

Chapter 185: A New Norm

Enki's addition to Wicke and Damian's crew brought both challenges and advantages in spades. For one, his presence aboard the Reliant was tolerable at best, and it seemed every other day that Wicke would receive some form of complaint about his presence. "That sea monster has dragged water all across the corridors." "He's eaten all of the food in the canteen that was for the guests." "There are fish in the coffee." They dragged on and on.

But despite the complaints, Wicke quickly grew fond of her new jiaoren ally. On the days strife with boredom he provided a great source of entertainment. He was quite talented with a brush – and once that became widely known, all manner of passengers and crew sought Wicke out for a portrait, which she was more than happy to arrange for a somewhat reasonable sum. If she ever needed something: a tool, hairbrush, or everyday item, he was more than willing to create one for her using his bardic magic. He was also quite good at pranks.

"I'm going to gut that fish when I catch him!" Damian growled, as he stormed around the Reliant with a painted face that made him look like an elderly woman. Enki had even painted his clothes, dressing Damian in a shawl that he couldn't remove and even a pink handbag. Wicke howled with laughter, well aware that Enki wisely would be following the ship from the waters as they traversed the rapids of the Rockies. "You make a great babushka," Cinderlee stated, with a somewhat prideful smile. Damian scowled, throwing as many swearwords and gestures around as he could as Sabine and Morgause similarly bellowed with laughter.

"I'm going to kill him. Why me?" Damian questioned. Wicke stifled her laughs, stepping closer to him and beginning to chant. "Hold still," she told him – dispelling the magic and returning his clothes and face back to normal. "Come on, we're nearly there – save your energy for the Dungeon," she told him. "Thanks," he said quietly, his worries about the effect being permanent easing immediately.

"Attention all passengers, we are thirty minutes away from arrival. Please prepare all your items and luggage, anything left behind will be claimed. All crew prepare for docking and final procedures," came the Captain's voice across the ship's speakers. "You heard the Captain," Wicke stated to the group, turning her attention towards the bow as the Reliant emerged from the canyon and dropped out onto open water. "We'll establish a base, and go from there," Wicke told her crew.

It felt strange to be back in Caedom – the last memory Wicke had of the place was the city in flames, an inquisition laying siege to the locale. For the most part the city had been rebuilt – it was smaller and no longer had such an expansive harbour, but the sloped plateau was covered almost entirely in houses and larger buildings. The streets had been remodelled, now with a large central path cutting straight through, leading from the Dungeon at the top of the plateau all the way down to the harbour where ships were loading crates full of purple magic stones.

In fact, from Wicke's glance across the region, it appeared as if Caedom had completely altered its design to focus entirely upon the Dungeon. The buildings lining the central road were Guild owned, offering equipment for explorers, items build using magic stones, and accommodation and leisure for their employees. Caedom was a Guild city – the first Wicke had ever seen. "At least it makes it easy for us to know where to go," Damian stated, adjusting his gauntlets as he leant on the railing. Wicke nodded, her eyes locked on the lone white tower. "We will conquer it for all it's worth."

They docked and disembarked, immediately splitting into three groups. "Enki and I will get our licences, Damian and Sabine will find accommodation that we can dip in and out of, and Cinderlee and Morgause will get equipment and gear," Wicke stated to the group, as they gathered on the pier at the edge of the city. The others nodded before heading off in different directions. Wicke then turned towards Enki. "Anything you can do to make our job easier for us?" she questioned. He took out his brush, pondering to himself for a moment. "I think I have an idea."

They pushed their way through the well-varnished main doors of the saloon-like building marked as the 'Adventurer's Guild'. Immediately, countless eyes fell towards them as the floorboards creaked beneath them. Enki towered behind Wicke, the jiaoren far larger than her anyway but seemingly even larger with the body armour and cowboy boots he had painted over himself. His headtails were separated, flowing behind him like colourful dreadlocks and painted with black tribal markings that were 'as intimidating as possible' – under Wicke's suggestion. He looked more muscular – not that the mouth full of canines weren't intimidating enough – and a patchwork of scars had been painted onto his face.

Wicke similarly had been dolled up: she had taken out her duster coat and her largest hat, and had also had tattoos painted on her face, along with a large scar across her nose. She'd painted her own eyes with dark and fierce makeup – and was doing her best impression of Thalia's scowl whilst showing off the grimoire

attached to her belt. She glared at the nearest adventurer, the young man averting his gaze almost immediately. She nodded, muttered gibberish to herself and then swaggered forwards as dramatically as possible, right up to the main desk.

“Uh, um, how – er – may I help you?” questioned the young woman on the other side. Wicke pulled a toothpick out of her pocket and began to chew on it. “We want six passes for the Dungeon, babycakes,” she stated, immediately cringing at her own words. The receptionist glanced past Wicke to Enki, who sneered as menacingly as he could. “I only count two of you,” she stated. Wicke folded her arms and let out a loud and dramatic sigh. “Ugh, my crew is obviously busy. Six passes - don’t keep me waiting!” Wicke stated, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a gold pearl before setting it on the desk.

The various eyes observing her all widened and the receptionist faltered before reaching for the coin. “Uh, we will need names?” the receptionist questioned. Wicke opened her mouth to answer, only to immediately falter as nothing came to mind. But without missing a beat, Enki stepped forwards. “My name is Tim Cognito, and this is...” Wicke glanced around desperately for anything she could use. “Jenny Tail,” Enki inserted.

“Tim Cognito and... Jenny Tail?” questioned the receptionist. Wicke forced a smile. “Yes, any problem?” Wicke questioned back. The receptionist looked down at the coin and slowly slid it towards herself. “I will, um, prepare your passes right this moment – Miss Tail and Mister Cognito,” she stated before taking a step back. “Oh yes, what were the names of your other crewmates? I need theirs too.”

Damian looked down at the pass in his hands. “Tom Ato...?” he questioned in mostly disbelief and the rest confusion, as Wicke handed out the passes to her crew inside the small room they had bought. “It could be worse... at least you’re not Robin Banks,” Morgause muttered, taking hers in shame. Cinderlee smirked as she read hers whilst Sabine flushed bright red and immediately pocketed it before glaring at Wicke and Enki. “Look, it is what it is – next time we’ll think of names beforehand. You try making six up on the spot,” Wicke defended. “Anyway, this is the best you could do?” she returned, deciding to attack rather than defend as she gestured to the tiny room around them. “Best I could do with a location close to water for Enki,” Damian fought back. Wicke stared at him in disbelief. “He’s fine without water – right?” Enki nodded. “See! Besides a big enough bath would have done the job.”

Damian swore at her and she swore back, the pair throwing as many hand signs up at each other as they knew until Morgause stood up and stepped between them. "Enough! You two are meant to be leading this party, stop acting like children. We've got the gear and supplies we need. We have the passes. And we have a permanent residence," she rationalised. "Is there anything else?" she asked, looking to Wicke. "Only anything and everything that will keep you happy. It may be weeks before we return to the surface," she warned, looking particularly to Enki. A loud gulp emerged from the jiaoren.

They stocked up on fruit, vegetables, grains and other foods that would last before sealing them inside containers and then storing them inside the group's numerous bottomless bags. With enough food and water to last weeks, the group departed, beginning the long climb up to the Dungeon. Magic stones continued to be carried out of the Dungeon in a consistent and continuous manner – rolling down the slope on wheelbarrows and carts.

"Halt, only those with passes may proceed beyond this point!" declared a guard dressed in rather ordinary clothes, a shortsword fastened to his belt. Wicke glanced across the area – the guards wore no regalia, there were no golden uniforms or special equipment. They wore clothes more akin to miners and the way the operation seemed to be being handled screamed of complacency. "Here you go," Wicke stated, stepping forwards and showing off the pass. With a single authentic pass in their possession Enki could manufacture as many replacements as they needed – something Wicke had frustratingly only realised after the fact. The guard looked at it, glanced at her and then shrugged before taking the others. "Carry on," he stated – Wicke immediately grateful that they had modified the names to be more ordinary.

They proceeded forwards, following the abundance of signs straight into the Dungeon. They descended the stairs, now fitted with a conveyer belt to help ferry magic stones, passing through the familiar portal and into the Dungeon itself. Wicke immediately jumped as she found herself stood face-to-face with a bored guard. "You there," she growled, numerous scars across her chin and one eye covered by a black eyepatch. "Passes, now! I don't recognise you and I know everyone who comes in here."

Wicke showed off the passes and immediately the guard faltered. A moment of horror crossed Wicke's mind as she remembered the portals anti-magic effect. The names had reverted and now the consequence of their choices were obvious. "These scream fakes, but if your parents were truly that cruel or you were unable

to come up with better pseudonyms then that's not my problem. You're free to go on. Your business is your own - the stamps are official and who am I to mess with that," she grumbled, handing them back to an immediate sigh of relief from the group. "Follow the markings, stray off the path and your lives are your own," she warned, gesturing to an abundance of wooden signs mounted to the walls and plastered to signposts. Wicke nodded, stepping forwards without further word. "Thanking you," stated Cinderlee with a curtsy, as she followed from the rear. "Happy hunting."

It was startlingly impressive and also deeply disturbing at how efficient and well-integrated the Guild had placed themselves within the Dungeon. For the first forty floors the group marched from campsite to campsite, stopping and taking their time to stick to schedule. Each area was well-guarded, well-stocked, and often had some semi-permanent source of entertainment for the miners (a term that no one could find a better replacement for), either a somewhat well-stocked tavern, fighting pit, or even library. The miners would work in constant shifts – often four-to-six groups equipped with particular weapons to hunt and kill the fauna on the floor. Each group would be replaced every few weeks – according to the locals – with scheduled leave to return to the surface.

Couriers would then take the magic stones up to the surface, following the patrolled paths or placing the stones into machinery to expediate the process. On multiple occasions, Wicke and the others spotted miners riding the machinery to the next floor up. Beyond the fortieth floor, as the journey neared its second week, the workforce began to diminish. Signage remained, but was clearly less maintained and mostly warnings about company policy and lack of insurance to cover death. There weren't patrols, but - after ten days of walking - Morgause and Damian were both itching for a fight – not that the carnivorous goats and zombies could offer much of a challenge.

As the solitude grew, the group encountering less and less mercenaries mapping out routes or trying their luck at hunting for larger and larger magic stones, it quickly dawned on Wicke just how much of a difference Enki's presence was making. "A... Dragon?" Sabine guessed, trying to guess the creature Enki had painted – the image itself crudely drawn from the minimal amount of strokes. "Nope," Enki stated, making another mark on his canvas and pointing his paintbrush towards Cinderlee – the older woman sat enamoured on the floor like a child watching a puppet show. "A lesser-spotted ice leviathan," she answered. Enki clapped his hands together. "Yes!" he declared proudly, turning and marking a line on the canvas under Cinderlee's name. Wicke smirked as she

looked from the singular tally under Morgause and Sabine's team to Damian and Cinderlee's array.

"I give up! They are clearly cheating," Morgause stated in a huff, standing up from her rock and stepping away. "Sore loser!" Damian called after her. She turned and glared at him before pointing her nose up in the air. "I will take no note of your comments – mister-needs-to-use-a-dictionary-for-hangman," she snapped back. Damian stuck his tongue out at her and she turned away, drawing her sword and practicing her stances – the very heavy blade moving far faster than it used to. "Change teams?" Enki suggested. Damian shook his head, standing up and putting on his gauntlets before joining Morgause for a spar.

Floor fifty came and went, the journey slowing significantly but fatigue still suspiciously absent. "How are we feeling?" Wicke questioned to her crew as they sat in the cove beyond the boss room – the previous room patrolled by a trio of giant stone centaurs, each armed with either a ranged weapon, a melee weapon, or magic. Morgause winced as she applied a healing potion to her open wound – the flesh bubbling before sealing over as the crimson fluid evaporated.

Cinderlee sat to the side, a small fire under a complicated set of glassware filled with various powders that she was melting and fluids that she was boiling. She twisted a tap, dripping a glowing green liquid into a flask before swirling it around, the colour darkening to a deep blue. She then poured the liquid on the stone floor, the fluid sizzling before giving off a potent, minty, and refreshing odour that reenergised the group, along with a few brief and startling hallucinations that faded almost immediately.

Enki gave a thumbs up, a big grin on his face.

Damian pressed his dirty thumb to his tooth, which wobbled at the gentlest touch. He winced from the pain. Sabine then took a small syringe from out of her bottomless bag, filling it with a healing potion before passing it over to him. Damian looked at it in confusion. "I can knock it out," Morgause offered instead. Damian squirted the healing potion in his mouth, pressing the tooth into place before looking at Wicke. "I'd say we're good," he answered for the others. "Huh?" Sabine asked, turning and looking at Wicke. "Sorry, did you say something?" Wicke smiled and shook her head.

Sabine looked almost completely different from the last Dungeon dive: if anything, she looked more comfortable – happier. And between the walking and Morgause's workouts, she had also muscled up at a far faster rate than anyone

else in the group, likely a combination of whatever chemicals Cinderlee kept giving her and her own regenerative powers. She was still bulky, much more noticeably in comparison to Wicke or Cinderlee, but she no longer got out of breath as easily and when the fights became more challenging, she was able to remain on the frontlines protecting Wicke, Cinderlee and occasionally even Morgause, Damian and Enki.

"Wicke, can I have a haircut later?" Morgause questioned, her fringe grown out and hair now down to her shoulders. Wicke nodded, the smell of burning hair drawing her gaze towards Cinderlee – now using a pair of hot tongs to burn off the ends of her messy hair. "I can do yours as well if you'd like," Wicke offered. "I am capable of my own styling," Cinderlee returned. Wicke held up her hands. "Fine."

They rested for as long as they thought they needed, giving Cinderlee time to brew some more healing potions and stimulants, whilst also taking the chance to bathe using the water fountain present. Eventually they carried on. Once again the floors seemed to drag on, the difficulty of the fifties significantly harder than the previous levels. Even after their worst battles, Enki continued to inspire and provide a constant source of energy and excitement, and - as they passed their previous record and carried on towards the sixtieth floor - it truly dawned on Wicke just how much of a difference morale had made. She could feel the exhaustion and the draining environment, but even so she still felt happy. Even Damian was tolerable.

"Hang on!" Damian yelled, the six of them tucked behind Sabine's large shield as the giant humanoid robot on the sixtieth floor unleashed a stream of continuous red fire towards them. The flames subsided. "Go!" Morgause yelled, darting out from cover alongside Damian and charging the giant, bronze machine three times the size of Enki. Sabine pushed forwards, repositioning herself and banging her mace against her red hot shield, the noise drawing the robot's red eyes towards her.

Damian leapt up, using his Focus to jump again on the air before slamming his metal gauntlet as hard as he could into the side of the machine's large head. The creature staggered, it's arms bending and exposing the tubes connected to its flamethrowers. Morgause did not hesitate, leaping and slamming her greatsword down and through the tubes: a viscous and shiny oil dripping from the damaged limb.

The sound of pumping and hissing emerged from the metal golem, the sign that it was refuelling its flamethrowers. "Cover!" Enki yelled, painting a series of large boulders for the group to dart behind. But as the others ran, Damian remained, darting beneath the monster's legs and attempting to create weak points in the joints. "Damian!" Wicke screamed, her grimoire glowing and sparking with energy as it held her ready spell.

The golem unleashed its fires downwards, igniting the fuel leaking from its limb – resulting in a large detonation that blew off the bronze limb. Damian bounced free from the blast, his arms steaming and charred, but otherwise alive. Cinderlee darted forwards, grabbing his burnt arm and throwing it over her shoulder before half-dragging, half-carrying him away to cover. "Let the darkness of the great beyond consume all!" Cinderlee yelled, giving Wicke the go ahead.

"Black hole!" Wicke screamed, throwing a swirling orb of dark energy across the room. As it travelled it quickly grew, sucking in the air and broken stone, a purple void sailing past the golem before locking into place in the centre of the room. "Wicke!" Sabine screamed, digging her nails into Enki's quickly fading boulder as she hung on for dear life. The golem stumbled backwards, the void pulling it, but it quickly toppled over, sliding across the floor before thrusting its remaining hand into the stone to save itself.

The giant metal machine dangled there, its huge, damaged legs flailing behind its large body. The black hole continued to swirl, growing larger and larger. The entire atmosphere was changing, the flesh on Wicke's face threatening to be torn off from the immense pull as she desperately tried to control her greatest spell. It was becoming hard to breath and even harder to remain standing as Wicke stood parallel to the floor on Enki's boulder. "Wicke!" yelled Damian.

"Hold on, it's nearly there!" she screamed out, the metal plating of the golem peeling away, revealing wires and cables beneath the surface. "Wicke!" Sabine screamed, her position closest to the void and her grip slipping. Wicke glanced towards her. "Fuck!" she yelled, focusing on the swirling of the magic in her spell and beginning to unravel it. A blur of metal then flew past her, Morgause diving out of her cover towards the black hole.

"Morgause!" Damian screamed. She twisted in the air, swinging with her greatsword into the hand of the golem. The metal came apart, the giant creature tumbling towards the void along with Morgause. But Morgause caught herself, leaping off and away from the golem to slingshot herself around the black hole.

The vortex swung her around, just enough for Enki to dart close enough to grab her – using his headtails to anchor himself to the floor as he held her in his arms.

The metal golem wailed as it flailed in the void, partially submerged in the darkness – its joints and plating twisting and scrunching under the crushing pressure. Its red eyes bore into Wicke before they shattered and its face inverted, the spell ending and leaving a twisted husk on the floor. They all fell to the ground in a crash, gravity reverting to normal. “Never again!” Sabine cried, her nails broken and hands torn. “Sorry,” Wicke stated, relieved that they were all alive, but overjoyed as she watched the metal disappear into white particles, leaving a huge magic stone behind. “But we did it! We conquered the sixtieth floor!”

She approached the stone, hefting it before placing it inside her bottomless bag. “Wicke...” Damian said quietly. She turned to look at him, her face falling as she saw his burns, the shock on Morgause and Sabine’s faces, and the exhaustion in Cinderlee’s eyes. Enki seemed fine. Wicke looked down and sighed. “Okay... let’s head back.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Scars

“Bjorn! Bjorn!” called out Fenn, as he, Wam and Ohno darted through the streets of Belluabella. Bjorn faltered, looking down towards Jayce and Caelie before sighing and turning. “What?” Bjorn questioned, turning to face them. “I thought you had gone to the Palace?” he asked. Fenn panted, leaning over with his hands on his legs. “We were! We saw something,” he stated desperately. Bjorn glanced from Fenn to Wam who simply nodded. “What did you see?” Bjorn asked, apathetically.

“We saw the War Hounds – they’re planning something,” Fenn said desperately. “I’m not surprised,” Bjorn said with shortening patience, turning and looking back towards Jayce and Caelie – both waiting for him. “No, you don’t understand-” Fenn stated, his eyes wide and panicked. Bjorn faltered, glancing back. “There were maps, Bjorn, of the New World. The Republic. They were planning something,” Wam reinforced.

“Did you hear anything in particular?” Bjorn asked, beginning to walk towards Jayce – the Beastly Boys following closely behind. “Uh, no, but... it must mean-” “It could be anything, but I hear you. Jayce!” Bjorn called out. “The boys saw something they think you should know about.” Jayce frowned, turning to look at them even as Caelie tugged on his sleeve. “What did you see?” he questioned.

They repeated what they had told Bjorn and he folded his arms before nodding. "Good to know, but not much we can do about it. It's not our problem," he concluded. "There," Bjorn told the trio. "Well done for coming to us, but nothing we can do about it. Run along, Magnus said he had some jobs for you once you'd done visiting the palace."

The trio looked down, standing awkwardly for a moment before accepting the outcome and stepping away. "Come on, let's go," Wam stated, the boys watching as Bjorn nodded to them and began to walk away. "It's probably nothing..." Fenn muttered. "Nothing, or something," Ohno concluded.