding guards stifling laughs and hiding smiles. "I'm acting as the same rank as you," she protested.

"You're acting Lieutenant. I'm acting Lieutenant to the Lieutenant Commander," stated Astris smugly, before sticking out her tongue. Riley rolled her eyes. "We are still all only acting Lieutenants, the only one with an official rank is the Commander," Witchford intercepted, as Astris began to threaten disciplinary charges, whilst Alara watched with bemusement. "You're both equal rank, besides if its anyone of us in charge it's me! Right Axel?" Wulf said with a grin, turning unconsciously to his left.

The silence echoed. A shadow fell across Wulf's face as he glanced down at the empty space. "Oh..." he said softly, his smile fading, as his eyes began to water. "He's really dead. Isn't he?" Astris asked quietly, her eyes wide and in shock. "How? Why him?" questioned Alara, tears dripping from her chin. "It should have been me," muttered Wulf, a gentle hand placing itself on his shoulder from Witchford. "It could have been any of us," he rationalised. Riley nodded, turning on her heels and walking towards the ship, her shoulders shaking.

Alara let out a long sigh before wiping her nose. The others looked at her and she nodded, following after Riley and climbing back onto the Lone Wanderer. She glanced up at the stars sparkling above her: an endless sea of light with next to no clouds. Eventually she glanced down, her heart sinking as she looked at the long line of bodies across the deck, covered in large white sheets. Riley turned and glanced up at her as she stood on the steps leading below deck. "We won't lose anyone else, will we?" she asked, with barely a whisper. Alara shook her head, the ghosts of the crew looking directly at her. "I hope not."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Mother's Worry

"Admiral! Admiral!" yelled the familiar voice of Cassandra's personal aide, Sylvie Gamble, as she barged through the office door. A flash of irritation quickly sparked across the Admiral's face as she glanced away from her guests, sat across from her in front of her desk, to the sweaty, green-haired woman clutching a document in her hand. Cassandra glanced back towards her guests, a tall man with golden gauntlets on his forearms, and a woman with long light-brown hair. "Apologies for the interruption. My aide-de-camp would not do so without reason. Sylvie," she stated, standing up and walking past her guests.

"Admiral," she said softly, holding out the piece of paper. "I'm sorry." Cassandra frowned, taking the piece of paper in her hands. She stumbled slightly, instinctively grabbing onto the Serpent's chair to stable herself as she gasped. "Admiral?" she questioned, standing up, the Phoenix glancing over with mild

curiosity. "Please, get out. I need a moment of privacy, then we'll resume," Cassandra stated, raising a hand to her eyes before walking back to her chair and slumping down. The pair glanced at each other before nodding, stepping up and walking to the door before shutting it behind them.

Cassandra clenched her fist, her knuckles turning white before she slammed her fist into her desk, cracking the wood. "When did this come through?" she asked. "An hour ago. There's been no further contact with the Lone Wanderer. Cannon fire was confirmed," Sylvie stated, walking around and resting a hand on Cassandra's shoulder. "We don't have a precise location, we don't know where they are, or their status," she intercepted, as Cassandra opened her mouth to speak.

Cassandra shrunk into her chair. "Who did it?" she asked quietly, her voice broken, yet radiating pure malice. "We don't know." Slowly Cassandra nodded, a silent tear dripping down her cheek before falling from her chin. She sniffed, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. "Cass, she may still..." Cassandra shook her head before turning it into a nod, standing up and wiping her cheek before walking towards the door. "We can call them back later," Sylvie suggested. "They're two of the Guild's Masters, there may not be another chance."

"Cass, be yourself, not the Red Admiral. They can wait." Slowly she glanced backwards. "I can't. My daughter may be dead. Or she may be dying, alone. And I can't do anything to help her because I don't know where she is. So, I need to work, until I find someone to kill for hurting her. Tell Philip for me, send word to Jayce," she said with barely a whisper, pulling the door open. "Sorry about that, a bit of bad, personal news. Where were we?"

Chapter 61: Freezing Desperation

Alara did not sleep well. Try and try as she did, she would wake every half an hour to a scream, a gunshot, a cry for help: the ghosts of her crew would not let her rest. "Alara," echoed the ghost of Axel, floating over her as she lay paralysed in her bed. She blinked, the darkness of the room fading into the soft sunlight of the early morning. Beams of light floated in through her cracked window, illuminating the Marines sleeping soundly on her bedroom floor.

Wearily she rubbed her eyes, the nightmare not over. She steadily got to her feet, careful not to step on the crew taking refuge in her room, their own rooms flooded, or full of injured. She reached over to her desk, grabbing the hastily written letter she wanted to send Jayce, as well as her uniform and weapon. Slowly she stepped across her bedroom floor, carrying her things to the door before slipping outside into the hallway.

She took an immediate left, stepping through the open doorway into the officers' lounge. "Morning, Commander," called an injured Marine from one of the sofas, his arm held in a sling. The various others in the room stated their own greetings, the rest asleep on the floor or furniture. "Morning all, how are we feeling?" she asked, heading over to one of the sinks and turning on the tap. It coughed, eventually turning into a splutter before spitting out a faint stream of fresh water.

She listened to their various complaints as she splashed her face, quickly turning off the tap so as not to waste their precious resource. "We are going to make it. Right, Commander?" questioned Elene, one of the recruits from the other squad, her right eye hidden behind bloodied bandages. Alara nodded, picking up her uniform before glancing back to the collection of injured. Wordlessly, they glanced away, granting her privacy, and allowing her to get dressed. Alara dropped off her pyjamas back in her room, a Marine having already moved onto her bed for better rest, before she made her way topside, stretching as she prepared herself for the day ahead.

A neat stack of reports was waiting for her, held tightly in Astris' arms as she sat on the main deck. "Morning Alar- Commander," she stated, standing up. "It's Alara, Astris. Whenever it's just us, please always call me my name. You're my friend, that will always supersede rank in my eyes. What do you have for me, Astris?" Alara asked, with a soft smile. Astris nodded, handing over the stack of documents before turning away to face an area of the ship not covered in white cloth. She struggled to find a space without a corpse, eventually setting her sad, obsidian eyes on the rising sun.

Alara glanced at the changes: another three deceased, water was back and readily available, food was critical, medical supplies were critical, morale was low, and repairs were a day-and-a-half off completion. She let out a sigh, continuing to read the positives and the negatives. Eventually she just nodded in resigned acceptance, before stepping next to Astris and looking out at the sun as it hovered over the ocean. "How did you sleep?" Astris asked, turning around. "Terribly. You?" Alara answered, her hand stinging as she took off the dirty bandages. Astris shook her head, remaining silent. "Are the others up yet?" Alara asked. "The squads are eating as we speak, we'll be ready to move soon. They're pretty restless as well." Alara nodded, taking in a deep breath of fresh air before forcing a smile. "Good. Let's make this day count. We have lives still to save." "Aye Commander."

After dipping her wounded hand in the ocean, and stating the day's objectives to her squads, the group got into their dinghies, setting sail and once again leaving the injured Lone Wanderer behind. They sailed quickly, the group weary but determined as they sailed in silence, only breaking that silence as Alara once again turned to Anson Brett. "Medical supplies are the priority. Where to?" she asked.

Brett pointed without looking, without even acknowledging Alara's question. He hadn't slept, and he had long been aware of his answer before Alara had even asked. The other Marines glanced between Alara and Brett, waiting for the disciplinary owed for Brett's continued disrespect, but once again Alara ignored it. "What's your reasoning?" Alara asked, crossing her arms and staring intently at him. "The treeline is thinner. The more space between trees, the easier it is for ground-based plants to grow. If we're looking for medicinal herbs, there's a higher chance on that island. The other island looks like the trees are fruit bearing. Probably more animal life: food," he answered arrogantly.

Alara nodded. "Set a course. Relay the information to the other squad," she ordered, glancing towards their destination. "We also need to be on the lookout for frost algae, also known as frost moss, depending on where you're from," stated Toger the Quartermaster. "Without it we can't keep the food we find, or the medicines we make, fresh," he added. Alara nodded in acknowledgment, an uncomfortable feeling running through her, as once again she felt the weight of her crew's lives on her shoulders.

They landed the boats, dragging them out of the water and tying them to nearby trees before collecting together. "I need six volunteers to stay with the boats,"

Alara began, nodding to those who offered. "The rest of us will stick together. We'll find what we need and then send back runners to drop off our findings. Keep your eyes and ears peeled, there's no telling what we'll find. But once again, lives are counting on us. Let's get the job done."

The various Marines nodded, spreading out and checking their supplies. Alara glanced towards Brett as he stared up at the canopy, eventually lowering his gaze to meet hers, his icy blue eyes staring through her. He scowled and she turned away, summoned by another Marine. Wulf frowned as he watched the encounter, a few of the other Marines under his command watching as well as Brett slowly and silently made his way closer to Alara, her back turned to him.

"What are you doing?" Wulf asked suspiciously. Brett quickly drew his knife, throwing the blade in Alara's direction, Wulf's men raising their rifles immediately and aiming them towards him. A body dropped to the floor to Alara's left: a giant snake, several metres in length, a knife through its skull. Alara span around, glancing at Brett, her eyes wide, but he ignored her, looking instead at the various Marines around him, all with their weapons aimed towards him.

"What?" he scoffed, stepping towards Alara and retrieving his knife. Wulf placed a hand on the nearest Marine's rifle, lowering it down, the others following his silent command. "Good spot," Alara muttered. "Keep an eye on the foliage, there may be more hidden in the undergrowth or canopy," she stated. Two of the Marines stepped forwards and collected the body, before carrying it to the boat – meat for later. "I hate snakes," muttered Astris, before scowling as Wulf hissed at her, much to the bemusement of his Marines.

After noting their current location, the troop departed, setting off into the forest with Brett once again leading the way. They walked for a while, but every so often Brett would stop, taking a look at his surroundings before changing direction. Each time, Astris and Wulf would glance nervously at each other, no longer quite as certain in his skills, but eventually a squealing caused the entire group to falter.

"It's a boar!" stated Wulf, his mouth watering as he stared at the large hog a few metres away. A Marine raised a rifle, aiming towards the creature, but Brett held up a hand. "Wait!" he stated, Alara holding her hand out and stopping the Marine. "What's wrong?" she asked. Slowly he pointed, the group not quite certain of what he was pointing at, until they readjusted their positioning. A considerable trail had been made through the undergrowth: a path, the dirt marked with hooves. "That's a lot of boars," muttered Astris.

"Males are solitary. If we can follow this one, it might lead us to others," suggested Brett. "Good suggestion. Wulf, give it some encouragement," ordered Alara. Wulf made himself look as menacing as possible, creeping towards the large creature as he followed the trail. "Come here piggy!" he called out, as the creature darted off along the path. Wulf grinned as he turned and glanced at the group. "Good to know I'm still the scariest thing around!" he boasted proudly.

Immediately, a creature pounced upon him from the canopy above. "Shit!" swore multiple members of the group, lunging for their rifles or sidearms as the giant spider slammed Wulf to the ground under a large net of webbing. "Help! Help!" Wulf cried, pinned by the creature nearly twice his size. Its limbs were huge, its body thin and narrow with a large head. Astris was the first to fire, hitting the giant casting spider directly in its limbs, blue blood splattering across its green and brown skin.

The creature scuttled quickly, turning to face the group, only to receive a barrage of bullets from the remaining Marines. It let out a loud chittering screech before collapsing to the ground on top of Wulf. "Wulf!" cried Alara, stepping forwards, only to falter and glance upwards to check for more of the creatures. "Get this bloody thing off of me!" groaned the trapped baned, a few Marines chuckling before going to help.

With the body moved, Wulf remained trapped to the floor, pinned under the heavy webbing, but with a collective effort the group managed to free him. "What the hell was that?" he asked, drawing his sword and stabbing the corpse for his own good measure. "A giant casting spider," stated Witchford, pulling out his notebook and sketching inside. "Keep a look out for more. Snakes, spiders, play it safe," Alara stated. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly, as Wulf cleaned his blade. He nodded, putting the sword away. "I hate spiders." As soon as his back was turned, Astris put her palms together, forming eight legs and walking them across his back. He yelped, much to the bemusement of the group.

After recollecting themselves, they set off back along the trail, following the boar's last whereabouts. Every-so-often Brett, or Wulf, would stop, pointing out another of the giant spiders, or a snake, the group either engaging the creature with their rifles or circling around the area. Eventually, Wulf stopped, his dark ears flicking. "What is it?" Astris asked, whistling and drawing Alara's attention. He turned his head, glancing deeper into the forest. "I hear... buzzing," he stated, stepping out of the group and leading the way.

It didn't take long, but the group found themselves staring up at a giant beehive attached to a large tree. "Good find," stated the Quartermaster. "The Chief will be appreciative of this, might save some lives," he added, patting Wulf on the back. "How do we get it down?" Wulf asked, slowly lowering his gaze to see the entire group staring at him. "You've got to be kidding me!" he stated. Alara patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry Wulf. You're the best suited."

He let out a long sigh, taking off his backpack and using his claws to climb the tree. The hive fell to the ground with a crash, the group quickly backing away before one of the Ensigns rushed forwards. "Wait, wait, wait, wait!" she stated, ignoring the angry swarm as she looked inside, eventually reaching down and picking up a large cluster of bees with her hands. She then carried the swarm to another tree, placing the group onto its surface before returning to help Wulf pack up the hive into a bag.

"Ensign Hynn, what did you do?" Alara asked, as Wulf and the Ensign returned to the fold, carrying a slightly buzzing bag in their arms. "I saved the queen, Commander. They should hopefully start on a new hive. This way there's a chance," stated Ensign Clara Hynn. "We keep hives back home," she quickly stated, noticing the group glancing towards her. "Very good, well done," Alara stated, glancing back towards Brett. "Let's keep moving."

They quickly returned back to their original path, heading onwards into the centre of the island. The buzzing in Wulf's bag quickly died out - enough openings had been left for any stragglers to escape. Upon Ensign Hynn's insistence, Wulf passed the heavy bag over to her, allowing him to return to the front unencumbered. "I'm starting to believe I've seen these trees before, Commander," Wulf muttered quietly, as he walked next to her.

She nodded, her own thoughts mirroring his. "Maybe we need to take a moment to reconfigure our positioning," Alara stated, indicating for the group to stop. Brett kept walking, whilst everyone else halted. "Brett!" called out Astris. Slowly he turned, looking at the group with irritation. "What?" he asked. Once again, the other Marines looked at each other. "We're going around in circles," stated Alara. "We're not," he stated quickly. "We don't have time to stand around."

"We're going to take a moment, and figure out where we need to go. Wasting time wandering around in circles won't help our crew," stated Alara, attempting to calm him down. Brett scowled, holding his hands up before turning around and shaking his head. Alara turned to others, only glancing back as they began to look upwards, watching as Brett clambered quickly up a tall tree. Wulf, Astris

and Witchford glanced towards Alara, all three of them silently expressing the same thought. "I'm handling it," she muttered, glaring back at them.

Eventually, Brett dropped back down from the tree, picking up his backpack and pointing. "As I said, this way," he stated, heading in a slightly different direction from before. The various members of the expedition glanced at each other before back at Alara and the other members of the command crew. "You heard him, let's make a move," she stated, following quickly after him in their new direction. Alara glanced back at Astris and Wulf, the pair exchanging silent words between themselves. "As long as he continues to do what is needed, it can be handled later. We need his insight, antagonising him may hurt that," she rationalised. They made no further glances, nor statements.

Not long after slightly altering their direction, the forest began to thin, until eventually the woods opened up into a large ring-shaped meadow, with a large and narrow tree planted in the centre. Brett turned to the Quartermaster. "Is this what we need?" he asked. After checking the area was safe, the Quartermaster made his way around the field, checking his notes and comparing sketches to the various plants. Eventually he collected some, returning to the group and presenting them to the various Marines before dispatching them.

The group recollected, Brett already ready with directions to the next meadow he had spotted from the top of the central tree. "There are four more," he stated, to the surprise and joy of the various Marines as they looked at their small collection of medicinal herbs, whilst consuming their rations. "Good job," Alara stated. He ignored her, but struggled to hide his smile. "We have a few hours left of daylight, we'll get what we can and head back. We can worry about food and the frost moss tomorrow."

The sun began to set as the group departed the island with their treasures. They had obtained multiple large bags of medicinal herbs, a beehive full of honey, and a few animals they had encountered along the way, but as Alara sat there in the dinghy, she couldn't help but notice the disappointed demeanour of her Marines. The exhaustion of the day had led to a collapse in travel formation: Astris and Wulf had both joined her vessel, whilst the Quartermaster had gone on the other dinghy.

She glanced towards Brett and Witchford as they sat near the bow before back at the various others. She opened her mouth to speak, but the voice of Ensign Che interrupted her. "What the hell is that?" he asked, pointing directly portside at the remaining island they were yet to explore. Immediately, the various heads of

the group snapped around, staring at the large bipedal creature walking along the coast.

Mist rolled off the giant reptile, its back covered in bright white and cyan flowers that seemed embedded in its scales. It had a pair of large meaty legs, that made the creature look huge, even from the far distance the group held. It had a long powerful tail, split at the end, that dragged in the sand. A small pair of arms stopped at around its knees, long enough to pick things up, but not much else, and it had a huge gaping maw, the outside of its large jagged teeth decorated with more of the strange white and cyan plants.

"A frostmaw," muttered Witchford and Brett in unison, only for Brett to lung forwards, diving over the side of the dinghy and quickly swimming in the direction of the creature. "Brett! Get back here!" Alara yelled, to no avail, glancing around in panic at those around her. "Commander, what are your orders?" asked one of the Marines. She bit her lip, glancing back at the frostmaw as it turned and walked back into the forest, Brett continuing to swim after it. "Dammit! Okay, take the supplies back to the ship, then come pick us up in the morning." She stated, crossing the boat to stand on the pontoon.

"Commander, are you sure that's wise?" asked Witchford, staring at Alara before shaking his head. "As a Commander, no. But as his squad mate, we're the ones who stand the best chance of bringing him back safely. Witchford, Wulf, Astris, with me. Get the supplies to the Doctor, we'll be waiting for pickup tomorrow. See you soon Marines!" she stated, diving over the edge with Wulf, Witchford, and Astris close behind.

The water was cold, but the insulation in their uniform, as well as the floatation aids built in, helped against the cold and made the swimming easier. "I'm going to kill him!" growled Wulf, as they fought against the waves in pursuit of their comrade. "Why couldn't I have stayed behind? Why couldn't we have stayed behind?" whined Astris. Alara ignored them both, leading the way as they swam for the shore. She silently cursed herself as she swam. This had been her fault. It had to have been her fault.

She glanced up, watching as Brett clambered out of the water, shaking himself off before taking his rifle off his back. He set off into the brush, following the direction the frostmaw had headed. Alara dropped her head into the water, picking up the pace as best as she could until she hit the surf. Tired from the long day, and exhausted from the swim, the group dragged themselves out of the water, swearing loudly as they called Brett's name.

“That bastard!” yelled Astris, ringing out her dark hair before pulling out her pistols – opening the chambers and draining the weapons of water. Witchford and Wulf took off their own rifles, the water sliding over the coating covering their weapons before they drained any and all compartments. “Ready,” the three of them said, glancing to Alara as she took off and assembled her glaive. “We get him alive, Wolves. That doesn’t mean unbruised, but alive. We’re not losing any more of the Wolfpack!” she stated, following the trail.

Brett’s footprints were easy enough to track, the water trail had made his normally light footprints noticeable against the sand and dirt, but eventually they disappeared. Witchford ensured rest was not an option, quickly pointing out the much more noticeable tracks of the frostmaw, and the inevitable path Brett would have taken to follow. As the sand turned to dirt and the dirt turned to rock, a stern silence fell across the squad, their anger turning into quick concern as darkness fell across the island.

“I’ve lost the trail,” stated Wulf, glancing desperately around as he held up a torch. “Check the foliage, the extreme temperatures of the frostmaw would have damaged the plants around it,” instructed Witchford. A whistle cut through their search as Astris drew their attention to a slope leading towards a large cave. Alara patted her on the shoulder as she passed, sliding down the slope as she took the lead, her friends behind her.

They peeked inside the entrance: the walls were isometric, and a set of wide and dark stairs led downwards. “This cave is not of natural formation,” stated Witchford as they stepped cautiously inside. “No shit,” muttered Astris, putting a pistol in its holster so she could also hold a torch. “There’s fucking stairs.” “Stow it,” stated Alara, listening carefully. A roar shook the cave, followed by a loud yell, the voice undeniably belonging to Brett.

They raced down the steps, a soft glow illuminating the path ahead as they charged into a large and damp chamber. Brett stood ahead of them, holding his rifle tight in his arms as he stared directly at the large frostmaw in front of him. “Brett!” Alara called out, drawing his brief attention. The room was full of frost moss, the large open space decorated with the cold material. The walls of the dark chamber were patterned with ancient runes and symbols that none of the group recognised. Beyond it all, as the squad took in their surroundings, all of their gazes focused in upon the large nest build into the ruined remains of a sarcophagus, six blue eggs resting inside.

"Why did you follow?" Anson Brett called back, beads of sweat lining his brow as the large reptile stared down at him, its scales a dirt-brown colour and it's eyes a bright and intense yellow. "Brett, back away slowly," Astris stated, slowly lowering her pistols as the frostmaw glanced nervously towards them. Wulf and Witchford glanced at each other before slowly following her lead and lowering their weapons.

"I can't! We need this stuff! They need this stuff... otherwise, he'll die!" Brett stammered, readjusting his grip. Alara took a step forwards. "Brett, this is about Axel and Delex, isn't it?" she asked softly. He glanced back, before quickly focusing back on the frostmaw. "We can't let him die. I can't lose him too," he admitted, Axel's tag hanging from the end of his hand. "He won't. Delex is not critical. He's fine. He's not going anywhere," Alara stated.

Brett's shoulders slumped, the rifle lowering in his arms as he glanced back. "But... I saw the report. He-he's critical. The Chief, she wouldn't let me see him," he stated. "He has a shattered femur, it's a broken bone. A bad one, but he's fine. In a lot of pain, but fine. He needs a hospital to stand a chance to recover and he can't move, but, Anson, Raine is alive. That's not going to change. You should have asked me," Alara stated, taking one more step closer. He glanced back, relief across his face. "He's okay?" he asked, with a soft smile. Alara nodded. "He's okay," she reassured. "Step back, slowly." Brett nodded, turning to face the frostmaw as he gripped his rifle, taking a slow step backwards.

His heel landed on a rock fragment, slipping out from underneath him and causing him to stumble. A loud echoing bang rang out across the cavern as he accidentally fired his rifle, the bullet flying past the frostmaw into a far wall. It roared, spinning on its legs and hitting him hard with its tail, knocking his legs out from underneath him before carrying him onwards, sending him spiralling into one of the large patches of frost moss.

Brett screamed as his exposed face scraped against the extreme cold of the moss, ice spreading across the right side of his face, his skin splitting and cracking as it rapidly froze. "Wulf!" Alara yelled, rushing forwards with Astris towards Brett. Wulf rushed forwards, spreading his arms in front of the agitated frostmaw and attempting to hold it back. "Watch your exposed hand!" warned Astris, as Alara reached out to grab Brett. Alara quickly pulled back her bandaged hand, hooking her arm under his shoulder instead as Astris grabbed his other arm, the pair dragging him backwards out of the frost moss meadow onto a patch of clear

stone. "Witchford, get as much as you can!" Alara ordered, staring in horror at the blood and ice spreading across Brett's ruined face.

"Alara, the vial!" Astris stated, desperately scraping the traces of frost moss off Brett in an attempt to stop the rapidly spreading frost. Alara grabbed the healing potion from her pocket, pulling out the cork and tipping it over Brett's face. A blast of steam rose off him as the blood on his face evaporated and the frost disappeared. The large cracks in his skin melted together into a red scar covering almost the entirety of the right side of his face.

He lay there in Alara's lap, his icy blue eyes wide. His right eye had split, fusing back together to form a milky blue colour. "Brett! Brett! Anson, can you hear me?" Alara asked, his expression despondent and his breathing shallow. "He's going into shock, we need to get him out of here!" Astris stated, elevating his legs before glancing over towards Witchford as he quickly collected as much frost moss into a sealable bag as possible.

"Alara," Brett whispered, his eyes slowly looking up towards her. "I'm sorry, Commander," he muttered, reaching up and holding out Axel's tag. She scowled, hooking his arm over her shoulder as Astris supported his other side, the pair slowly lifting him to his feet. "Apologise later, asshole!" she yelled. She glanced back towards Wulf, his hand gently pressed on the nose of the now calm frostmaw. "We're leaving!" she stated, charging forwards as she and Astris half-dragged, half-carried Brett to the stairs.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Wolves

Darkness had completely covered the island, their feet sliding underneath them as they attempted to climb up the stone slope outside of the cave. "Swap," ordered Wulf, grabbing Brett from them with Witchford and using his spare hand to claw his way up the rock whilst Witchford used his rifle as a walking stick. "We need shelter. That cave might have been our best bet," Astris stated. "Probably, but I don't think the cold would have been good for Brett. We need a fire," stated Alara, shining her torch around them before eventually pointing at a large rock pressed against a tree above the cave entrance. "There."

They carried him quickly, gently placing him down before elevating his legs and burying him in their jackets. Wulf and Astris ran off in pursuit of kindling and wood to burn, whilst Witchford and Alara found rocks to build a fire pit. With fuel to burn and using the fire starters in their survival kits, they easily created a fire, crowding around the large source of heat as they finally got a chance to rest.

"Well that could have gone better," muttered Astris, as she buried her chin into her knees, glancing towards Brett as he slept.

"He is alive," stated Witchford. "I would consider that a success." Wulf shook his head. "Those burns... How could anyone call this a success?" he asked, wincing as he glanced at Brett's ruined face. "We have successfully obtained enough frost moss to provide a long-term means of food and medicine storage. As I said, he will live. Besides, what was it Axel always said whenever he was pained by his scar?"

"Chicks dig scars..." muttered Alara and Astris, the pair scoffing as they shook their heads. "That idiot," Alara said with a soft smile, as she dangled his tag from her bandaged hand. "He deserved better," Wulf said quietly, his eyes flicking from the tag to Brett as he opened a tiny part of his right eye. "He was the best of us," added Wulf, forming a tight fist. "It was my fault. He took that shot for me. Stepped in front of it before I could even react. I... I killed him."

"No..." muttered Brett, taking in a deep breath of air through his teeth before holding his arm to his eyes, a stream of tears flowing down his face. "No, you didn't. Axel would have taken that shot for anyone, even... even if it wasn't one of us. It's not your fault," he said painfully. "Axel died because of his own choice, don't take that away from him." Wulf stared at Brett in surprise, but slowly he glanced at the others, the group nodding in agreement.

They sat in silence, the fire crackling as tears flowed silently. "I'm going to try and find some food," Wulf said at last. Astris nodded, standing up to go with him. "I'll go with them, just in case," added Witchford, leaving Brett and Alara behind. "How bad is it?" Brett asked at last, slowly sitting up as Alara tossed another branch onto the fire. "I'm not going to lie. It's... bad," she admitted, slowly meeting his gaze from across the fire.

"Chicks dig scars. Do burns count?" he said, with a soft chuckle. Alara rolled her eyes, the pair returning to awkward silence. They both opened their mouths to speak, but Brett held out his hand – indicating that Alara should go first. "Can... Can you see out of your right eye?" she eventually asked. He nodded, closing one eye after the other. "This one's a little blurry, but yeah. I... Thank you. For saving my ass... and for telling me about Delex."

"You should have asked me. I know we're not... friends, but we're Wolves – squad mates. You should have trusted me," Alara stated, staring directly at him. He glanced down, looking into the fire. "You're right. I-I should have. I just... I

couldn't face losing him as well as Axel. I felt so... helpless." Alara shook her head. "That's not an excuse." He met her eyes, his widening slightly as she stared intensely at him, his burns a sign of his error, not hers. "We all lost Axel. Not just you, he was our friend too. You put yourself and us in danger. You've been disrespectful to command, plain rude to me. Cruel and unkind from the get-go because you didn't get your way. I--"

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I was jealous. I've always been jealous. And I let my ego get to me. You didn't deserve it - you don't deserve it. I'm sorry, Commander." He hung his head in shame. Alara let out a long sigh, eventually shaking her head and leaning back onto her backpack. "What happens now?" he asked at last. "I don't know, Brett. What do you want to happen? You abandoned the mission to go off on your own. Disobeyed orders. And have got yourself disfigured. What do I say to defend you?"

"You'd defend me?" he asked. Alara sat up to see him, squinting and pulling a face. "I don't have any more excuses. I made a mistake, but I got us what we need. I thought I was helping, but I can't yet see the results of my eagerness, so... I will accept any punishment you see fit, Commander. And from the deepest part of my shallow soul, and as the youngest son of the Brett name, I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you."

"Fine, apology accepted. You better hope Witchford and the Quartermaster are generous in their reports of your apology, and I'm going to work you to the bone back on the ship. But, okay. Brett, please don't put me in this position again." He nodded. "I promise Commander, you won't have an issue with me again. I owe you too much, and Axel wouldn't forgive me, when I finally see him again, if I was still a pain in your ass." Alara smirked, nodding in acceptance. "He would kick your ass into oblivion. I can only imagine how angry he would have been if he saw your face."

"You did what? You idiot! The one time I'm not here to save you and you make that ugly mug of yours even uglier! You dumbass," Brett mimicked, laying back and looking upwards. "He really was the best of us, wasn't he?" Alara said sadly. "He was... but you're not far off, Commander. I think I finally understand why he liked you so much," Brett said quietly. Alara's lip trembled as she covered her eyes. "Get some sleep - that's an order," she said quietly, glancing backwards as Wulf, Astris and Witchford came into view from the darkness carrying armfuls of fruit. "Yes ma'am."

Chapter 62: Salvation from the Isles

"We'll split up the night into shifts," Alara stated to Wulf, Witchford, and Astris, as Brett slept soundly. "The Commander and I will take the first four hours," stated Witchford, as the group snacked on the berries they had found. "Wake us when you're ready then," stated Wulf, glancing at Witchford and Astris before laying back and making himself comfortable. It took less than a minute before he transformed back into his human form, indicating he was asleep. "Wake me when you need to switch," stated Astris. Alara nodded and she too lay back, leaving Witchford and Alara alone with the remaining fruit and the dwindling fire.

It didn't take long for Witchford to speak up, an unusual occurrence for the typically stoic and quiet man. "Commander, can I ask you three questions?" The shadows flickered across his tanned skin, his green eyes glinting behind his spectacles. Alara nodded. "What are your intentions with Brett? What is the result of his actions? Is he to be punished?" he asked. Alara glanced over towards the sleeping Brett, shaking her head. "I think he's been punished enough. He will wear his mistake literally."

"That goes against protocol. He disobeyed direct orders, was disrespectful to command. The rules are clear on these things," Witchford stated. Alara nodded. "Sometimes the rules do not apply. He still has a chance to be useful, and he was apologetic. I think he's changed," she said quietly, glancing back to look up at Witchford. He nodded slowly, taking off his beret and rubbing his very short, dark hair.

"Is this why you consistently break the rules for Jayce Exarga?" he questioned. Alara's eyes widened. "Sorry? I don't quite... Wh-what do you mean?" "Your partner, boyfriend – he's a known criminal, yet you continue your relationship with him. Even if it is somewhat public knowledge, it's clearly overlooked because of his affiliation to the Red Admiral, and your affiliation to Admiral and Vice Admiral Exarga – it simply seems... illogical."

Alara stared at him, his own expression twisting as he struggled to condense his mind into words. "I cannot understand why you, or the Admirals, or even the Captain and Commander, can just disregard the rules. They are designed for a reason. Anson Brett broke multiple rules, he deserves to be punished, yet you intend for him to get away with it. If this had been another Marine, would you do the same? If you weren't adopted by Admiral Exarga, or in a relationship with her son, would you have been allowed to continue a relationship with a criminal

without consequence? If you weren't the child of Vice Admirals Silas and Victoire Vanathur would you have become a Lieutenant Commander?"

"I don't know," Alara answered quietly, staring at him as he unloaded his concerns in his own way. "I understand your views, I think. Maybe you're right. I am a hypocrite using my own position and powers to benefit those around me, but Brett doesn't deserve prison. Jayce is a criminal, but he is also a good person. A kind person, who I can trust and believe in... even if... he's a Pirate," she said. "How can a criminal be a good person? There is no such thing. A criminal is a criminal because they are bad. Because they broke the rules."

"Not every rule is a good one. Not all orders should be followed. There's not always a right way of doing things, and sometimes things take so long to change that good people are forced to do 'bad' things in the name of good," Alara rationalised, fidgeting with her palm. Witchford shook his head. "My family are simple people, I am a simple person. We own a shop, selling glass. My father makes windows, my mother makes art. My sister runs the accounts, my brother makes the trades. One night we were robbed. There was no money to take so they broke my father's glass and took my mother's art."

Alara looked at him with curiosity; Witchford had never spoken about his family before. "They destroyed the shop for no reason, for nothing other than out of spite. I tracked them down. My mother sold her art so I assumed they would attempt to as well. Instead they just broke it. Months, years of her work out of spite. There were no 'good' intentions, no good reason to rob us. They wanted money because they were too lazy to earn it themselves. Criminals can't be good. They are the villains, and they need to be punished."

Slowly he took off his gloves, his knuckles scarred. Alara nodded. "I think those thieves were bad people, but people do things for many reasons, not always out of their own choice. Jayce is a criminal because he wanted to save someone. A young Sorcerer called Wicke. She is a child, who would have been executed because she knew magic. Does a child deserve execution for knowing something others don't?" she asked.

Witchford paused, thinking deeply. "I do not know," he answered honestly. "What about you? You've broken the rules with us. Does that make you a bad person?" Alara pressed. Again Witchford paused, eventually shaking his head. "I guess not. Thank you, Commander. This has left me with much to think about." Alara nodded, lowering her chin to her knees as she stared at the flames. "Me too," she muttered.

Alara woke the following morning to the sound of sizzling and a strong smell of blood and meat. "Good morning, Commander," stated Astris as she tore into a large leg of meat, the carcass of a wild boar nearby. Alara glanced around, Brett, Wulf and Witchford were nowhere in sight. "They've gone to meet the others. Eat," she stated, offering a steaming leg from the fire. Alara took it, rubbing her eyes before taking a large bite. "Why didn't you wake me?" Alara asked.

"You looked so cute," Astris said, with a messy grin. Alara childishly stuck her tongue out at her. "You needed the sleep, and everything was handled. You're welcome," she stated. Alara glared at her. "Thank you Lieutenant Kai. You're the best Lieutenant I could ever ask for. You're so smart, kind, funny, pretty..." "Thank you for letting me sleep, Astris." Astris smiled, discarding the bone before standing up and wiping her gloves on her legs. "We should probably go." "Agreed, lead on."

They grabbed their things, putting out the fire before making their way to the beach, Astris leading the way. When they arrived, they found two squads of Marines waiting for them, collecting fruit from the numerous trees and tying the hunted boars onto large branches to carry more easily. "Commander," greeted Toger the Quartermaster. "Morning Quartermaster, anything to report?" she asked. He shook his head. "Little change, but we were just about to head back with the frost moss and the food Lieutenants Wulf and Witchford collected." Alara nodded. "Let's go then, time is wasting."

They sailed quickly, arriving back at the Lone Wanderer. Riley raced out across the sands, launching herself into Alara and Astris. "Thank goodness you're safe!" she stated. "We're fine," Astris stated, as she released them, looking them over before glancing in horror at Brett. "Holy..." she muttered. He nodded unashamedly. "Yeah, my fault," he stated. "I'm not going to do it again, don't worry," he quickly added as several Marines glanced at him.

"Speaking of," muttered Alara, glancing at two of the nearby Marine guards. They stepped forwards, grabbing Brett's arms. He tried to fight them off but, upon meeting Alara's gaze, he stopped resisting. "Anson Brett, as acting Commander, for disobeying orders and in acknowledgment of your successful acquisition of the frost moss, and the well-meaning motives behind it, I sentence you to the brig until tomorrow morning. Following which, you will be scrubbing toilets, emptying bed pans and otherwise offering your aid in menial labour in all and any capacity until we dock," she stated sternly. He nodded, putting up a faint smile. "Thank you, Ala- Commander. Thank you, Commander Vanathur."

"He can walk, but escort him," she added, the guards and Brett heading quickly away. Witchford glanced at Alara, and she met his gaze. "He didn't do it correctly, but he did a good job. Make sure the reports reflect it," she stated before looking towards the Quartermaster. Both he and Witchford nodded in acceptance. Alara then turned to lead Shipwright Verity Moire. "Status?" she asked. "Two hours, then we are ready to sail, Commander," she stated. Alara nodded. "You heard her, two hours to obtain as much food as possible from the island, then we drag the Lone Wanderer out of here. Get to work!" Alara ordered.

Alara wandered the ship as she waited for the time to tick by. Morale was high as food was finally handed out by the cooks, the various Marines feasting on the first proper meal in days. Alara then checked in on the Captain and the Commander. Both were unconscious, both looking rough, but they were both still alive. She checked in on her squad, the various members making themselves as useful as possible, like every other Marine, finding any and all jobs that needed doing. As she returned to the deck, she glanced at the large sheets covering the rows of bodies, noticing the new presence of frost moss as it spread across the corpses, slowing down their decay in an attempt to ward off disease.

She checked the final route Witchford had presented to her, glancing over the edge at the guards around the ship as they waited for their final orders. "All good!" stated Shipwright Moire, climbing up onto the main deck, her assistants behind her. "Then let's go!" Alara declared, to the cheers of various Marines nearby. "Everyone back on board!" she ordered, the guards backing away quickly from the surf, apart from two Marines equipped with large sledgehammers.

The guards quickly took up positions along the edge of the main deck. "Do it!" Alara ordered, the two remaining Marines smashing their hammers into the logs holding up the front of the ship. The hammers smashed through the mostly sawn logs, the pair quickly moving onto the next log, until the front of the Lone Wanderer dropped with a crash into the trench they had dug into the sand bank. "Lower the sails!" ordered Alara, her Marines working quickly and the ship slowly beginning to move forwards.

The back of the ship dropped as the final supports were broken, the ship free as it sailed away from the sand bank, the two remaining Marines rushing towards the remaining dinghy as the first of the giant lobsters emerged from the waters. They pushed clear, sailing quickly after the Lone Wanderer into open seas. "Status?" Alara asked, as the Lone Wanderer collected their remaining crew,

folding away the dinghy into one of the external holds on the side of the ship. "Small leak on deck one, being patched as we speak," Astris stated with a wide smile. "We're clear," Alara stated, wide-eyed as she looked at Astris. Astris nodded. "We're clear!" she yelled, to the cheers of everyone on the main deck. "Witchford, set course. Let's get our people home," Alara ordered, struggling to hold back her tears as she smiled uncontrollably. "Aye aye, Commander!"

Several days later, Alara stood exhausted as she hung onto the ship's wheel. "We should arrive in the next few hours," Witchford stated, as he leant onto the railing next to her, the ship shrouded in almost complete darkness, the sea a reflection of the endless stars above. Alara nodded, her eyes closing on their own. "I have the wheel," Witchford stated, taking it from her. She nodded. Stumbling backwards and sliding down the wall of the captain's quarters to sit down next to Astris and Riley as they slept on the floor. "Wake me in four hours, that's an order," she stated.

Alara awoke to the sound of seagulls flying above her. Witchford stood slumped over the wheel, making minor adjustments as he stared ahead at a large and rapidly approaching island. "Witchford!" Alara scolded, standing to her feet and carrying him to the floor. "Why didn't you wake me? I gave you an order!" she demanded, Astris and Riley waking from the commotion. Witchford smiled. "Not all orders should be followed," he said smugly, shutting his eyes and falling asleep.

Alara grabbed the ship's wheel. "Send a flare, let them know we have wounded!" she ordered. A Marine quickly fired off a blue flare high into the air, a quick response coming from the island. They sailed in quickly, raising their sails and docking. Alara clambered over the side, a single Doctor and a few dockhands stood around looking at her. "Who's hurt?" asked the doctor with a curious expression.

"I have more than sixty injured, of which more than twenty are critical! You! Go to the hospital and get as many staff as possible. Bring gurneys, emergency supplies. Everything!" Alara ordered, pointing at one of the dockhands. The young man gulped, racing off immediately as the Doctor stood dumbfounded. "The rest of you get this ship out of the water with the cranes, gut my ship, get my injured out of there!" she ordered. They ran off, running to get help and follow her commands.

The Lone Wanderer was lifted out of the water, its hull resting on the side of the dock. The dockhands, as well the Lone Wanderer's shipwrights, began to work

quickly to cut open the hull, large ramps immediately getting placed to allow the fast approaching hospital staff to get the Marines inside out. They raced past Alara, all uninjured crew quickly disembarking to ensure they weren't an obstruction. She glanced at one gurney as it came past her, Captain Onasi lying on top. She grabbed the edge, pointing onwards towards Lieutenant Jicks as she spoke to the head of the hospital. A flash illuminated the side of her face - a camera - but she ignored it, her crew her biggest priority.

Alara found herself sat in a corridor a few hours later, her hand freshly bandaged, the slight infection treated. She had showered, and she was still exhausted, but as she stared up at the door of Rear Admiral Harper Otrera, her heart pounded in her chest. The door opened and she quickly got to her feet, a small and skinny young man stepping outside. "The Admiral is ready for you," he stated. "Can I can get you anything? Tea, coffee, hot chocolate?" he asked. "Hot chocolate please," Alara answered, stepping inside. The assistant nodded. "I was joking about the hot chocolate," he muttered, before walking away as he tried to figure out where to get some.

"Admiral," greeted Alara as she stepped inside. The Admiral behind the desk glanced up from her work. She had shoulder-length, sand blonde hair tied back into a loose ponytail, a thick clump in her hand as she leant on her wrist. Her eyes were a deep forest green, and she was well built, with broad shoulders and muscular forearms. She wore a grey tank top underneath a yellow camo-patterned jacket, her trousers matched the pattern before connecting into her black boots. Hidden by her chair, marking her back in black was the number fourteen. A peaked cap sat on her desk.

She sat up straight in her chair, putting down her pen. "Lieutenant Commander, please take a seat," she greeted with a small smile, a serious expression on the rest of her face. Alara sat, placing her hands in her lap and meeting the gaze of the Rear-Admiral. "First of all, Commander, I would like to express my sincerest compliments for performing in such an exemplary manner. You have done yourself and your crew a great service, your parents would be proud, as I'm more than certain your adopted parents are."

"What's even more impressive is that you have stuck to both Marine and Navy doctrine, combining the belief of Navy independence and Marine stubbornness to live to fight another day. Stand tall, stand proud - you achieved something few could and I'm certain there will be a medal and a promotion for it. In fact, if it

weren't for the fact that I have physical evidence sitting in my dockyard, I doubt I could even believe the reports. Your survival is miraculous."

"Thank you, Admiral," Alara stated, bowing her head. The Admiral nodded, relaxing a little in her position. "Second of all, you have my sympathies. I can only imagine what you have suffered, the comrades you have lost, especially at such a young age, but please relax. You're safe, it's okay," she reassured, her words stern and gentle. Alara nodded. "I'm fine," she attempted, only to choke on her words as an overwhelming bubble of emotion burst from within. The Admiral stood up, walking around the desk and sitting on it before she took Alara's head in her arms, in a manner that seemed familiar.

"It's okay, you're safe. You got them home," reassured Admiral Otrera as Alara cried into her stomach. Once Alara regained control of herself, a wave of embarrassment turning her a deep red, she glanced back up at the Admiral. "I'm sorry," Alara stated, wiping her eyes. The Admiral shook her head. "I take the wellbeing of my troops very seriously, besides, it is not the first time I have had to comfort you."

Alara frowned as she looked up at her, a very old memory bubbling to the surface. "I, like most of high command, knew your parents, but they once dropped you off on my doorstep. You've grown up, little Vanathur. Cassandra has been very worried," she said softly, her stern face growing younger as Alara remembered a very expensive and very broken clock. "I broke your..." Harper smiled, nodding. "It's okay, I won't bill you fifteen years later."

She stood up, walking back around to her chair and sitting down. "Anyway, there's a few details I need to clarify before I send a report back to the Capital. This is not an interrogation, but do your best to tell me everything you can," Rear Admiral Otrera stated. Alara nodded. "Yes, Admiral," she said, sitting up straight, a little more at ease now that she recognised her host. "The reports indicate that your ship was attacked out of nowhere, the enemy were hidden in a fog cloud and the only visible signs of who your aggressors were was the edge of a red flag. Did you see any more details: rough ship height, length, anything you can think of?"

"The enemy were obscured, but it was a long ship. Similar height to the Lone Wanderer. The enemy shot gold and green bolts of light as well as bullets and cannonballs," Alara answered. The Rear Admiral nodded, writing some quick notes. "Can't have been Ruyn, he's north. Maybe Rebel Red," she muttered. Alara quickly began to think – why would one of Kitty Deliver's subordinates attack

her? "Right, the report states your Captain used a healing potion to stabilise Commander Vao, however the wounds indicate a healing potion wouldn't have been strong enough to repair enough of the organs."

"He used two. Both greater healing potions," Alara quickly lied. The Admiral stared intently at her, eventually just shrugging. "Makes sense," she stated. "Last one. One of your Marines, Anson Brett, disobeyed direct orders and set off in pursuit of his own objective. Is this true?" Alara shook her head. "How so?" "Brett was tasked with spotting any signs of frost moss, a necessity for our crew's survival. He saw an opportunity and took it once his current objectives had been complete. In doing so, he successfully allowed us to obtain the frost moss, getting injured in the process."

The Rear Admiral nodded, making her final notes. "Very well, although unorthodox, I suppose his actions do deserve a reward for getting injured in the line of duty. Okay, that's everything. Rest up, I will be personally escorting you and your crew back to the Capital. Some of your more injured crew need clerical aid only available there, so take the time to relax. You're free to go," she stated, collecting her reports together before standing up.

Alara nodded, getting to her feet. "One last thing. It's not normal for people to come back from the dead like you and your crew did. It's not the Navy way," Harper said softly. "But it is the Marine way, Admiral," Alara stated, looking back at the weary sailor. "I suppose it is. Maybe after all these years Cassandra was actually right," she muttered. Alara held the door handle, pausing before she opened it. "It's not too late," Alara suggested, glancing back with a smile before stepping out and shutting the door behind her. As she was walking away, a voice called after her. "Commander! Commander! I have your hot chocolate!" called Rear Admiral Otrera's assistant.

Seize the Seas Tales: Licked Wounds

Delex glanced away from the rest of the squad, as they stood crowded around him, to Alara. "You did great, but I'm sure you've heard that enough," he said with a smile, patting his leg as it lay immobilised in a very large cast. "So, thank you, more than anything. I'm still alive, we all are and I'm sure Axel would be glad of that more than anything. The Docs said we're going back to the Capital, so hopefully my leg can be un-destroyed. Do you, Commander, know when that is?" he pried.

The other Wolves turned and glanced towards Alara. "I don't have specifics. The Rear Admiral is taking us personally, so whenever she wants. It'll be a few days at least. The Commander only just came out of surgery, and a few of the others are still critical. We're not leaving them behind, so get comfortable," she answered. Delex nodded, glancing away towards the small tree resting at the foot of his bed, Axel's tag hanging from its miniature branches. He raised his head, smiling at the group. "Go on then. Get! I don't need you all crowding my space. Enjoy your time off, don't get too drunk, think of me as I'm stuck here looking pretty."

"Oh please, I'm only just worse looking than you," stated Brett with a grin, a few of the group laughing. Delex rolled his eyes, shooing the squad away. Alara glanced back as she reached the door. Violette had taken up a chair next to him, the pair looking lovingly at each other before a pained expression clouded Delex's eyes, his gaze flicking towards the Wolfpack's Tree and Axel's tag. She shut the door behind her.

Alara found herself dressed casually in some clothes she had salvaged from her old room aboard the Lone Wanderer. Her squad had split up across the island of Fractured Pearl, taking to whatever drew their attention. It had already been a full day, and Alara was struggling to settle into the normality of off-duty life. She glanced over her shoulder, her heart pounding as she waiting for something to require her attention. As she glanced back, Astris glared at her, her feet resting on a small stool as she sipped a brightly coloured drink. "No one's going to attack you, Alara," she stated.

"Don't be too certain," stated Riley, as she returned from the bar with a large pitcher, Wulf, Witchford and Brett carrying their own drinks and an assortment of snacks. "Lay off, Wiley! Leave the Commander to her restlessness," stated Brett, taking the seat next to Alara before giving her a nod of confidence. "Don't call me Wiley, I have deep personal trauma related to that," she stated casually. "Anyway who invited you? Why aren't you with Ryker or the others like normal?"

"They're trying to pick up girls, didn't want me to scare them off," Brett lied. "I thought 'chicks digged scars'?" muttered Wulf, well aware Brett was lying. Brett gave him the same pleading look he had given earlier when begging Wulf and Witchford to tag along. Wulf just smiled smugly as he sipped his drink. "Okay fine, you guys are the 'cool ones' of the group, I admit it. And um... I'm not in trouble am I?" he asked Alara.

She shrugged, forming a similarly smug smile. "Ala- Commander, please." "I don't think so," she answered honestly, only to flinch as a flash illuminated the side of her face from one of the nearby windows. "Bastard reporters!" complained Wulf, standing up and shooing them away. "I've got this," Brett stated, standing up and walking outside of the bar before disappearing out of sight. "Now's our chance. Let's book it!" stated Riley. Witchford flicked her across the back of her head with his finger. "Ow!" she protested, as he shook his head. "That would be rude, Riley."

Alara glanced back towards the window, the various reporters moving quickly away, Brett returned moments later. "What did you say to them?" Alara asked. "Just turned on the old charm, threatened them with my father," he stated with a proud smile. Alara rolled her eyes. "Well done," said Astris with a smile. "However, if you wish to join the 'cool group' there are a series of tasks that need completing," Astris said, with a mischievous grin. Brett's face fell before he slowly glanced across the group, all members apart from Witchford nodding in agreement. "Witchford, is this true?" Riley leapt up, wrapping her legs and arms around his upper body and head before he could answer. He let it happen, but surprisingly a muffled voice came from within Riley's hands. "Yes, thirteen," he answered, his glasses askew.

Alara grinned as the group began throwing preposterous tasks his way, mostly involving stealing items from people they knew, but the smile faded as a Navy sailor wearing yellow walked into the bar. She glanced around, eventually settling her eyes on the group. She approached, nodding to the group courteously before facing Alara. "Lieutenant Commander, Commander Vao wishes to see you, please come with me."

Alara walked extremely quickly towards the hospital, the Navy sailor getting her through the many guards on station before telling her the exact room. Alara ran the rest of the way. "Commander!" greeted the Marine guards posted outside of Commander Vao's room, the door already open. Alara nodded to them, red-faced, before she stepped inside. "Shut the door, lock it," said Commander Vao, as she sat up in her bed, her blue hair floating in the wind and a soft smile on her face.

Alara nodded, doing as she ordered before quickly crossing the room. To Alara's complete surprise, Vao opened up her arms and Alara dove into them. "You'll hear this a million times more Alara, but I'm so proud of you." The hug was tight, soft, and Alara was so glad to have had it, but eventually Delta released her and

Alara dragged a chair to sit up next to her bed. "I read the report, are there any details that need personally amending?" she asked, a cunning and knowing look in her brown eyes, her glasses cracked and set on her bedside table.

"The Captain can-" Alara began, stopping when Vao nodded. "You knew? Of course I knew, but I can imagine an explanation is long overdue. I read the whole report, I've also spoken to Jicks, Togger, Moire, and Bo, already. I'm due for a visit from the Rear Admiral as well, so I apologise if I'm a little burnt out from talking already," she began, dragging herself into a more comfortable position, her toes peeking out from her covers at the end of the bed.

"Do you mind?" she asked. Alara glanced at her feet, adjusting the covers before looking back up at the large dressing across her stomach. "Can you feel anything?" Alara asked softly. Vao nodded, glancing out towards the open window and the birds beyond. "I can feel, I can't move. The Captain restored part of my spine as well as most of my organs. For whatever reason he didn't complete the job, I don't know. Maybe he ran out of components, time - I don't know, all I know is my running days are over. Shame too, I was just feeling like it was time to do it as a hobby," she joked.

Alara didn't smile, her eyes filled with tears instead. "I don't give you permission to feel sorry for me. I could have let you and the Captain get impaled, it was my choice, and it's better than being dead, Alara. Anyway, the Captain should be apologising, it is his fault we were attacked by the Church after all," she stated casually. Alara's stomach twisted. "I-I don't understand. What do you mean the Church attacked us? We didn't see who it was," Alara stated quickly.

"True, but there are very few who wave a red flag. True, it could have been a random pirate with access to magic. It wasn't Ruyn Masse, and it definitely wouldn't have been one of Kitty's Captains, not after how she treated us, and especially considering they knew you were aboard. Red is Church and unfortunately Onasi has a history with them. What I tell you does not leave this room, does not get repeated. Am I understood, Alara?"

Alara nodded, taking a deep gulp as she listened intently. "Onasi's mother was a Sister, many years ago, before they were an official faction within the Church. A kind, if simple, woman. Always happy, devoted, generous, but unfortunately also quite beautiful. She drew the attention of the Priests around her, they raped her, and Onasi was born. He doesn't really remember her, just what the Sisters who raised him told him about her. Once he was born, it didn't stop, and she killed herself when he was two."

"That's horrible," stated Alara, hugging herself as she listened. Vao nodded. "It gets worse. The Sisters raised him. He talks sometimes of when they changed, about twenty seven years ago, they became more serious, unified - regardless they started teaching him magic, how to defend himself. It didn't matter. When he was eight... The Priests are scum, and it took Onasi six years to finally snap. He stole a gun and hunted down the Priests he had grown to hate, the ones who had abused him, his own father included. Over the course of a night, he killed fourteen Priests and fled. Took to the cities and eventually found himself begging for refuge at the Marine headquarters."

"A young Captain took him in, protected him from the Church's assassins and eventually set up a negotiation. Paired with one of the Empire's smartest men, they quickly arranged blackmail potent enough to keep even the Church at bay. Onasi was to work in the Marines until he died, unable to spill his secrets, but protected. Clearly that protection is no longer valid. It's okay to hope it wasn't them, I took long enough to believe him, but... It was the Church, Alara. It had to have been."

Slowly Alara nodded, horrific images of a terrified child running through her mind. "Unfortunately there's no evidence," Alara stated. Vao nodding in agreement. "The first attack was directed at Onasi and I, we would have been the only ones to prove it was them. They got us good, but we're still alive." "You speak of the Captain with such... closeness. Are you together?" Alara questioned.

The Commander let out a sigh, smiling and shaking her head. "It's messy," she stated. "I'm dating Jayce Exarga," Alara admitted. Delta laughed, leaning forwards and flicking Alara in the forehead. "I guess I'm not the only one with bad taste. That explains a lot about your career, but fortunately, I understand exactly." Alara raised an eyebrow. "A story for another time. Your secret is safe with me. Now, I've got a meeting with an Admiral, and I'd like a quick nap before then, so go." Alara nodded, standing up and heading to the door, unlocking it and stepping outside before shutting the door behind her. A faint heartbroken wail slipped through the gap, but Alara forced herself away, leaving the Commander to her grief.

Chapter 63: Returning Home

Jayce let out a long sigh as he put down Alara's sixth, and most recent, letter. "Well?" asked Bjorn, a significant portion of the crew sat around him catching up on the last six-and-a-half weeks of world news. "She's fine. A little shaken from the ordeal - she lost some friends - but she should be back in the Capital by now. She has officially been promoted to Commander, and, as we speak, a ship is being prepared for her as she chooses a new crew and trains for the position," Jayce stated with a soft smile.

"That's good. I'm glad she's alright," said Wicke. "Who attacked her?" Jayce picked up one of the older letters. "They didn't see, the ship was shrouded in fog, but it had a red flag." The various crew glanced at each other, a few soft ideas passing around. "Ruyn seeking revenge?" Marisha asked at last. Bjorn shook his head. "Not his style. He'd have wanted them to know it was him. It could only have been-"

"The Church," intercepted Xander. "Sounds like something they'd do, but why? What could Alara, or her crew, have done?" Jayce shook his head, shrugging, before collecting the letters together. "No clue, but she's alive. That's what matters." Xander nodded in agreement. "Anyway, for now, the plan remains the same: we sail for my home. We're still a few days away, but let's see if we can speed that up." The crew packed up the mail they had received, nodding as they returned back to their stations, apart from Marisha.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry you missed your anniversary," she said softly, patting Jayce's shoulder. "It is what it is. She wouldn't have made it anyway," he replied. "Well, how long is she in the Capital for?" Marisha asked. "At least until after the Emperor's Ball on the summer solstice. Two weeks is a bit tight for us, but I think the Capital makes sense for us to head to next, after a day or two at my home. What do you think?" he asked. Marisha smiled, nodding in agreement. "I haven't been since I was a little girl, but it sounds like a plan. Maybe we'll catch her, or at least find a way to get her next location." Jayce nodded, thinking to himself, before glancing up towards Falconer and Bjorn at the wheel. "Let's aim for two days!"

Almost two days later, Jayce stared at the island growing on the horizon. It wasn't particularly large, and was surrounded by crystal clear, shallow waters, with long sandy beaches around the east and north sides. To the southwest, the sands blended into an underwater slate cliff; its top shallow enough to walk on. A small mountain sat nearer to the north than the south, with large bulbous cirale

trees decorating its surface in a crescent formation. A stream flowed from the woods, curving and cutting through the small village that covered the south of the island, eventually meeting the dark waters of the Frontier. Jayce smiled as he stared at his home: the island of Last Drop.

"Anything we need to be prepared for?" asked Bjorn, as he steered the Stacked Hand. "The people are weird, they may ask a few too many personal questions - you can refuse to answer. Eat everything given to you, and if someone starts a fight - fists only. Also shoes off when entering a house. Just follow my lead," Jayce stated. Bjorn chuckled. "Sounds like a plan. Who's looking after RK?" he asked. Jayce reached into his pocket pulling out the rokken sat in his ball. "There's a rock beach populated by boulder crabs, he'll be fine there," Jayce stated, already prepared.

Jayce smiled as he stared at the quickly approaching dock, a quick crowd of nosy people forming as they came to investigate the new visitors to their island. He glanced across the other docked vessels, scanning for Corina's ship, but it was nowhere to be seen. They raised the sails, drifting the remainder of the way before throwing down the mooring lines to the awaiting dockhands. The crew then assembled on the deck and turned to Jayce.

"Welcome to Last Drop. We're known for our pearls, and being the last island before the Frontier - not really much else. Enjoy the peace and behave - they don't get many visitors so be on your best behaviour! We're only staying for a day or two, so don't get too comfortable," Jayce stated, varying nods of acknowledgement coming from the other members, all eager to see Jayce's home. A whistle drew their attention from the side of the ship, a quick grin forming on Jayce's face.

"Hello?" called up an authoritative voice, only to quickly follow with a gasp as Jayce leant his head over the side of the ship. "Hiya Lieutenant, long time no see!" Jayce grinned, entering into Focus and dropping off the edge of the ship onto the pier below. Sara's eyes widened and she stumbled backwards, her green Navy uniform immaculate as always. "Jayce? Jayce!" she stated, fumbling for her belt and reaching for her pistol. He lunged, grabbing it out of her hand with a smug smirk.

"You! How dare you show your face here!" she yelled, the various dockhands around laughing as Jayce emptied her pistol of ammo and began to twirl it around. The various Aces glanced down at the scene with mixed looks of concern and confusion. "Welcome home, Jayce. Good to see you, Jayce. Awesome ship,

Jayce,” he chided. She glared at him, eventually letting out a sigh and lowering her head in defeat, before smiling. “You damn Pirate,” she stated, holding out her arms and embracing him in a hug. “It’s good to see you, Lieutenant. Here’s your pistol.”

She took it back, placing it in its holster before pointing a finger at him and glaring at him with her dark brown eyes. “No trouble. I will arrest you,” she warned. Jayce held his hands up in surrender. “I don’t intend to cause any trouble. Don’t worry. Can my crew leave my ship without you arresting them?” “Hmm, so you’re a damned Pirate Captain at that, your poor parents. Poor Alara.”

Jayce rolled his eyes, glancing up to his crew. “It’s okay, the Lieutenant isn’t going to arrest anyone,” he called up. Sara took off her cap, rubbing her shaved head before letting out a defeated sigh, only causing Jayce’s grin to widen. “I take it Corina’s not here?” Jayce asked. Sara placed her peaked cap back on her head, shaking her head. “She hasn’t returned since she left with you. In all honesty, I’m surprised you came back at all, not much here for you, I suppose. Holli isn’t even here at the moment.”

The Rising Aces crowded around on the pier, the various dockhands all staring towards the group, mostly at Bjorn and Tempest, even the stoic Lieutenant stared in awe at the pair. “Where is she?” Jayce asked, glancing at the mob awaiting at end of the dock. “On a trip with Dola, they’re back this afternoon. There’s a few things to catch you up on,” Sara said, stepping towards the dock. Jayce nodded, following after her, his crew following behind.

Immediately, Jayce was bombarded by voices calling his name, he recognised them all: friends, neighbours, people he had known all his life. “Is that your ship?” called one of the local fishermen. Jayce nodded proudly, his eyes widening as a further onslaught of questions blasted his way. He held up his hands, the crowd ignoring his well-mannered pleas to settle down. “Shut it!” Jayce eventually yelled, channelling his mother, the mob quietening enough for him to introduce his crew, before erupting back into chaos.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough. There’s plenty of time for questions. Break it up, he’s only just come back!” Sara called out, stepping onto a box. A few other prominent figures spoke up, helping to disassemble the mob. Slowly the crowd dispersed, leaving just a few bystanders, Sara, and the Rising Aces behind. “They don’t change, do they?” Jayce asked with a soft smile. Sara shook her head. Jayce then turned back to his crew. “Feel free to explore, there’s a tavern up over there.

A small shop for supplies just along there. Village hall is to the east. Check out the cliffs to the southwest, and the beaches to the north and east. Tell me if there are any issues,” Jayce stated, taking RK out of his pocket and handing the rokken over to Wicke. The group nodded in acknowledgment, splitting off to go and explore, eventually leaving just Sara and Jayce behind.

Jayce said his greetings to the village chief, a newly elected middle-aged man wearing a symbolic blue hat decorated in coloured pearls, as well as the remaining locals, before they carried on along the main road. Jayce frowned as he stared at Holli’s General Store, the building undergoing a remodel and otherwise looking closed. He glanced towards Sara, and she looked down, a sad expression on her face. “Holli lost her grandparents a few months back... there was a day between them. It was peaceful – in their sleep - don’t worry,” she said softly. Jayce’s heart fell. “Oh... How is she?”

“Rough. When you and Alara left there was a definite void, and that only grew when she lost her Pops and Na. I... can’t speak for her. She’ll want to talk to you.” Jayce nodded, glancing up at the stone steps leading up the island. “Jayce, why did you do it? Follow Valentine’s path, not your parents?” Sara asked, stopping in her tracks. Jayce glanced back. “I wanted to do some good. This was the only way for me to protect someone I cared about,” he answered honestly. Sara frowned as she took his answer. “I can’t pretend to understand you, but for what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re okay. Welcome home, Pirate.” Jayce nodded and she smiled softly before turning around and walking away.

Jayce followed the stream up to his house, pulling his keys out of a nearby plant and unlocking the door. Dust covered every surface, the house untouched since his departure ten months prior. He let out a sigh, walking from room to room and opening all of the windows, his feet leaving footprints behind on the floor. Finally, as he stood in his bedroom staring out of the window, he began to chant. “Mighty winds bow to me, take my power, follow my command,” he said in Demon’s Tongue, casting Gust. The winds ran through the house, throwing up dust, and everything else that wasn’t held down, out of the numerous windows.

After recollecting the items that had been caught in his magic, Jayce sat down on one of the chairs in the kitchen. He sat in shock, in disbelief of everything that he had experienced over the last few months. The incident that had started it all, the journey to the Capital, meeting Kitty, finding Wicke, the Imperial Arena, dying, the Dungeon, the deserts, the Oni, Ruur, Aurare, Caedom, the Ronin, Silvalan, the Willow, and Nowhere. Every adventure, every fight, every ally they had met,

every enemy they had made, it all flashed through him, a grin spreading as he realised this was only the beginning.

Eventually, he climbed back upstairs to his room, laying down on his bed and tucking himself in. The bed had always felt small, especially when sharing, and now it felt tiny, like someone else's. He shut his eyes, fumbling around the edge of his bed until he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a small white teddy bear, worn beyond belief and missing an eye. He brought it to his face, taking a deep breath. It smelt slightly salty, like the sea, but there was a dewy, woodland scent hidden inside, a scent not his. He held it tightly, his favourite gift tucked safely into his arms as he fell asleep.

Jayce awoke to a loud knocking echoing from the front door. With a groan he rolled out of his bed, stumbling to his window and sticking his head out. "What?" he asked, glancing down at Bjorn, Marisha, and Caelie as they stood outside his house. "See, I said it was this one," stated Bjorn smugly. Caelie stuck her tongue out and Marisha rolled her eye. "Can we come in?" asked Marisha. Jayce nodded. "Should be unlocked," he called down, stepping away and heading to his bedroom door.

Jayce found them admiring the many photos decorating his hallway. "Look how small you are. How cute!" grinned Marisha pointing one out. Jayce rolled his eyes, sitting down on the stairs and letting them rummage. "I take it this is your brother?" Bjorn stated, pointing at a photo of Damian's thirteenth birthday. Jayce nodded. "He looks like you. He looks annoying," he added with a chuckle. Jayce smiled. "You have no idea. Anyway, I assume you came for a reason?" he asked. "Yeah, we're all heading to the tavern. You coming?" Marisha answered. "Sounds like a plan."

They left Jayce's house, heading comfortably along the paths throughout the village. A large explosion quickly drew their attention to the east side of the island. "What was that?" Jayce quickly questioned, repeating the question into his communicator. "Sorry, sorry!" responded Wicke immediately. "RK started a war with some crabs. I'm handling it!" Jayce let out a sigh, shaking his head as Marisha and Bjorn laughed. "No more explosions!"

The Emperor's Rest was a friendly and familiar sight in Jayce's eyes as they climbed the west side of the village. The building was large, made almost entirely out of local, soft, brown wood, with glowing windows and a big open entrance. The smell of food wafted down the hill towards them, drastically accelerating Caelie's pace as she hurried after it. Bjorn faltered as the others stepped inside,

glancing up at the sign hanging from the tavern. It was of a young girl sleeping in a hammock under two cherry blossom trees, a discarded platinum and pearl tiara on the floor, along with a pair of long white gloves. He shrugged, carrying on inside.

Jayce made his way up to the bar, sitting in his usual spot. Caelie sat to his left, and Bjorn sat to his right, whilst Marisha leant onto the bar next to them. The place was pretty much empty, which wasn't surprisingly given it was only mid-afternoon. Jayce sat there, glancing around, looking at what had changed – very little, apart from newspapers highlighting him and Alara – until, with a snort and a grumble, a large figure stuck their head out from the kitchen.

"Heh, people – already?" questioned the large, broad-shoulder, fair-skinned woman, glancing at Bjorn and Marisha, their bodies blocking Jayce from view. They both gave awkward waves, and she just shrugged, stepping fully out of the kitchen before limping over. As soon as Jayce came into view, her eyes widened. "Jayce? Is that you?" she asked, her small eyes wide in surprise. Jayce grinned. "Hey Marcia, I'm home!"

Marcia smiled, wiping her large hands on her dirty, greasy apron before extending a hand across the bar. Jayce gripped it tightly as she attempted to crush his fingers. He entered into Focus, and she immediately let go. "My oh my, little Exarga has grown up. It's good to see yeh Jayce, I'm glad yeh still kicking." "And you. These are my crewmates: Caelie, my Quartermaster - Bjorn, and my Cook - Marisha," he introduced.

She glanced them over, nodding approvingly before concluding her gaze on Marisha. "Ah a fellow Cook, I hope you're feeding him well. He's always had an appetite about him," she said with a big smile. Marisha nodded, glancing towards Jayce. "I try my best. I'm getting better, I think, slowly," said Marisha honestly. "Humility, I like it. You can join me. I assume you want the usual?" she asked Jayce. He held up four fingers and she nodded, reaching out with a large muscular arm and guiding Marisha towards the kitchen.

"Help yourself to drinks, I assume you're still smart enough to run a tab," Marcia called out from the kitchen as she got to work. "Aye, thank you," Jayce called back, stepping around and pouring out some drinks – juice for Caelie, beer for Bjorn and himself. There was a bright flash of flame, followed by the sound of sizzling from inside the kitchen. "Good, good, mind the meat, watch the oil," instructed Marcia as Jayce returned to his seat.

It wasn't much longer before it was ready. Marisha nervously stepped through the doorway carrying a tray laden with several wooden bowls full of broth. She set them down in front of the trio, Marcia stood behind her, wiping sweat out of her very short, grey hair and nodding in approval. "It better be to your taste," Marcia stated, slapping Marisha on the back. "Thank you for the meal," Jayce stated, picking up a spoon and a fork as he collected the noodles within before bringing it to his mouth.

Jayce flinched the moment it touched his tongue. It burned. Not with heat - although it was quite hot - it was spicy. Very, very spicy. He let out a dry cough. "I think I've weakened over the last few months," he confessed, his nose beginning to drip and eyes watering. Caelie, as usual with her meals, had not hesitated, draining the soup in a matter of quick gulps that she immediately regretted. She sat there, red-faced, scraping at her tongue with her fingers in a panic.

Bjorn had hesitated, much to his relief as he watched his companions' reactions. Nervously he held his spoon, his supposed food a few centimetres away from his mouth. He could feel the heat without it touching. Slowly he lowered his spoon, only to quickly spot Marisha nervously watching him, waiting for a reaction. He took a nervous gulp, picking up the bowl. With a pained expression he set it back down, now empty, nodding and giving a weak thumbs up as tears streamed down his face.

"It's... good," he whispered, staring in horror as Jayce grabbed a second portion. "It's very good, Marisha. I might need you to make it for the crew," Jayce said with a smile, as he blew his nose. Her face lit up, Caelie shaking her head profusely as Bjorn stared blankly at the wall. "Aye, well done lass. I'll write the recipe down for yeh. Anyway, Jayce, a word of warning would've been nice. I thought you'd be back for your anniversary. Lady trouble?"

"I'm surprised you didn't notice our arrival. We were delayed, and well, Alara..." he stated quietly, looking down at the bar. Marcia nodded. "You know me, I don't do people before three," she stated earnestly. Marisha smiled. "And yes, we all heard about Alara. I'm glad she's safe. Dola wanted to make the trip north to see her, but I think she has enough on her plate without worried neighbours."

Jayce nodded. "How is Dola?" he asked, as Bjorn grabbed Caelie and took the bowls into the kitchen. Marcia nodded to them in appreciation before letting out a sigh. "We got divorced," she stated softly, shaking her head in disappointment.

Marisha opened her mouth to speak, but Jayce interrupted her. "Again! How many times is it now? We must be in double digits by now," he stated. "Watch your tongue!" she scolded, flicking him with a tea towel, as Marisha stared in confusion. "What was it this time?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Marcia muttered something under her breath about dirty clothes, wandering off towards the kitchen. Jayce just rolled his eyes, turning towards Marisha. "They do this so often there's a marriage annulment and renewal box just for them in the village hall. Don't feel sorry, they're a pair of morons who deserve each other." A spoon bounced off the side of his head. "Ow!" he quickly protested. "Don't pretend that hurt. I recognise Focus when I see it," called Marcia as she returned with an assortment of desserts, Caelie trailing behind with custard dotting her cheeks and chin.

Marisha stared in surprise. "Ah, sorry love. I haven't introduced myself have I? Commander Marcia Bua of the Red Navy. Retired now," she stated with a smile, rolling up her short sleeve to reveal a tattoo of the Navy insignia. There was a crash from inside the kitchen. "Sorry, sorry," Bjorn quickly called out, prompting Marcia to head back inside. Marisha stared at Jayce. "What?" he asked. "Didn't you think that was relevant information? A Navy Commander!"

"Retired," he said softly. "You don't have to worry about her. She married a pirate anyway." Marisha tilted her head, pulling a face at him. "It's a long story. They fought to a standstill in the Blood Wars on opposite sides. Dola was a mercenary under Crach, Marcia was Navy. They had a one-on-one fight to determine victory over an island, and, by the time they admitted a stalemate, their troops had negotiated a ceasefire."

"Very romantic, I know," stated Marcia, as she returned with a flour-covered Bjorn. "Minus the blood, broken bones, and missing teeth," Jayce muttered, once again getting whipped with the tea towel. "You fought in the Blood Wars?" Bjorn asked. Marcia nodded. "Aye, I fought throughout, start to end," she said with a slightly vacant stare. "What was it like?" he asked. She let out a long sigh, shaking her head. "Hell. One disaster after another. If you want to properly discuss it, my ex-wife would be the one to ask. She was the enemy after all."

"Is she... baned?" Marisha asked. Marcia shook her head, prompting a look of surprise from Bjorn. "The wars each were very different, but they came one after another. She joined as a mercenary once the fascism had been torn out. I... It's not a fond memory, sorry. I understand why you of all people would be

interested," she said with an unfamiliar level of gentleness to Bjorn. He nodded. "I'll have to ask your ex-wife."

"Ask her what?" asked a gruff voice from the doorway. Jayce turned around, only to immediately get tackled off his stool by a fast-moving blonde figure. Caelie glanced up from her pudding in surprise, only to immediately go back to it as Jayce held the young woman tightly. "Hey Holls, long time no see," Jayce said to her as he lay on his back on the floor, looking up at her. Tearfully she stared down at him, her previously happy expression turning into one of quick anger as she weakly hit his chest with the palms of her balled-up hands.

"No letters, no calls, no warning, nothing. You asshole, Jayce Exarga!" cried Holli Marcheant. Bjorn and Marisha shared a look of confusion. "Sorry, sorry. I've been busy," he stated pathetically. She scowled, climbing off him and getting to her feet. Her long blonde hair had been tightly braided behind her, the front loose with two dyed strands: one blue, one red. She had green eyes, with freckles across the bridge of her small nose and she was of average height and build.

He extended out a hand to let her help him up, but she just crossed her arms instead. Dola reached down, pulling him to his feet instead before hugging him tightly. "It's good to see you," she said softly. She was a similarly beefy woman to Marcia, with broad shoulders and big muscles surprising for a woman in her early sixties. She had dark skin, and long, curly, grey hair held back by a headband. "And you," Jayce stated with a smile. "These are some of my crew. Caelie, Bjorn, and Marisha."

Holli and Dola extended their greetings. "You've timed your arrival well, Jayce," Dola stated. "Holli was hoping you'd come back sooner rather than later." Jayce raised an eyebrow as he glanced towards her. "What do you need?" he asked. She let out a huff, glancing away, only for Dola to place a large hand on her back and push her forwards towards Jayce. "I need a lift to the Capital. I think I finally know how to find my Father."

Seize the Seas Tales: The Next Step

Over the following few days that Alara and her crew were stuck recovering at the island of Fractured Pearl, she didn't get the chance to speak to Commander Vao once. The Commander had locked herself away, and she was also under immense duress from the agony of her wounds. Every time Alara tried to visit, she was either asleep or busy. Instead, Alara found herself laden with reports and questions from her crew, reporters, and other Imperial staff. Initially, she had

avoided the few reporters on the island as much as possible, but under Rear Admiral Otrera's advice she bit the bullet and got it over and done with. Or so she would have liked.

"They want you again, for another interview," stated Astris as the pair packed their bags. "They've also learnt my name, so now I'm being targeted as well," she added with a huff. "Yeah, I'm not doing that again. Commander, do you feel let down by your Captain? Commander Vanathur, do you feel you were lucky? Commander, are the reports of Captain Onasi's repeated sexual misconduct accurate? Commander, Commander, Commander – fuck off!" she yelled, holding her head in her hands as she sat down on her bed. "They're trying to paint the Captain as incompetent to bolster my image," she said softly.

Astris nodded. "Captain Onasi has never been popular, and he can't defend himself. The initial story is already out, they want something to fuel the interest. We're leaving today, it'll be a few weeks of smooth sailing, and then we'll be home in the Capital. Just try your best not to think about it," she advised, picking up her things before tilting her head towards the door. Alara let out a sigh, nodding, before getting to her feet.

They left their temporary accommodation behind, heading quickly with the other Marines of their crew towards the docks. The Lone Wanderer sat in dry dock, its hull torn open, with various workers stripping the vessel clean. Alara couldn't help but feel a twisting sensation inside her as she watched her, and her crew's, home get pulled apart. "Commander," said Riley softly, as she tapped Alara on the shoulder. Alara glanced down at her. "It's time to go." Alara nodded, giving the Lone Wanderer one last glance before heading along the pier towards the ship awaiting her.

The Amazon was a large yellow flagship, only slightly smaller than the Ballast or the Ursus Ultra. It had an array of cannons across its numerous decks, three very large sails with a jib at the front, and multiple large decks. It was a stocky ship, built for war and for intimidation. It was their new home for the next few weeks. The various Marines climbed aboard, numerous Navy sailors ready to take them to their quarters. "Commander, please follow me," stated a Lieutenant. Alara followed him, finding herself placed in a small room.

She felt the ship begin to move, and, after unloading her things, she made her way up to the main deck. "Welcome aboard!" called out the Rear Admiral from next to the wheel to the assembled Marines and Navy on the deck. Alara stood at attention, as did the others. "Now, I apologise for the squeeze, it's not ideal to

have our crews mixed together, but we'll have to make do. Marines, you're guests. You've earned your rest, but make yourselves useful. Boys and girls, behave yourselves," she stated, glancing at her sailors, before dismissing the collection with a wave. Alara's Marines turned to her. "You heard the Admiral. Best behaviour, no fighting. The rest of us are with the escort ships, we'll see them at the Capital," she stated.

The Marines saluted, heading off to find something to keep them occupied. Alara then glanced back towards the Admiral. Otrera slowly made her way down the main stairs, her various crew members glancing towards her. "It's a long voyage, and, as I have stated, your official promotion is guaranteed upon arrival. Admiral Exarga would want you prepared for such things, and I am more than capable of bringing you up to standard."

"I welcome anything and everything you can teach me, Admiral Otrera," Alara stated, drawing the curious gaze of her nearby Marines. The Admiral smiled. "I'll do my best," she stated, unzipping her jacket and taking it off before adjusting her white tank top. A sailor quickly stepped forwards, taking it from her. She rolled her shoulders, and then cracked her knuckles, a nervous feeling running through Alara. "Hit me," stated the Rear Admiral.

"Sorry?" Alara questioned, glancing around in confusion at the quick ring that had formed around them. "You heard me, give me your best hit. Preferably in the face or stomach, rather than the chest. Kick, punch, whatever." Nervously Alara stepped forwards, forming a pair of tight fists as she waited for someone to stop her. "Don't worry, I won't hit back." Alara swung, a fast and powerful right hook straight to the Admiral's jaw. Otrera's head didn't move. Alara's fist hurt, but it wasn't even connecting with the Admiral, her knuckles held away in the air by a few centimetres. Otrera smiled as Alara stared in horror. Slowly she pushed Alara's hand away. "There's a lot more for you to learn, Commander. Let me introduce you to what we call Focus."

