

Chapter 1: Duty, Purpose, Freedom, Adventure

Of all of the islands of the New World, Last Drop was definitely not the most famous, nor the most important. It was an insignificant tropical island: surrounded by bright clear shallow waters, with glorious sandy beaches that lead around the north and east sides. Towards the southwest, these sands slowly blended into the island's namesake, an underwater slate cliff; its top shallow enough to walk on, with water only ever up to your knees. A small mountain, although most would deem it a hill, stood nearer the north than the south, with large bulbous cirale trees decorating its surface in a crescent formation. A cool clear stream flowed from these woods, heading south through the small village that inhabited the island, eventually meeting the dark ocean water that indicated the true start of The Frontier.

Sat comfortably atop a large boulder, close to the local divers, but far enough not to warrant conversation, Alara sat watching. The sun had only just started to wipe away the early morning mist and already the village was active, collecting fish and pearls from the ever-giving cliff. The divers, dressed in their skin-tight wetsuits, dove down deep, aggravating the jet clams that lined the underwater cliff. Amidst the blasts of water, shot out against their aggressors, pearls would fly, and the water above would bubble. The fishing folk, ready with their nets, would snatch at any foolish fish caught in the streams, dropping them swiftly into their prepared tanks. The conscripted children and apprentices would then sort the fish, throwing back the small to be caught another day. It was a routine, unique only to this time of year, and one she had grown to enjoy spectating.

With the clean salty air in her lungs, and her tangled, shoulder-length, brown, bedhead smoothed out by the wind, Alara rose to her feet, before looking longingly towards the south. She shook her head and spread her arms wide, following up with a large yawn, before leaping off the rock to the grass beneath. Her scabbard and holster jangled as she landed dully, and she quickly checked behind to see if she had left anything. She followed up by checking her trouser and coat pockets, counting off her keys, her money pouch, and the various other random items she had forgotten to take out from the night before. Satisfied, she set off back towards the village, although she took the long route out of idle curiosity.

Heading up along the gurgling stream, she neared the crown of the hill, yells and grunts getting ever louder as she got closer. In the small clearing, surrounding the mountain spring, a young man stood swinging a long sabre. He had short

black hair; recently cut, and looking surprisingly good, for her own handiwork. Sweat dripped from his pointy nose, and his eyes matched the darkened morning sky. "Morning Alara," he said casually, as he rounded an imaginary target, before sidestepping and lunging with his sword. "Morning Jayce," she replied, with an upbeat tone. "You're up early!" she added, taking off her coat and laying it down, next to the spring, in the centre of the clearing.

"It's an important day ahead, I figured I'd make it count," he smirked, sheaving his blade, and locking it in its scabbard, before turning to face her. "What's happening today, what have I forgotten?" Alara asked quickly, panicked confusion spreading across her face as her olive skin blushed a deep red. "You'll figure it out. Anyway... bring it!" he declared, pointing his sheaved blade at her, with one hand behind his back. Alara nodded and took her pose, with her heels perpendicular to each other and holding her own large sheaved blade, a dromon, with both hands. Jayce initiated the duel, pushing hard with a series of quick and simple strikes, eager to close the distance that Alara's longer sword controlled. Alara matched him strike for strike, her brown, almond-shaped, eyes watching his wrist, rather than the blade, as she prepared for his tricks.

He upped the tempo, stepping boldly towards her and using his spare hand to add more force behind his strikes. He pushed her back, forcing her to either match him or retreat; she chose the latter, unaware of his trap. He used a quick feint, aiming a quick slash towards her right arm, before slipping into her guard as she swung to block the now gone blade. She rushed to meet him - only to receive a smack on the hand from his weapon; her sword dropped from her grip and bounced away in the grass. "Ow, ow!" she yelled, as he stepped back, following with a bow.

"I win!" he said smugly, his fair skin flushed and awfully sweaty from the morning workout. Alara gritted her teeth and bowed her head. "Well fought. I yield," she said. Jayce picked up her sword and handed it back to her, with an annoying grin. "So, what's happening today?" Alara asked, taking back her blade, before flicking his ear with her finger. "They're back," he said, pointing off to a single ship in the distance, as it circled quickly around the west side of the island, towards the dock. Alara picked up her coat and the pair of them left, following the stream back to their village.

Crafted from the large cirale trees found at the top of the island, the village of Last Drop housed only a few more than a hundred people, and of the thirty or so buildings in the village, Alara's home sat at the top. The stream ran straight

through the village with small water wheels located at each significant decline, and curved wooden bridges allowing for easy crossing. As Alara and Jayce followed the waters, chatting casually to each other as they walked, they eventually paused outside of Alara's cottage. It was a small wooden house, freshly varnished, with a dull blue slate roof and a slightly more colourful, small blue door.

Alara opened her door with her keys and dropped off her coat in its usual place, before closing the door, and ensuring that she relocked the house. Jayce rolled his eyes, and with her satisfied, they continued a little ways down the path to the next house along. It was a larger wooden house, with a red slate roof instead and a small balcony looking out towards the dock. Jayce walked up to the door and walked straight in, wiping his feet on the entrance mat inside. He held the door open for Alara and took off his shoes before planting himself at the bottom of his staircase, located nearby. He cupped his hands to his mouth, glancing over at Alara, who was already protecting her ears, before bellowing out to the sole other occupant of the house.

"Damian! Get out of bed, now!" he roared, afterwards mouthing a three second countdown as he looked at Alara. She uncovered her ears and rolled her eyes. A crash, followed by a door being slammed open, and finally the sounds of rapid footsteps echoed from the upstairs landing. A young boy thundered down the stairs, launching himself from about midway onto his older brother at the bottom. They collided and rolled away from each other in a flurry of limbs. "You could wake me up in a nicer way, you know," grumbled the younger clone of Jayce, as he stood up with his right foot on Jayce's face. The elder of the pair threw off the younger before getting to his feet. "Yeah... well, better me than Mum," Jayce retorted. Both boys shuddered, prompting a small smile from Alara.

Of the pair, Jayce was significantly taller, and much more muscular than his smaller, skinnier brother, but outside of the body proportions they both looked very similar. Black short hair, fair skin, taken from their father's side, and a small pointy nose from their mother's. Although, as Alara analysed the boys, the subtle difference in eye colours stood out. Jayce's were blue, Damian's were green. "What are you staring at, Alara?" interceded Damian, cutting into her thought process. "Ah nothing. Want some breakfast?" she asked, rolling up the sleeves of her navy fleece and stepping into their kitchen. Both of the boys trailed behind like ducklings as Alara settled in, reaching to the several cupboards that decorated the open room. "Where do you want us?" Jayce asked, already aware

of the answer. "It's fine, just make yourselves useful somehow," Damian mimicked, before Alara could answer. She blushed and instead grabbed a cloth and bucket. "For that you can go clean the windowsills before- "

A knock came from the door. "Ah never mind, go let Corina in," she ordered. Damian stuck his tongue out at her, and she swore at him, before throwing the now wet cloth at his head. As the pair squabbled, Jayce went to open the front door. "Corina Liu herself, come in," Jayce said, amidst the background chaos. "Anarchy as always I see. I'll tend to it," smiled Corina, her imperial accent coming through especially heavy this morning. She had her work uniform on already, a simple white shirt, with a pair of suspenders attached to smart trousers and a black tie. Her long, dark brown hair was tied up in a bun, with her signature silver and pearl hairpin holding it in place. She winked at him with her soft brown eyes as she stepped past, the faintest trace of wrinkles lining her face; her orchid scent flowed through him as she silenced the chaos with a glance.

"Morning Corina!" clamoured the pair, as they quickly settled down. She folded her arms and looked back over her shoulder at Jayce. "See, easy," she added smugly. Corina slung her backpack off her shoulder onto the dining room table with a thud, reaching in and pulling out a stack of heavy tomes. They slammed down in front of Damian, to his horror, and she glowered at the early teenager. "Homework, get reading. You have till the end of the week before I test you," she declared, before walking up to the stove and shooing Alara out of the kitchen.

"More! You've got to be kidding me!" complained Damian, as he flicked through the smallest of the books thicker than his hand. Both Jayce and Alara couldn't help but giggle a little, as they reminisced over their own days of Corina's lessons. "Whilst your parents are deployed, I'm in charge of your education. Don't like it, I'll take you to them and you can explain it to your mother," she threatened casually. Damian immediately muted his whining, waiting until her back was turned to make any physical complaints.

"You're about thirty years too early to get away with that sort of attitude with me, Damian. You're doing the dishes after breakfast," she declared with a cold steel tone, not even turning around to see his shock. Worried about getting caught out next, Alara and Jayce started to set the table before taking their seats. Corina served them pancakes, accompanied with several berries and jams, before she headed over towards the door, leaving behind the dirty pans and bowls in the sink. "When you three have tidied up - and have said your hellos, hurry over to the pub. Today's going to be busy, so don't get carried away - Jayce," she

added, before heading out of the door. Both Alara and Damian looked at Jayce with a smug smirk, he retaliated by pulling a face at Alara and kicking Damian in the shins.

They finished their breakfast and started their chores - Damian with the dishes and Jayce with the windowsills, whilst Alara flicked through Damian's books. They were mostly on sailing and weapon theory, a staple of every child's education in the wider imperial world, but snuck in-between were a few books on pre-modern history that Alara hadn't seen before - dating no further than six-hundred years ago, the day the Dungeons opened. Alara scolded herself, shaking her head. "Of course there would be no earlier books than before the apocalypse," she thought. With her curiosity satisfied, she stood up and made her way out to the hallway.

Lining the walls of their home were photographs of Jayce and Damian, with some containing her, but mostly containing their parents. She followed her usual path, Damian as a baby, Jayce as a toddler, Jayce and Alara by the sea with Damian in a pram... until finally she paused at the same photo she always did. A picture of four smiling adults at Corina's bar, her parents and Jayce's. Her heart twisted as it always did and she leant back against the opposing wall, one hand resting on her forehead, the other on the wall. "You okay?" asked Damian, looking up at her as he walked out of the dining room. She rested her hand on his head and nodded. "They'll come back," he offered, as he hugged her. She shook her head.

They put their shoes on, after Alara had sent the boys to brush their teeth, and stepped out into the morning sun. The fishers and divers had returned, and the village had awoken like a cat demanding breakfast, loudly and everywhere. From Jayce's front door, they could see the village all hurriedly heading towards the dock, all rushing to greet the visitors to their island. Damian's eyes widened and without hesitation he charged down the path, leaving the pair behind. "Damian!" called Alara after him, not expecting an answer, but at least a look. "Was I like that at his age?" Jayce asked, as he locked up his house. "Worse," she laughed. "Go after him, make sure he doesn't pull a 'you' and try to flee home," she mocked, with an edge of sincerity, as she poked his chest, "I'm going straight to Corina's." Jayce feigned offence, rolling his eyes at her. "That was one time, and I was fine on my own for a while!" he stated in defence. Alara shook her head and walked off, waving behind her.

Jayce followed Damian, at a more casual pace than the excited thirteen year-old, taking in the sight of the busy village. His neighbours greeted him as he passed,

most observing the already busy dock, and he gave a gentle nod back in their direction. He continued down the central village path, the previous stone steps changing to cobblestone as he passed Holli's general store, marking the decrease in decline as the island hill smoothed out. Her grandparents, both wrinkled like prunes and resting on walking sticks stood outside the shop, no doubt tending to it as she went to trade with the visitors. They waved kindly at Jayce, her grandfather smiling broadly with a rather toothless grin, and he waved back. "Has the mail come yet?" Jayce asked them casually, as he passed. "Not yet, the delivery bird only left a week ago," answered Holli's grandmother, pointing to the empty perch above the entrance. "It'll be another few weeks," she added. Jayce nodded and continued onwards towards the dock, stepping through the countless villagers to get to the front of the crowd.

Among the various docked fishing boats, as well as Corina's Voyager yacht, sat the ship Eros. The triple-decked merchant sailing ship dwarfed the other ships in the dock, despite remaining some ways out on the pier. Its hull was a soft eggshell colour, with swirls of red decorating the ship from bow to stern. The ship had three masts, each containing three sets of red sails, with the mainsail of the forward mast displaying the title of the vessel's crew - The Valentinos. As Jayce looked up at the ship from the pier, he spotted a familiar face, the captain's first mate. He stood tall, towering over the ragtag crew as he commanded them to prepare their goods for disembarkation. His colourful fur stood out, shining brightly in the light; then again a giant humanoid tiger would stand out regardless.

"Oi Tanare!" yelled Jayce. The giant tiger's ears perked up and he looked overboard, with what constituted for a grin, at the small man beneath him. "Jayce! Good to see you!" he called out, before turning back to his underlings and roaring some more orders. "The Captain is waiting for you; your brother is already on board!" he yelled down, over the sounds of the crowd. Jayce gave a thumbs up and rushed over to the main gangplank, hurrying up it to get on board. The various crew disembarking stepped aside to let him past, each greeting him as he continued forwards.

He stood at the top and looked across the wooden deck, spotting his brother near the middle, stood talking to a man dressed in a fine red jacket with a stupid looking feathery hat on his head. "Permission to come aboard, Captain?" Jayce asked excitedly. "Granted," said Captain Richard Valentine, with an equally wide grin on his face. Jayce leapt aboard and he hugged the older man tightly. "You've gotten taller, or have I gotten smaller? Ah, doesn't matter, as long as I'm

taller than one of you two boys," he said, smirking at Damian. He stroked his silver goatee and looked Jayce once over. "You've grown into a fine young man, Jayce. Nearly as fine as myself... less handsome of course," he joked.

Jayce rolled his eyes and looked around at the stacks of cargo they were offloading. "Big haul? Where have you been?" he probed. Valentine dismissed his question with a wave. "I'll recount tales of our adventure later at Corina's. For now, however, I must ensure everything is in order - we leave again in a few hours on our greatest voyage yet!" he proclaimed, to the cheers of his crew. He stepped past the boys, turning around as he walked away. "Wait here - just a second!" he instructed with a wink.

With the Captain wandering his ship looking for crew to annoy, Tanare made his way over to the pair, the planks of the ship rumbling slightly with each of his giant steps. The tiger-man looked down at the boys, easily over a foot and half taller than the already tall Jayce, his muscles straining against the white shirt he had on. The cursed man held himself strongly and neither Jayce nor Damian held his situation against him, it wasn't his fault and by no account did they feel he was a bane. A deep scar cut across his mouth, and it was clear to see where one of his large teeth had been forcefully pulled out in his younger years.

Jayce met his orange eyes and extended his fist to the giant tiger; Tanare made a fist of his own, folding his human-like hand over and retracting his claws. It was almost twice the size of Jayce's, and he tapped it in mutual respect. "The Captain has something he wants to talk to you about, Jayce; I'd advise you grab him and head to Corina's, sooner rather than later. I've got the crew," he suggested, picking up a crate the size of Jayce and walking towards the gangplank. "Give Corina and Alara my best!" he added, with a wink, before stepping out of sight. The two boys grinned at each other and went to grab the Captain.

Forcing Valentine to leave his stupid hat behind, Jayce and Damian dragged him off the ship and through the crowd. They took one of the main paths away from the dock, heading back up the hill towards a large tavern on the west side of the village. As always 'The Emperor's Rest' was a welcoming sight, its windows glowed from the inside and the smell of food flowed out of its door. The trio stepped through the large doorway and walked straight up to the bar. Jayce slid smoothly over the seat, sitting on it without an issue. Valentine performed a small jump to position himself neatly on the stool to his left. Damian had to use the step to sit on the stool to the right.

Alara smirked at the three boys from the other side of the bar. "How may I help you?" she asked Jayce and Valentine, filling a glass with water, and handing it to Damian without even asking. "Rum. Two glasses, please," requested the Captain. Alara nodded and poured them their drinks, and then leant across the back of the bar. "It's good to see you are doing well, Alara. Have you applied for the Marines yet?" he inquired, downing his drink, whilst Jayce nursed his. "I'm waiting on my references to come back, and I still need to find a way up to the Capital. Are you heading that way?" she asked, refilling his glass from the bottle.

The stool to the Captain's left shifted as a dark-skinned woman sat down. She took off her dark green peaked cap and rubbed her shaved head, before turning to the Captain with a smile, her green Navy uniform immaculate as always. A double-breasted tailcoat over a white shirt, a matching ascot around her neck, and large baggy trousers tucked into a pair of shiny black boots that came up to the knee. Alara poured an identical drink and passed it over. "Hello Sara," greeted Valentine. She smirked and leant on her elbow. "Hello Dick. Not here to cause more trouble are you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow and swirling her glass. "No, of course not, Lieutenant. Not here anyway," he joked... somewhat.

Corina poked her head out from the kitchen, followed by another head, much larger and higher up. "Is that Richard Valentine I hear?" she asked, stepping out into the bar. Another body followed behind, dwarfing the woman as Ottar, another baned, but a humanoid otter instead, brought out some food for the other patrons. "It is indeed, how are you dear?" he asked, tapping Ottar on his chunky rear as he passed by. Ottar ignored the Captain with a grunt and wandered over to the other tables. "I'm good, things are good here. I heard you're departing this afternoon, where are you rushing off to this time?" Corina asked curiously, as she leant forwards across the bar.

Alara picked up the Captain's glass and went to refill it again, as he took a deep breath before smiling. "We are going to The Frontier!" he declared. The glass fell from Alara's otherwise steady hands as the bar silenced, hitting the floor with a crash. He maintained his smile, as the faces of everyone around him darkened. Jayce, as well as the other patrons in earshot all looked towards Alara. Her shoulders shook softly, and her hair hid her face. "Are you an idiot?" Alara asked quietly, as she leant over the bar towards the Captain, the shattered glass crunching under her shoes. Valentine held his tongue, aware exactly of what he had just triggered.

"No one comes back from there. No one!" she snapped, pacing back and forth angrily. "Are you so willing to just throw away your life, the lives of your crew?" she demanded. Sara looked at Alara and then at the Captain next to her. "Captain, what you just admitted to this entire bar is a crime. You knew that right?" she asked him, standing up. He nodded and looked at her. "Are you going to arrest me?" he asked softly, turning on his seat to face her. Sara sighed and put her cap back on.

"Officially, by all rights, I should. However, it is your choice to risk your lives and I can't stop you," she stated. Alara went to speak, but Sara halted her with a look. Desperately, Alara looked towards Jayce, waiting for him to say something... anything. Instead, he finished his drink and looked down at his lap. Valentine tapped Jayce on the shoulder. "Mind if we talk outside, briefly?" he asked, pulling from his pocket a few circular nacre coins, and placing them on the bar. Jayce nodded and the pair stepped outside.

Alara looked at Sara, silently demanding an explanation, but she simply shook her head before reaching behind the counter for the bottle of rum. Slowly the other patrons started to chatter again, and the deafening silence faded. She wondered what they were talking about, as she looked out the door, but resigned herself to tidying up her mess. Damian sat quietly in his seat, unsure of what to say, as he saw Alara's eyes grow more and more panicked as their conversation continued outside. She resumed pacing, muttering under her breath. She grasped both thumbs in her palms and bit her lip, until finally, she stepped out from behind the bar, with Damian following closely behind in pursuit, as they rushed to the door.

Outside, Valentine nodded. "I understand," he confirmed, resting a hand on Jayce's shoulder. "We'll be waiting for you, when you're ready," he added, just as Alara stepped out of the door. Her heart dropped, and the colour faded from her face as she looked at the pair. Jayce turned to look at her, his face unusually serious. As he opened his mouth to speak, far off in the distance, the sound of three soft thumps rang out, followed by a strange whistling. Their eyes widened as just down the path a house collapsed, wood and stone flying into the air before a fiery blast followed. "Cannon fire!" yelled Jayce, grabbing Damian and putting him behind him, as he scanned the horizon for the aggressor.

"There!" called Alara, as she pointed at a large warship sailing towards the dock. "It's the Navy!" she declared, as she noticed the blue and gold imperial colours. Jayce followed her gaze and spotted the ship, immediately noticing the flags it

was flying. "They're here, shit. I thought we had longer," muttered Valentine, as the enemy ship fired another volley against the island, fires spreading quickly and screams filling the air. He turned to face Jayce, only to freeze as he looked past them. "Captain Richard Valentine, you're under arrest! What the hell did you do to incite the Church against you? Why are Inquisitors here?" Sara demanded, pointing her pistol at him. She stepped past Alara, and Jayce immediately moved Damian, and himself, out of the line of fire.

"Sara, you don't have to do this," Valentine said calmly, his hand hovering by his side. "The sooner we leave, the less the island will be in danger. Let me go. We didn't start this," he asked, his soft, casual demeanour replaced with a stern and serious glare. "I can't believe you, Dick. By the Gods, I knew this would happen. You just kept sticking your nose deeper into places you shouldn't have." Alara stared at Valentine, whilst Jayce watched the Inquisitors set fire to the island. "There is more to this world than what we are told by them. I refuse to ignore it and you should too," he said calmly. Sara shook her head. "You broke the rules, all of this is on you," she refuted. "Surrender. Now!" The Captain bent his knees slightly and hovered his hand over the holster on his belt. "I can't do that, old friend." Sara gritted her teeth and tensed her shoulders, pulling the trigger.

The bullet missed as Valentine twisted his body, simultaneously drawing his own pistol and retaliating by shooting her in her bicep. Her weapon fell to the floor, and she fell backwards, reeling in pain. The pistol landed at Alara's feet, and without hesitation, she picked it up, but by the time she aimed it at the Captain, Jayce had already stepped between them. "Alara! Put it down!" he told her, spreading his arms. "He's a criminal Jayce, and he just shot a Navy officer. Step aside!" she ordered, her arms shaking and her vision blurry. Jayce maintained his eyes on her and stepped towards her, until the end of the pistol hovered less than an inch away from his heart. "Captain, get out of here! Survive!" he yelled backwards. Valentine nodded, looking towards them, unable to meet Alara's gaze as tears streamed down her face. "Thank you Jayce... I'm sorry."

Jayce took the pistol from her and threw it away into the grass, before hugging her tightly. Alara opened her mouth to say something, only to squeak as she buried her face in his shoulder. She shoved him backwards angrily, only hard enough to push him back a step, before turning to Sara and applying pressure to the wound, ripping off her sleeve to use as a bandage. "Dammit!" yelled Sara, as she lay back on the ground clutching her arm and breathing deeply. "I'm okay,"

she affirmed, to herself more than to Alara. Jayce grit his teeth, before he looked towards his brother sitting quietly to the side. Damian wasn't paying any attention to them, instead he looked towards the waters.

Jayce followed his gaze and turned to see. The Eros had departed, sailing quickly out of the dock, every sail on the ship taut in a perfect wind as it accelerated away from the island. Bolts of light flew between the two ships and the cannonballs fired from the Navy ship seemed to fly wide, even from the close distance. The Valentinos sailed straight past their enemy, continuing quickly south. By the time the Inquisitor vessel had come about, it was too late; the Eros sailed past Lone Rock, marking a point of no return as they sailed into unknown waters. The pursuing ship turned around once more, abandoning its prey, as Dick Valentine, and his crew, sailed off towards the giant wall of trees, reaching beyond the heavens, known as The Frontier.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Choice Made

Aboard the Eros, the Valentinos breathed a sigh of relief as the Inquisitors turned away. "All crew to their prepared stations!" ordered Tanare, as he stood behind the ship's wheel. The crew immediately set to work, rushing to their official stations as The Frontier grew ever closer. Valentine sat down next him, holding his head in his hands as he leant against the railings of the aft deck, breathing heavily. "So," asked Tanare, handing the Captain his overly large hat. "Do you still think we shouldn't have brought Jayce along?" Valentine looked up, and let out a long sigh before chuckling to himself. "Funny enough, Jayce said he wasn't ready," he answered. Tanare let out a long hearty laugh, helping his Captain to his feet. "Well, that solves that. Probably for the best..." he said, as a shadow fell across the entire ship.

Chapter 2: Pack Your Bags

Fires burnt out. Houses were rebuilt. The Navy left. Yet regrets and tensions remained between Jayce and Alara for weeks after the incident. Jayce could understand why she couldn't forgive him; ever since that day, he had woken up with the image of a gun barrel pointed at him - he could only imagine what she saw from the other side. He sat there on his bed, the windows of his bedroom fully open and the early summer sun shining through the flapping curtains. His knees were tucked in, and he rested his head upon them, waiting for something, anything, to give him a reason to get up. Nothing came.

Letting out a sigh, Jayce rolled back, aiming to put his head back on his pillows. Instead, he hit the headboard of his bed, hard, with a loud thunk. "Ouch..." he groaned, breathing in heavily through his teeth. "Ow!" he yelled once more for good measure, before rolling out of bed to his feet. As he rubbed the back of his head, he picked up his clothes from the floor and started to put them on - a simple pair of shorts and a button up t-shirt. He opened up his drawers and pulled out a fresh pair of socks, before wandering over to his curtains and pulling them open. He leant out into the open air, the smell of the sea clearing out the bedroom dust in his lungs. The air felt warm, as it did most of the year within the tropical islands of the Frontier archipelago.

As he looked around outside, thinking of what to eat for brunch, his food thoughts were interrupted by the loud, squeaking call of a bird. He stuck his head out further - far enough for his feet to lift off the floor. There, gliding low, down from the top of the hill, came an albatross; not just any albatross - the signet albatross of the World Guild Postal Service. It glided straight past him, its tailwind threatening to pull him out of his window, heading for its perch at Holli's general store. Its underbelly was a camouflaging sky-blue, except for the white ring on its breast. Its topside was a matching white colour, adorned by black on the tips of its feathers. Attached to its grey feet were small pouches for money, accompanied by a small red disk used for directional instruction. Hanging across its body, just below each wing, bound tightly, yet loose enough not to be a hinderance, were two satchels for mail retrieval and delivery. It was a huge, beautiful bird - the pride and joy of the Guild.

Jayce landed back inside his room, a smile on his now chipper face, as he rushed to the door and headed downstairs to get some food. Damian didn't even look up from his pile of books as Jayce grabbed himself some fruit, he simply let out something that sounded unintelligible from behind the stack. "Morning," Jayce

replied with a bit more grace - a mouthful of banana blurring his speech as he sat down at the table. "Mail came," he stated clearly, after swallowing his food. "Good. Do you think Mum or Dad will have sent anything?" Damian asked, putting his book down and pouring himself and Jayce a glass of water. "Thanks. I hope so. Well, they better have; it was your birthday a week ago and Alara didn't say a single word to me the entire time," he answered, taking the glass, and swirling its contents.

"What does that have to do with Alara?" Damian asked, raising an eyebrow, and pulling a face. "She's waiting on her references to get back from Mum and Dad, for her application to the Marines," Jayce replied quickly, his ears a deep red as he looked away from Damian's gaze. "So, she'll be leaving soon, then?" Damian asked. Jayce shrugged. "Well... better get apologising or you'll regret it when she leaves," he stated. Jayce chugged his glass and made a face at his brother. "Since when did you become so wise?" he mocked, grabbing the glass and the bowl Damian had left out. "I've always been wise!" stated Damian with an air of absolute certainty. Jayce laughed, prompting Damian to scowl and go back to his book.

He tidied up the mess the two of them had built up over the week, before ordering Damian to wash their clothes. As they inevitably argued whose turn it was, they were interrupted by a knock at the door. Jayce opened it and found Corina leaning in their doorway. "Here's your mail," she said aptly, handing a small pile of letters addressed to him and Damian. Most were addressed to Damian, notably in both their father's and mother's handwritings, but there were a few from other people across the New World. "Thank you very much," Jayce told her, eagerly flicking through the pile. She glared at him, crossing her arms, her few wrinkles making a rare appearance. "What?" he asked, putting the letters down and leaning against the wall. "You know what," she stated in a mothering tone, grabbing his shirt, and pulling him out of the door. She shut it softly behind them.

"Alara will leave soon, and you also need to make a choice. Either use your heritage to your advantage, or find something else to do," she said, pulling out of her pocket a slightly thicker set of letters. "Your references from me, and Alara's from your parents. Join the Navy, or the Marines if you want to push yourself, by the abyss, join the Guild, but most notably go and apologise to Alara. Use this to start a conversation and be honest, she knows your bullshit face better than anyone, so be genuine," she ordered with a soft tone, handing him the stack of letters. He nodded. "Okay. I'll go now." Corina patted his shoulder and smiled

gently. "Good. We leave tomorrow morning, so get yourself packed by tonight!" she declared, taking his reference, and walking past him into his house. He stood there for a moment a little confused, but as he felt a towel and his shoes hit the back of his head, he knew exactly where to go and what to do.

Jayce made his way through the village, cutting across the stream and heading to the slate cliff: Alara's favourite place to go when upset. He found her sat on her usual pedestal. As soon as she spotted him, she puffed her cheeks and looked away. He deliberately ignored her, placing his towel down on an elevated rock, alongside his shoes, socks, and shirt, before stepping onto the top of the slate cliff - the water lapping at his ankles as he walked closer to the edge. He stood there, the water neither hot nor cold, and looked down beneath the waves at the cliff leading downwards. Jayce took several deep breaths and leapt from the edge with a splash, diving down quickly into the cool water.

With pearl season over, the waters were abundant, with fish of all colours scavenging the many gifts left out by the villagers. They swam around him in the clear water, watching him as he swam deeper and deeper, avoiding the jet clams as best as he could. As he felt his lungs run out of air, he exhaled and continued swimming. He ran his hand against the cliff, gently following the path of algae that lined it, until he found what he was looking for; he stuck his head under a ledge and took a deep breath within the air pocket. With most of the local experts away - most notably his mother - the deeper pearl trails had been left alone. He refilled his lungs and continued downwards, until he found a giant, unique-looking clam of a beautiful golden colour. He tapped it as he approached, and it opened, blasting a jet of water at him, along with a large blue pearl about half the length of his pinkie. He grabbed it before it sank and quickly swam back to the air pocket, the water pressure heavy in his ears.

He made his way back up, slowly letting his air out continuously as he rose, until finally, he breached the surface. Alara was looking right at him, and she seemed to let out a sigh of relief, before she resumed looking angry and turned away. He pulled himself up out of the water and splashed his way back to shore, leaving his socks, shirt, and shoes and just grabbing his towel, before heading in her direction. Once within distance, he flicked the blue pearl over to her, she instinctively caught it without even looking at him. "What is it?" she asked, refusing to look at him, before throwing it back in his direction. He caught it and stood in front of her. "A going away gift," he said, presenting it to her in his palm before rolling it onto his thumb and flicking it back to her. "Where are you going?" she asked, looking at the pearl in her hands. Jayce smiled.

"I'm not... you are," he said, drying his hands before pulling the reference letters out from his towel and handing them to her.

Alara's eyes widened as she took them eagerly, pocketing the pearl instinctively as she turned to face him. "I'm sorry for what happened. I shouldn't have put that risk on you, and you never should have been forced into a position like that. But I wouldn't have stopped him from leaving, and I wouldn't change it if I could. I understand you see it differently from me, and I hope you can agree to disagree on this and forgive me. Talk to me again? I've missed you," he asked, holding out his hand. She took it and slid off her rock onto the grass before punching him gently in the arm. "Fine, you get off a week early. Please, don't ever put me in that position again. I don't want to ever have to point a gun at you," she said sincerely, meeting his eyes as she looked up at him. He leant down and kissed her. "Never again," he promised. She smiled, taking his hand and dragging him back towards the village.

About halfway there, Jayce remembered his shirt, shoes, and socks, leaving Alara to continue the walk alone as she held the letters tightly in her hands. Her heart raced in anticipation, although logically she knew they were only reference letters. She made her way past Jayce's house, surprised that he hadn't caught up with her, before continuing her climb up to her house. As she reached into her pocket for her keys, she brushed the pearl he had given her, a small smile creeping onto her face as she grabbed her keys and opened the door.

She slipped off her shoes, put her keys in the bowl, and opened the letters in her entranceway. Satisfied with the first-class recommendations, she walked to her stairs and opened up the safe hidden underneath, placing the letters, and the pearl, inside. She returned back to the hallway to put her shoes away in their proper place, only to pause after doing so as her attention was drawn away. She looked at the few photos in the hallway, mostly her as a child with her parents - either at the beach to the east of the island, or on a boat sailing, or somewhere else near or on the island. As she continued down the hallway, the photos of her parents disappeared, replaced by pictures of her and the boys and Holli, all the way up until Damian's thirteenth birthday, several days ago. She smirked a little as she looked at Jayce placed physically as far away as possible from her in the photo, staring in her direction as she tried everything to ignore him. Her smile quickly softened as she felt her vision blur, the flames and screams of the island loud in her ears.

A knock interrupted her, and she quickly wiped her eyes and made herself presentable. She opened the door to find Corina leaning in her doorway, with a spiced apple cake in her hands. "Congratulations!" she declared, to Alara's confusion. "What are we celebrating?" she asked, taking the cake inside and setting it down in her kitchen. "Your acceptance into the Marines, of course!" stated Corina, hovering in the entrance hall. "You can come in - and I still may not get in, right? Besides, I still have no way of getting to the Capital to apply, and so many other things could happen!"

Corina scoffed and shook her head. "Oh, please! Anyway, I can't stay, I have to get things prepared. Pack your bags - I'm taking you to the Capital myself, tomorrow," she ordered casually, reaching into her pocket to pull out an item list. Alara's face blanked. "You heard me - we set off tomorrow morning. I have business there, so taking you is no problem. And it's the least I can do." "Th-thank you so much! I-I will get packed immediately!" stuttered Alara, hardly able to contain her excitement. "Meet me at Jayce's tomorrow morning, six a.m. sharp!" The door slammed shut behind her and Alara stood there in shock for a few minutes.

She put the spiced apple cake away for later, supplies for the month-long voyage, and immediately set about getting her stuff together. It took her a while, but by the evening she was sure she had everything she needed. As she checked over her list for the final time, she went to finish her final task. Stepping into her parents' room, Alara slid off her belt. She removed her father's sword and placed it on the left side of the double-bed, before removing her mother's holster and pistol and placing it on the right side of the bed, completing both halves. "I'm going away now. I may not be home for a while," she said, as she sat down on the edge of the bed. "I... miss you. And I hope, wherever you are, you are proud of me," she added quietly, before standing up and leaving the room, carefully closing the door behind her. Alara undressed and slipped into her bed for the last time, ready for the day ahead.

Alara slept well. She slept heavy, and it was only as her backup, backup alarm clock started to screech at her, that she woke up. The sun was only just starting to come up, as she had planned, so her bedroom lay in almost complete darkness. She bolted upright, slamming her alarms one after another, before rolling to her feet. Alara tore off her woollen bed socks - tucking them into her bag, then let down her hair, and grabbed her clothes, carrying them into her bathroom. She then hopped in the shower, starting off hot then gradually making it colder and colder, before getting dressed into a pair of leggings and black shorts, and a black

tank top with a white fleece over it. She checked her watch: she had forty minutes, plenty of time to any sane being. Panicked, Alara raced down her stairs, carrying her backpack with her, and heading into her kitchen.

She filled her bowl with cereal, then added the remainder of the milk from her fridge into it, checking her fridge for anything else that needed using up. After finishing her breakfast, she tidied up her kitchen and then emptied out the remainder of her fridge into a lined food bag to take with her. With her house now barren, she went over to her safe, unlocking it using her mother's birthday, and grabbing her life savings, along with her identification. She left her most precious trinkets and memories behind, opting instead to grab the blue pearl she had received earlier - placing it and her other valuables in her coat by the door. As she looked around her dark, empty home, she felt... at peace. Alara shook her head - now wasn't the time. She put on her coat, put on her backpack, picked up her bags, blew out her lamps, and stepped outside into the early morning air.

She locked up, as she always did, but rather than putting her keys in her coat, she walked around the side of her house, stashing them strategically in a notch under her kitchen windowsill. "Goodbye house, see you in a while," she said softly, placing her head against the cold wood before turning around and grabbing her bags. Alara made her way down the path towards Jayce's and Damian's house, running through her goodbyes in her head. The blue light of the glowing algae streetlamps guided her way along the stream in the early morning light. As she neared their house, she spotted several figures stood outside their door.

"You're later than I expected!" joked Jayce as he watched her approach, alongside Corina, Damian, and Ottar. "You're only fifteen minutes early. Now, come on!" "I'm impressed you're even awake!" she retorted, deliberately using her momentum down the steps to bump into him. "Come to say goodbye?" she asked, a brief look of hesitation masking her face as she looked up at him. "Pff, did I forget to tell you?" he said, feigning shock and picking up his own bags. "We're coming too!" he declared with a smile to the surprised Alara. She looked at Damian and Corina, they both nodded in confirmation. "Can I at least say my goodbye speech to you anyway?" she asked.

After Corina told her no, they made their way through the village to the docks, both Alara and Jayce spotting a large amount of the residents waving them off from their windows. Holli and her grandparents smiled at them as they walked past, her long blonde hair tied up in a ponytail and store uniform already on. "Good luck and safe journeys!" she called cheerfully. They waved back to her

and continued onwards. Corina's yacht, the Heavenly Hand, sat neatly in its usual position in the dock. It was a rather big boat, with three small decks and a large sail. It was white in colour, with etchings of silver and pearl decorating its hull. A luxury yacht to say the least, with enough storage space for long journeys, and three bedrooms situated below the main deck.

They stored their various bags in the bottom deck; Alara, Jayce, and Damian storing their daily items in the third bedroom that had been prepared for the three of them, with two hammocks as well as the proper bed. The boys, after some mild persuasion, were happy to allow Alara to take the bed, and afterwards they took to exploring the vessel. On the middle deck was the living room, inside were several rows of various books from Corina's personal collection and a kitchen. Beyond that was the bathroom, containing a sink, a shower, and a working toilet, as well as Ottar's bedroom and Corina's, much larger, personal quarters. The top deck was spacious enough to relax on, with a few sunbeds lain out for the passengers to sit or sleep on. An extended aft deck near the stern provided a clear forward view of the vessel, an etched and smoothly varnished wooden wheel ready for use by the Captain. As was the case with the majority of the world's sailing vessels, it held no armaments to use for offensive or defensive purposes. Regardless, it was a perfect boat, more than capable and suitable to be their home for the next month.

"Are we all ready to set sail?" Corina asked as she stepped up to the helm, the sun now clearly rising over the horizon in the east. "Aye, Captain Liu!" called Alara, followed by a yawn from Damian and a much more half-assed call from Jayce. Ottar pulled on the halyard, lowering the mainsail, before handing the lines to Jayce and Alara to tie down. He moved forwards and unfurled the jib at the front of the boat, waiting for the all clear. "Right! Let's go!" called Corina, releasing the mooring lines, and allowing the boat to start moving out of the dock. As they sailed out into open water, Alara looked back to see most of the village waving them off. She spotted Sara, her arm still in a sling, and Holli and her grandparents near the front, all yelling them onwards as they waved their final goodbyes.

They first sailed south and then turned to go around the east side of the island. As they passed the many beaches to the east and north side of Last Drop, Alara could see the many boulder crabs all piled up along the shore, covered in coloured paint and chalk by the local kids. Some even read the words: "Bye Alara and Jayce!". They continued around the north of the island before turning south once more for a final run. The island looked idyllic in the golden orange sunlight,

and the trio stood there behind Corina, basking in the sight of their home. They passed the dock once more, before they looped around and headed back along the west side.

Both Alara and Jayce leant on the railings as they passed the slate cliffs. She leant her head on his shoulder and he put his arm around her as they pointed at a few large boulder crabs eyeing up her favourite rock to make their new home. "They better not!" Alara protested, almost preparing to leap overboard, much to the bemusement of Jayce. "It just means your spot will now move with you!" laughed Jayce. She opened her mouth to say something, but instead held her tongue and pouted. The moment was interrupted by Ottar as he went to lean on the railing next to them, the sheer weight of his body threatening to capsize the boat. He paused, and the pair looked at him curiously, and with a solemn look he recited a poem of years past:

"The day has set; our time is here.

We flew too high; our end is near.

We run, we flee, hold tight my brother.

Forget your home, put down your tome, hold tight to our mother.

Close the door, lock the gates, enter the deep.

Hold those beside you, for today we weep.

Be brave, be courageous, like those we cannot not see.

Fear not who you are, fear who you will be.

Tomorrow will come, but we must deny all entry.

For the night grows thin, hungry with bellies empty.

Dream for a better day,

When we'll open our doors, unlock the gates, and feel the breeze.

Our day will come... when we'll seize the seas."

It was a bittersweet piece, one of their ancestors and one most of the world knew. The pair looked at him and he gave a curt bow before walking away and descending below deck. As the sun cleared the eastern horizon, Corina called the troupe over. She locked the wheel in the northern direction and pulled out a large map. She held it over Damian, with Alara and Jayce on either side. "Right, so - we are here," she said, pointing at the southernmost part of the map, a wall of green trees marked the entire of the south border and her finger lay slightly to the north of that. She ran her finger around a large cluster of islands marking out the Frontier Archipelago. The map didn't show off every location but what was marked were at least a hundred, if not more, islands.

"Now, we are going here: to the Imperial Capital." She pointed to the exact centre of the map, to a trio of three islands. "The journey will take about a month, provided there are no issues. We will make a few stops along the way for supplies, but outside of that, we will head straight there, dropping anchor most nights, but we may continue through the night sometimes," she stated. Damian pulled the map down a little to get a better look and he pointed to the other territories marked out on the map with curiosity. "The centre of the New World is known as the Heart. It is the very centre of the world and the seat of our Empire. The far north is the Ice Floes, a cluster of glaciers and icebergs that some people live on," continued Corina, she then pointed to the far east. "This is the Mysts, the technological centre of the Empire."

"What are those fogged out areas?" asked Damian, a giveaway he hadn't finished his books. Corina sighed. "They are unmapped regions, dangerous places we still have little information on. The far west is called the Rockies and the south-west contains the Salvation Isles. Both are supposedly wild and untamed areas of the world - we aren't going anywhere near there." She continued to label out the major archipelagos to Damian, Jayce using the chance to remind himself of his geography. Northwest contained the Storm, northeast the Keeps, southeast the Gardens. His head spun a little trying to remember it all and he hadn't even included the four outer routes. "Can I borrow that?" Jayce asked inevitably. Corina looked at him curiously, before immediately understanding why. "You two are hopeless students of mine. No, I only have the one. I'll get you one another time," she promised, rolling up the map and heading below deck back to her quarters.

She quickly returned, carrying a small tub of cream. "Right! The sun will melt your skin right off if you're not careful, and I'm not delivering you two to your mother burnt. Sun cream on, now!" she ordered, herself already lathered. As they

smeared themselves, and put on hats, Corina took the wheel, looking down at the kids by the entrance to the decks below. "Today marks a new day! Are you ready? Your stories begin now!" she declared to the world.

Seize The Seas Tales: A Closed Chapter

Alara stood in the bathroom, holding the blue pearl Jayce had given her, now with a fresh hole straight through it. She ran some thin silver silk thread through it, borrowed from Corina, before tying it around her neck. It needed a proper clasp, a purchase for another day, one she could no doubt make in the Capital. She admired it in the bathroom mirror, a small smile on her face as she clasped it in her hand. Happy with it, she stepped out and climbed the stairs to the top deck. "What's the smile for?" Jayce asked as he manned the helm. She shook her head and leant on the back railings looking south. "Oh, nothing," she smirked, watching the final tops of The Frontier fade into the horizon.

Chapter 3: The Open Seas

"Land ho!" declared Damian proudly, from behind the wheel of Corina's yacht. "Yes, yes, we know! This is at least our twentieth island so far! You don't need to declare it every time," groaned Alara, as she basked in the sunlight with a book in her hands. "You're no fun," pouted Damian. She swore at him over her shoulder with a rude gesture, so he wandered over and threw a water bucket over her. Sensing the situation swiftly getting out of control, as Alara went to grab Jayce's sword, Ottar stepped in. "Right!" he called out in his gruff voice. "You are getting idle," he said, pointing at Jayce snoozing away. "You are getting annoying," he continued, pointing at Damian. "And you are getting irritable!" he completed, crossing his arms, and looking at the three of them. Jayce let out a snore. "Annoying?" muttered Damian quietly to himself, crossing his arms. "Irritable!" protested Alara, rounding on the giant.

"If we are going survive this voyage, now that we are settled in, there are a few things you all need to learn. Quickly," said the giant humanoid otter, his whiskers bristling as he laid it out to the youngsters getting on his nerves. "We will be leaving the Frontier Archipelago soon enough, and when we do, the seas will get significantly more dangerous for all of us. If we see a ship that looks hostile, what do we do?" he asked, nudging Jayce with his webbed foot. Startled awake, Jayce stretched and stood up; he was decently tall, but compared to the baned he looked tiny. "We fight!" he declared, grabbing his sheaved sword.

"Wrong! We run, and we keep running until we get away. Why?" Ottar asked, poking Jayce in the stomach with his tail as he walked forward. Damian wisely observed, as Alara, and Jayce, tried to come up with an answer. "Because a hole in the hull may not sink us immediately, but it will sink us later. And if our ship sinks, it is adventure over for all involved. Learn this well and do not ever forget it! On the seas, your ship is your home. Without it, you have nothing, and regardless of how good a swimmer you may be, you will eventually drown." Jayce and Alara looked at each other and then looked up at Ottar. "This will not happen whilst I am here, if we see danger, it is on me to protect you all. Our priority will always be escape. Do you understand?" he asked, pointing first at Jayce. Jayce nodded. Ottar then turned to Alara. She nodded too. Finally he looked up at Damian by the wheel. He too agreed.

"Good. Jayce, Alara, grab the training weapons I brought along, from downstairs. You two are training for the rest of the voyage!" he ordered, clearing a portion of the upper deck of trip hazards. "What about me?" Damian asked, abandoning

the wheel, and joining the older pair. "Finish your reading first, then you can ask!" came Corina's voice from below deck in answer. As Damian grumbled and dragged his feet below deck, Jayce returned with a large cylindrical canvas bag containing various types of wooden swords. Alara took the katana, whilst Jayce picked up a simple sabre. "Right, get to work! Show me what you've got."

Days passed by quickly, with Ottar tightening up their technique and ensuring all three of them maintained their fitness with a swim each morning before they set off. Alara often found herself doing extra, making sure she remained at the top of her game. Jayce, on the other hand, opted instead to fish and to read; he didn't catch much but it gave him an excuse to tune out Damian for at least an hour of the very long day. To the others, excluding Corina's endless patience, Damian became more and more irritating by the day. He often followed or bothered the others purely to find something to entertain himself with.

Eventually, something drew his attention. As he leant on the railings to the left side of the yacht, he spotted something in the distance. "Hey Jayce," called Damian. "What do you want now?" asked the elder of the two brothers. "Look, I'm starting to get serious about tying you to something that floats and throwing you overboard," he threatened. Damian scowled at him, kicking his brother as he lay down on a deckchair. "Where are the binoculars?" he asked, turning away from Jayce, and trying to discern what he was seeing. "Downstairs, on the table. Can you get me some water whilst you're there?"

Damian followed his brother's words and headed below deck into the main living area. They were where he had said they were, much to Damian's surprise. "Who'd have thought?" he asked himself, picking them up and putting the straps around his neck. He then turned to go back up, but turned himself around to get Jayce his drink. With a glass of water in hand, he returned back up to the top deck handing it Jayce. He thanked him and the pair shared a brief moment of surprise at their civility. "You're... welcome," responded Damian, heading port side, and looking through his binoculars.

It took him a moment, thanks to the glare of the afternoon, near-evening, sun, but it looked like a ship. A small one, but a ship at that, with a pair of cannons facing forwards and one on each side, two decks, and a single mast. It was sailing west from the angle of its bow, but outside of the local fishing boats near several of the islands they had passed, this was their first ship they had encountered on the open seas. It was very far away, but something rubbed Damian the wrong way.

He opened his mouth to tell Jayce, but decided against it, returning back to his observations. Night came and they weighed anchor.

The sea was quiet, the waves rolling the ship gently as Damian looked up at the night sky. Everywhere, reflected in the water as well as the sky, were thousands of glittering stars, all surrounding the giant white moon. Whilst the others slept, he often stayed up a little longer, the chill of the night and the roll of the waves bringing a sense of calm to him. He lay there on the deck this particular evening, unsure of himself. With Alara gone, would Jayce stay? He wondered. If he left, who would he have to talk to other than Corina, and Ottar? Holli? Sara? Damian didn't like it, that was for sure.

He sighed, turning over and looking overboard, away from the diamonds that made up the sky, to the diamonds reflected in the water. His face looked sad in the low light of the moon, and he didn't like it at all. He crawled closer, sticking his torso over the edge, trying to get himself as close to the water as possible. It wasn't enough to meet the gaze of the face looking up at him, so he hooked his feet in some rope and dangled himself overboard, his hand behind him on the ladder to get back up. The water was just there, right beneath his face, the moon and starlight reflecting in the eyes of the creature beneath the waves.

It looked up at him as he looked down at it. "I don't suppose you have an answer for me?" he asked the creature, its face looking as sad as his own. He reached out with his other hand and brushed the surface, sending small ripples across the water between each wave. As he looked more closely, he could see the faintest of shapes beneath the water, fish swimming calmly beneath the waves. The shapes changed to something flowing in the water - seaweed that must have come loose from the seabed. Damian reached out to touch it, but he couldn't seem to reach it, it drifted just out of reach each time. The face laughed at him, and Damian realised it wasn't his face looking up at him.

His feet slipped from the rope, and he hit the water with a splash, the one hand still on the ladder causing him to slap the water hard. In the pitch black sea, he could only just see in front of him and as he flailed around, the world twisted and turned as up became down and down became up. As he failed to correct his direction, he felt something push him upwards, to the surface. He breached and gasped for air, looking back immediately to see the faintest of shadows disappear back into the depths. Damian climbed back up on board, stripping quickly to hang up his wet clothes.

Jayce ran up and out from the living room, clambering quickly onto the deck in a panic. He relaxed as he saw Damian shivering in the moonlight. "Are you okay? What happened?" he asked, helping pull the wet clothes from Damian. "Yeah. Slipped. Don't worry," he said, shaking off his brother. Jayce nodded, grabbing a dry towel from the clothesline, and handing it to him. "Go to bed. Okay? No night swims without supervision!" Damian nodded, shooing Jayce away as quickly as possible.

With Jayce gone and some dry clothes put on, Damian looked back over the edge, looking for the face, instead he saw only his own looking back up at him. He shook his head and climbed down below deck to the living area, before descending again to their quarters. Alara lay in her bed with her hair tied up, her mouth hung open, with some drool on her cheek, and her body practiced martial arts as she wriggled in her sleep. Jayce lay quietly in his hammock, eyes shut, but he was unlikely to be asleep, yet. Damian clambered into his own hammock, now a resident expert at the manoeuvre it took to not fall out. He shivered softly as he wrapped his blanket around him, trying to figure out what he had experienced. "Hey Jayce..." he asked quietly. Jayce opened an eye and looked towards Damian. "Yeah?" he asked curiously, folding up his own blanket. "I saw a ship today," Damian muttered, shutting his eyes, and drifting off to sleep.

Damian woke up in the late morning to Alara shaking him awake. "Damian! Damian! Get up and come with me now!" she told him urgently. He groaned and rolled out of his hammock, throwing off the pair of blankets he had wrapped around him, before following her upstairs begrudgingly. He stopped in the living room trying to get some food, but Alara grabbed his wrist and dragged him up to the top deck. "What's going on? What do you want?" he asked irritated. "You told Jayce you saw a ship yesterday, right?" she asked, turning on him. Damian quickly became increasingly aware of the other members of their crew all stood on the aft deck by the wheel. "Yeah. Why?" he asked. She walked up the stairs to join them and he followed behind. "Is that it?" she asked, pointing at the same vessel Damian saw the day before, now following them, off in the distance.

"Yeah, that's it. Are they following us?" he asked, growing more worried. "Unlikely," stated Corina, looking at the ship through the binoculars. "It could be a coincidence, but just in case it's not, we are picking up speed, so get some food in you." The faces Jayce and Alara were making were not reassuring. As Damian hurried off to get dressed and eat, the others stood watching the ship.

"It's matching, no gaining on, our speed, if only slightly," Ottar told them. "A few kilometres behind us, but it will be within distance of us in a few hours," he added. Jayce and Alara looked at each other and then back at Corina.

"What do we do?" they asked, a slight sense of panic in their voices. Ottar held out his hands to settle them. "For now, nothing. If they keep following us and get within a kilometre without any warning, then we'll worry about it. Let me keep an eye on it. You two get to your drills, just in case," he stated reassuringly. They looked at each other and then walked away, leaving Corina and Ottar to talk. Jayce tried to catch what they said, but was unable to discern anything. Damian ran out of the living area with a wooden sword in hand. "I'm ready!" he declared. Jayce and Alara each grabbed one of his shoulders and dragged him back down the stairs.

With one eye over their shoulders, Jayce and Alara tried to keep themselves, and Damian, busy as the ship drew ever closer. Alara practiced her form, ensuring every manoeuvre in her arsenal was polished and ready - just in case; unfortunately for Damian, he was on the receiving end. After mirroring her for a minute, Jayce gave up, unable to distract himself from the situation. He instead stood by the stern keeping an eye out with Ottar. The hours passed with the suspicious ship slowly gaining on them, each passing minute drawing out more and more unease from the group. As it entered within the one kilometre stretch, doubts started to fly in their minds. Was it just their imagination? Were they just heading in the same direction? They didn't know.

That was until the ship raised their flag, an otherwise common move to identify friendly intentions. However, as Jayce looked at the black and white flag waving in the wind, he knew immediately that these intentions were anything but. "Well that solves that," sighed Corina, leaning onto the wheel. "A jolly roger, just perfect," she lamented. Damian inevitably asked the obvious question. "What does the flag mean?" he asked, looking back at the ship tailing them. "No quarters are to be given. It's a warning. No mercy!" stated Ottar. "If they fire a warning shot or raise a red flag we know they are coming for us."

As if on cue, they fired a single shot from one of the front cannons, the ball landing in the water a hundred or so metres behind the Heavenly Hand. Corina looked at Ottar and he looked back at her. "You have my permission. Go!" she stated, to the confusion of the other three. "What permission?" asked Alara, as Ottar undid his white shirt, folding and laying it neatly on a deck chair. He walked up to the bow of the ship putting both feet on the edge. "What's Ottar

doing?" Damian asked, all three of them watching him closely. He took a deep breath in, stretched his arms wide, and rolled his neck, before leaping forwards and diving down beneath the yacht.

Alara, Jayce, and Damian immediately rushed to the rear of the ship, looking in the water for him, looking out for his white shorts beneath the wake behind them. Jayce looked towards the pirates, their crew now visibly watching them and reloading their cannons. "There!" Damian called out pointing to the brown and white shape moving rapidly beneath the water in the direction of the enemy. "What's he doing, Corina?" Alara asked, following Damian's gaze and slapping his hand down as to not draw attention to Ottar. "He's guarding us," she said softly, a calm look re-established on her face.

Ottar swam fast and hard, using the natural ability he gained from his body. The water was clear to him, and he could see far around him. With the ban on propellers, the waters remained quiet as he stalked his prey. He breached the surface, roughly twenty metres away from the enemy, taking in a deep breath of air, before diving just beneath the surface again. He could sense the change from the pirates, given away immediately from their swift change in direction as they noticed him. "Fools," he thought. "It's too late now." He pulled and kicked as hard as he could using his tail to direct him around the side of the hull.

It was filthy, covered in barnacles and other creatures. He scowled and pulled back before charging it like a torpedo, twisting his body and pulling back his fist before slamming it straight through the wooden hull of the lower deck. He withdrew his hand quickly before diving down deep and launching himself once more at the other side, the wooden beams of the hull cracking and splintering as tore through it. Water rushed in from both sides through the large holes he had made, something the pirates would immediately have to patch. Ottar pulled back once more, this time breaching a couple metres away from their ship to assess the situation.

The crew were in panic, the top deck now empty as they rushed below to bail out water and fix the holes, an opportunity he wouldn't miss. Ottar swam quickly at the boat, diving gently before propelling himself out of the water onto the top deck, landing with a slide onto his feet. Without hesitation he stepped behind the dual front-facing cannons placing a hand underneath each cannon and lifting with all his might. He strained and grunted but slowly they lifted off the deck, tilting forwards as he brought them to shoulder height. He switched his grip, turning the pull into a push as he pressed the cannons over his shoulders,

sending them overboard with a huge splash - the sheer weight change causing the entire vessel to lurch.

With the main threat dealt with, Ottar rounded on the terrified and unprepared crew staring up at the seven-and-half-foot tall otter. Without hesitation, he lunged at the nearest, grabbing them by their shirt and throwing them hard at the others. He knocked another overboard with a powerful kick and then roared at the remaining crew as they backed up. He glanced at the other two cannons facing port and starboard; and in a quick movement he tore the ropes off of the port-facing cannon dragging it across the deck on its wheels and slamming it into the other. Both cannons flew off the boat and he used the lurch to escape into the water as the ship careened, threatening to capsize.

Jayce was awestruck at what he was witnessing. The pirate ship turned away from them, terror and panic running rampant across the crew as they saw the beast tearing at their hull from beneath the waters, the ship jostling with each hit. The cannons flew off one after another neutering the ship before Ottar went in for the final crippling strike. The waves parted for him as he charged their ship from the portside tearing up the water and leaving a wake of his own before he disappeared. Ottar leapt clean out of the water charging shoulder first into the mast. His giant frame caused the entire mast to bend, the loud sound of cracking ringing out across the water as the entire thing tore off, falling into the water on the other side along with him.

They were stunned, terrified even, as Ottar made his way back to their vessel, pulling himself out via the ladder in victory - the remains of the enemy drifting away into the distance. He lay down with a thump, his large belly breathing heavily. "I'm. So. Unfit!" he yelled between breaths, as Corina looked down at him smugly. She gave a thumbs up from the wheel and he gave one back, as Jayce, Alara, and Damian dove on him with hugs of victory. "Hey, hey. Let an otter breathe," he complained, wrapping his arms around them. "What? How?" Alara asked flummoxed, as she and Jayce helped him to his feet. "Let's just say this old man has a few tricks in his book still," he laughed, drying himself off and putting his shirt back on before laying down on the deckchair to bask in the sun.

Jayce made his way back up to the rear of the boat, looking back at the pirate ship as it disappeared further and further into the distance. Corina tapped him on the shoulder pointing to the wheel as she disappeared below deck, returning with several cold glasses of lemonade, handing one out to each member of the crew.

"Well, for every loss there is a victory and today we are victorious! Cheers!" declared Corina. They clinked their glasses together in celebration as Damian prodded the resting baned with his wooden sword, cementing the reality that everything had worked out just fine.

Seize The Seas Tales: A Baned Man

Night had fallen once more, but for once Damian had gone to bed along with the others. He couldn't sleep, however. The adventure of the day and the previous night wore heavy on him, and he couldn't hide his excitement for the adventure tomorrow would bring. He tried to sleep, only to toss and turn in his hammock, stuck listening to Alara rustle in her bed and Jayce snore next to him. Eventually, he found himself drifting off to sleep - only for the soft echoes of voices throughout the ship to jolt him awake. He rolled out of his hammock with a sigh and made his way up to the next deck, tiptoeing so as to not wake Alara and face her wrath for disturbing her sleep.

As he made his way into the living area, he followed the faint noise down the hallway. As he reached Ottar's room he paused, the sound wasn't coming from there, but curiosity gnawed at him. Softly, he opened the door, peeking his head in to look at the sleeping otter. As he looked at the bed, he was surprised - the bed covers were smaller than he expected for a man of Ottar's size. He crept closer tilting his head to get a better look in the dim light. Where the otter should have been, slept a large burly man, light-skinned, with a thick, grey, whiskery beard and eyebrows that almost covered his eyes. He was big, with arms thicker than Damian's legs, and a large stomach. His arms were stained a red-orange colour up to his elbows.

Damian stepped even closer, confused. Who was this stranger? He had never seen them before. "Ottar?" he asked quietly. Immediately, the man's eyes opened, and he looked directly at Damian jolting to his feet. As he stepped up, a light green glow enveloped him, creating a glowing shell around his body, a perfect image of what Ottar normally looked like. The light faded and Ottar stood there in his usual form, a giant humanoid otter. "Damian?" he asked, rubbing his small eyes, surprised. "What are you doing in my room at this hour?"

Damian opened his mouth to answer. "I... You... Weren't an otter." Damian answered, confused. Ottar chuckled quietly. "No, baned change back to being human when we sleep. I'll explain in the morning. What did you want at this hour? Can't sleep?" he asked kindly, extending an arm to the boy's shoulder. Damian shook his head and stepped out of Ottar's room. "Sorry, goodnight," he

said, leaving Ottar in his room. The sound of voices continued as he shut the door, so Damian resumed his adventure, confused; but somewhat not surprised, at what he had just seen. The world was a strange place after all.

Damian continued his way along the hallway, towards the origin of the sound, Corina's room. Light glowed faintly underneath her door and as Damian approached the room, he tried to hear what was being said. It was only as he stood right outside her door that he could hear some semblance of words. A strange man's voice, soft and gentle, with an accent like Corina's, could be heard faintly on the other side. Corina interrupted them. "The day is coming, we'll talk soon," she stated, the light disappearing from underneath the door. Curious, Damian knocked on the door.

Corina opened the door and looked at him puzzled. "Damian, it's really late. You should be in bed. Is everything okay? Could you not sleep? Did you have a nightmare?" she whispered, opening her door wider and inviting him in. He shook his head, peeking his head inside and looking for the source of the voice. Nothing looked out of place for Corina's room. Ledgers, tomes, and maps littered her desk as always and her bed looked freshly disturbed. "Sorry, for disturbing you," Damian muttered, shuffling back down the corridor and down the stairs to his bed, as Corina closed her door behind him. He lay there, confused, more so than ever, but he managed to finally close his eyes - drifting off to sleep with the soft rocking of the ocean waves underneath him.

Chapter 4: Food, Water, Rum, and Repairs

It had been over two weeks since they had left Last Drop; the days had already begun to blur together for Alara. Each day began the same; first a swim in the water, at least a kilometre, if not two. Then came breakfast, usually something robust, intended to fuel them for the majority of the day. A break followed, usually occupied with some light reading, or lounging. Then came melee training, the bruises and aches growing worse with each day's new drill as she trained her blade and her fists. Then, Alara would man the helm, ensuring she had at least a bit of experience at the wheel. With that all out of the way, the day was hers to find something to occupy herself with; so far she had taken a new appreciation for fishing, following Jayce's example - for once. Jayce, unfortunately, couldn't seem to escape the drills and exercise either. Ottar had already dragged him out of empty crates, cupboards, and even from the top of the mast, during one particularly miserable morning. He couldn't understand Alara's drive, but he could respect it, and faced with either babysitting Damian or competing with her, the preferable choice was obvious.

Today, of all days, the skies were clear: not a single cloud lay on the horizon and the sunlight bore down upon them. With skin as fair as Damian and Jayce's, the sun had been nowhere near as kind to the boys as it had been to Alara. Both lathered in suncream, the boys sat with their feet swinging over the sides, using the break granted to them in the afternoon to relax. The exercise had been good to Jayce, his shoulders and back seemed broader than before and, although he hadn't been bulky, he had noticeably toned down. Alara too had noticed a change in herself, her arms most notably had become more muscular, and she certainly felt stronger under Ottar's tutelage.

Alara whistled through her fingers, drawing the pair's attention. "Damian, your turn! Keep an eye out for sandbanks this time!" she ordered, locking the wheel and stretching. Damian leapt up, racing to the wheel, and grabbing hold of it as Alara disappeared down below deck, with Jayce following not long after. The first few minutes were fine, but eventually Damian got bored and locked the wheel, opting instead to look over the side of the yacht. The water wasn't quite as clear today, instead a much more opaque light blue colour, but as Damian looked down the entire water around the yacht darkened to more of a navy blue colour. Confused, he looked up, searching for a cloud that must have blocked out the sun. He saw nothing, his stomach sinking as he looked down at the monstrous shadow beneath their ship. "Um, guys," Damian whispered, trying not to draw attention. No one heard, and the water around the boat erupted.

Walls of water circled the ship as they got caught in a maelstrom, waves crashing in all directions as the entire world around them darkened and turned stormy. "Jayce! Alara!" yelled Damian through thunder, as he unlocked the wheel trying to seize control of the ship. Immediately, the others appeared on the deck in a rush; Ottar grabbed the wheel from Damian as the ship careened due to a strong wave from the portside. Corina grabbed Damian, dragging him away from the edge to the centre of the deck, as she commanded Jayce and Alara to maintain the sails as best as they could.

Dark rain poured down from the skies and lightning lit up the world around them, the clear, sunny day now changed into a dark, swirling abyss that blinded them to their surroundings. Damian couldn't hear anything from the others, as they rushed about desperately trying to keep control of the flailing vessel, the clashes of thunder and the roar of the ocean deafening everything in its clutches. Corina turned him to face her, pointing at the railing by the stairs and handing him a rope to tie himself with before she disappeared into the darkness to help the others. He gripped it harder than anything he had before, each lurch of the ship threatening to send him flying overboard.

He shut his eyes, trying to control his breathing as water battered his face. Lightning lit up his sight - even through his eyelids, the chasing thunder snapped him out of his attempt to calm himself, and he found himself desperately trying to see anything in his surroundings. Around the entire ship were walls of water, there was no horizon, and he wasn't even sure if they were facing upwards. Another flash of lightning illuminated his surroundings once more - huge tendrils of shadow were whipping around the ship, striking at something. The thunder deafened him again, but he steeled himself trying to grasp his surroundings. Another flash illuminated his world; there floating in one of the walls of water was a creature, huge beyond belief, its face a blur behind the swirl.

It met his gaze, piercing into his body and his mind with its six red eyes, the eyes lined in a diagonal row on either side of its colossal head, with each eye smaller than the first. Fear ravaged him as its beak emerged from the water getting closer and closer. The light faded, but the glow of its eyes remained. It reared back as something heavy landed on the deck next to Damian, vaulting off the wood and diving straight at the giant creature. Another flash briefly illuminated the shadows of at least four creatures, all hovering there in the waters around him, large tentacles spread out from across the back of their humanoid figures, various weapons in their hands.

The beast roared, the entire world shaking at its cry. Damian let go of the railing, covering his ears, only to get knocked down the stairs to the living area, the rope Corina gave him lost long ago to the wind. He groaned, his vision blurry and his body bruised, but quickly he crawled his way back up for another look, only for the shadowy tendrils and figures to have disappeared and the surrounding walls of water to crash back down to the sea. The darkness around them evaporated and the rain stopped, they were clear. "Headcount!" called Corina. Jayce called out, followed by Alara, Ottar added to it from behind the wheel. "Still alive!" called Damian, to the immediate relief of the others. "What the fuck was that?" yelled Jayce, as he emerged from the front of the ship, drenched head-to-toe in water. Corina shook her head, equally surprised and drenched. "Whatever it was, we should be careful from here onwards," stated Alara as she limped out from behind Jayce, a small trickle of blood dripping from her arm onto the deck.

The silence between them was interrupted by the flapping of the sail above them. As they looked up, tears and cuts littered it, sustained from the storm. The mast creaked and groaned, and their attention immediately turned to the large cracks in the wood. "Jayce get the repair kit! Alara patch yourself up with the med kit!" Corina immediately ordered, before she walked quickly below deck. Ottar locked the wheel, grabbing the mast in his grip whilst Jayce hammered reinforcing planks onto it. "It's not great," Jayce admitted, as he stepped back to admire his work, "but it will have to do." Corina emerged back onto the deck, carrying her map and several towels for the crew to dry off with. "We'll make a diversion, this needs tending to sooner, rather than later," she stated, stepping up to the wheel and changing their direction to the northwest.

Damian sat quietly by himself, too quiet for Alara's liking. With her arm tightly bandaged, she went and sat next to him. "Are you okay?" she asked, her face full of concern. "Yeah, did you see it?" he asked quietly. Alara folded her eyebrows. "See what?" she asked, checking him over for any injuries, as he tried to fight her off. "The monster," he replied softly, with deadly seriousness. Alara nodded. "That storm was a monster. Don't let it bother you, the weather does frightening things, but we made it out okay," she reassured, unsure of what he meant. Damian simply nodded, looking back out towards the open water, certain she hadn't seen it.

They continued sailing for a few hours, eventually arriving at the intended destination as the sun started to set. The three of them stood there on the bow, all looking out at a giant floating barrel in the middle of the ocean. It was huge, with several docking pontoons surrounding it. A giant, floating, pontoon-barrel

island. Several ships were docked around the central barrel, most waving jolly rogers, each different from the next in some form. "Corina!" called out Alara. "Yes?" answered Corina. "We're going there, get ready to dock!" "Some of the ships have Pirate flags!" Alara replied, getting ready to disembark and tie down the ship. "Doesn't matter, the flag is also an identifier for non-navy crews. They won't do anything in Guild territory. Don't assume all jolly rogers are flown out of malevolence!" she stated, contradicting Alara's thoughts.

Whereas Alara's face was hesitant and rife with concern, Jayce and Damian stared at the wonderous location before them with nothing but excitement, their energy only growing as they docked, with Jayce immediately vaulting over the edge onto the pier. Jayce whooped and cheered as he stepped on nearly solid land, only to be hit by the large heavy ropes that Alara threw at him to tie them down. As the two yelled at each other, Corina dismounted with a bit more grace onto the wooden walkway using the ladder. She looked over her ship and stood with her arms held behind her, waiting patiently.

Before long, a tall, and extremely broad man, walked his way up to them. He wore a simple shirt and trousers, accompanied with a pair of sandals and shades. He was bald, his head glowing in the sunset, and was covered head to toe in tattoos. He walked past Jayce without a second glance and bowed to Corina. "Good evening!" he said, in a rather high-pitched voice for a man of his size. Corina kept her face composed, as Jayce and Alara snorted behind him.

"Welcome to the Tachus Pit, property of The World Guild. My name is Bacchus, is this your first time visiting?" he continued, a vein pulsating on the side of forehead as the two snickered. Corina nodded. "We hold a no weapon policy, so please ensure all personal arms remain onboard your vessel. Supplies and repairs are available to purchase within the main hub, there are also lodgings should you wish to stay temporarily off your vessel, as well as a restaurant and bar for all of your requirements," he stated courteously. He then held out his large hand to her.

"Docking fee please. One hundred pearl covers all standard repair fees," he stated, pointing at the cracked mast and the torn sails with his other hand. "It also pays for ship docking and basic resupply. You could always pay just the base if you prefer?" he suggested, much to Corina's dismay. She sighed loudly. "How much is the base?" She queried, pulling out her purse and rattling it a little bit. "Twenty five pearl, eighty coral per night," he stated with an overzealous smile. Corina sighed again, pulling out from her purse a small round black coin

and handing it over. "There - one hundred pearl." He took it and put it into a small pouch of his own, before pulling out a small sponge from a pocket. He rubbed it on the Heavenly Hand's hull, leaving a golden mark. "Thank you for your patronage. Lodging costs extra so please talk to the desk if you wish to partake. The repairs will be finished by the morning, feel free to stay longer should you so desire. May I take a name to put in our logs."

"Corina Liu. Thank you very much." He nodded and walked back towards the barrel. "Bloody rip-off. Could have fed these lot a hundred meals with that," she muttered, waiting until he was out of earshot. Damian, Jayce, and Alara all stood there before her, like cats waiting for food. "Keep out of trouble, watch who you talk to and stick together," she ordered - Jayce and Alara immediately turning around to explore. "Hold up, have you two got your coin pouches with you?" Corina asked. Both Alara and Jayce turned back around and climbed back onto the yacht. As they went to find their money, Corina sighed and pulled Damian close to her. "They've been working so have their own money, you don't. Your parents will pay me back later, so here." She grabbed a small pouch from inside her bag and poured some of her own various coins into it.

"Do you remember which is which?" she queried, before handing it to him. Damian shook his head, eager to take the bag from her. "Pearl are the larger of the two, coral is the smaller. Pearls are round coins, coral are squares." She pulled one of each out from the bag. Neither were flat, with the pearl coin looking exactly like a squashed pearl. It was smooth to touch in Damian's fingers, but he could feel through his fingertips detailed etchings and intricacies within its nacre.

The coral coin felt rough, like a coarse stone, and as he looked at it through the light, he could see the faintest trickles of transparency with small light beams passing through. "Now, keep a hold of it, the colours of the pearl dictate its value. White is one, pink is two, blue is five, red is ten, black is one hundred, gold - a thousand. I'm not giving you either of the last two. The coral have different sizes, but if you are unsure shine a light through it. The number of beams passing through tell you its value," she stated clearly and concisely, doubting he would remember it immediately.

Damian took the bag gingerly, before turning around to go and explore with, the now returned, Jayce and Alara. As he raced off, he tripped, spilling the bags contents onto the pier and into the water. Corina sighed and rubbed her face, unable to look before she climbed back onto her boat. Damian collected the money he could from the pier before looking over the edge to see if he could

recollect the rest, expecting it to have sunk. To his surprise, they were all floating, allowing for him to easily recollect his cash. Damian tied the bag to his belt, trying to ignore the laughter coming from Alara and Jayce.

Ottar and Corina had both opted to stay onboard for a little while - presumably to enjoy the first moment of actual peace - stating they'd join later, so the other three left to explore. They first wandered around the piers, scouting, and looking at the various ships docked; some were simple merchant vessels, in to trade goods or take a short rest on their journeys. Others were clearly pirate vessels, or at the very least mercenaries. Jayce led the charge to get a closer look, against Alara's strongly advocated recommendations. They were mostly empty, from what they could see from the piers, their crews likely in the main hub. The pirate ships ranged in size, one being even larger than the Eros. They had simple hulls, each lacking ornate designs outside of the simple wood they were made from. Their sails were all furled, preventing a proper look, but they all had names: Ghost, Heavyweight, Rouge, and the Great Seacat.

The Great Seacat was the only pirate ship that had a single flag flying, 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 on it. The other three ships had the same flag, as well as one of their own flying underneath. The Ghost had a disintegrating skull fading into the black background; the Heavyweight was a large blue anchor with an open skull where the anchor's eye would be; finally the Rouge was a simple black skull and crossbones on a red flag. Jayce was very curious about the designs, and it was only as Alara dragged him away, did he leave his curiosities behind.

They made their way to the main doors of the barrel; each at least double the height of a standard human and big enough to presumably move a variety of goods through. The doors were closed, and as Jayce went to open them, someone opened them from the inside, the curved doors sliding away on tracks to the side to allow entry. "Excuse me," said a long-haired man in a wheelchair, as Jayce jumped back, before stepping to the side. Soft, whimsical music called out to them from within and the entire interior was lit up with burning lamps, all containing a strange, purplish gem in the centre of their flames.

The air outside had chilled a little as evening had come upon them, but the inside felt surprisingly cosy and warm, for a barrel. It had five floors, all connected by a curving ramp that ran around the outside of the interior. Each floor had a crescent shape cut out allowing for Jayce to see diagonally all the way to the top

from the bottom. He assumed they were emergency exits in case of a raid, but he couldn't be sure. Jayce and Damian ignored all else, immediately rushing up to the top floor and back down in a scouting run. The very bottom was a restaurant, with wooden tables and chairs laid out for visitors to relax in, rowing boats sat to the side for emergencies with their oars hung up on the walls. There was also a kiosk set up for information purposes, the Guild emblem displayed proudly above - a jade green, circular mask with a crescent taken out of it. An old man with grey hair and spectacles sat behind the desk, softly dozing. It appeared repairs, fees, and the sorts could all be arranged there, from Alara's brief inspection.

The second floor contained the bar, drinks could be ordered down from it to the restaurant if requested; rows and rows of various alcoholic and non-alcoholic options, from all across the New World, were written up on the various backboards clearly catering to any type of customer. The third floor contained workbenches for those wishing to repair their own vessels, as well as licenced shipwrights ready for hire. The fourth contained guest lodging, an entirely enclosed area that Jayce assumed contained various rooms to rent, or company to hire for the night. Finally, the fifth floor contained crew quarters for the Guild employees, although the ramp continued up onto the roof allowing for a glorious, open view of the surrounding ocean. All along the ramp, lamps lit the way with no obvious source of fuel.

Now regrouped, with both Jayce and Damian panting heavily, Alara insisted they get something nice to eat. They sat down in the busy restaurant, surrounded by various tough-looking sailors, and quite quickly a young, well-dressed, and clean boy came over to them carrying three menus, handing them out before wandering off. The meals on offer were mostly fish-based, but they included several other kinds of domesticated meats, as well as many meat-free options made from various kinds of plants and seaweeds. "They must get them imported," Alara stated astutely, weighing up her choices. The meals were surprisingly fairly priced as well, to her surprise: most ranging between one and five pearl, some options even cheaper.

Damian immediately asked if he could get something outrageous and Alara was forced to be the adult, again, whilst Jayce looked around at the various visitors and pirates around them. Most looked like run-of-the-mill sailors, but a group of four caught his eye. They were sat to the side, around a circular table - drinks sat half-full and it was clear they were deep in conversation. Three of the four sat around one side, with the final member leaning back against the wall in the few

shadows that existed in the barrel. He couldn't quite make them out as he looked over towards the group. In the light were two men and a woman, all dressed in casual clothing.

The woman had shoulder-length black hair and sat at an angle, twirling in her left hand a small bone. Her face was covered in black tattoos that made it look like a skull; she also had a black nose-ring on her right nostril. She wore a white tank top and beige baggy trousers with no shoes or socks, her arms also tattooed to outline her bones. She was quite skinny, but despite her pale complexion, she looked rather cheery and full of colour. To her left, in the middle of the trio, was a small man, his face hidden to Jayce, but his hair was long, auburn, and shaggy. A large, red coat covered the entire of his back and he wore a tricorne hat, and a pair of finely polished boots. Blocking the majority of the other side of the table sat a much broader man, he had light-brown skin, an eyepatch, and a shaved, or bald, head. He was topless and with each movement the muscles across his back rippled. He had a gruff look about him and a mean demeanour with a little bit of an underbite. To Jayce, he could almost have been comparable in brawn to Ottar.

It appeared Jayce had stared for too long: a pair of fiery green eyes glowed at him from the shadows across the table and the trio turned to look at him. Jayce immediately gave a nod before turning to the server who had come. After giving his order, Jayce turned to Alara, ever now aware that they were still looking at him. "I'm going to get something from the bar, do you want anything?" he asked, not even bothering to ask the underage teen. "Something sweet, please," she asked with a smile, trying to ignore the various renegades around her. He nodded and walked on up the ramp as two large men got up to follow him.

Jayce ordered both himself and Alara some cocktails, ordering a non-alcoholic one for his brother, before turning around to walk back with them. Almost immediately, one of the following men bumped straight into him, spilling the drinks to the floor with a crash. The other patrons in the bar fell silent, all immediately curious as to how Jayce would react. "Oops, sorry about that chum," said the goon, with fake care, "might want to watch what you're doing next time. Never know who you're going to upset," he advised. Jayce sighed. "Look, I'm just here to enjoy myself and get some repairs before we move on," Jayce stated crossing his arms and not budging.

"So?" asked the other goon, crossing his arms and stepping forwards to fall in line with his companion. "Just pay for my drinks and we can put this behind us. You walked into me, and if you hadn't done that, we wouldn't be having this

conversation, uh, what's your name?" Jayce stated slyly, with a foolish smirk. "Davarick," replied the pirate, confused. "What wait? I ain't paying for no drinks of yours." Jayce tutted, wagging his finger, and stepping forwards - the very act causing the pair to step backwards. "Now that's not very nice, come on, cough up. That's two and half pearl, plus maybe a little extra for the inconvenience. Only fair," Jayce said, stupidly. In an instant, Jayce felt Davarick grab his shirt and throw him to the side, straight over the ledge surrounding the hole.

Jayce twisted his body to try and stick the landing only to land directly onto an empty table with a crunch, as it collapsed underneath him from the impact. "Jayce!" cried out Alara. The two goons leapt through the hole after him, landing next him with a thud. "Ow," groaned Jayce, looking up at the pair. "That was rude, and you still owe me three drinks!" he said with another dumb grin. The pair looked at each other, dumbfounded by Jayce's arrogance, ignorance, or sheer stupidity, only to then grimace in pain as Jayce grabbed two of the broken table legs and smacked them in their knees with a double strike, before rolling to his feet with his temporary weapons equipped. Alara grabbed an oar off the wall as the friends of the goons got to their feet, clearly eager for a fight. "How is it, that we've been here less than an hour and you've already started a fight?" Alara demanded, as her eyes flitted around counting the aggressors. "Ah it's fine! We've got this," he stated, eager for some action.

Davarick rushed forwards and swung at Jayce with a meaty right-hook, only for Jayce to smack his hand hard with one of his improvised weapons. Davarick reared back in pain and Jayce smacked him across the jaw with his other weapon, knocking him, and a tooth, out with a crash. Three other pirates charged at Alara, and she swung wide with her oar knocking out their legs with the sweep before jabbing at another with the end. Damian balled his fists and went to join the fray, only for Ottar, now sipping a cocktail, to grab him by the scruff of his neck, shaking his head as he watched them fight. Somehow, for a little bit, they were winning, until the huge man who Jayce had seen earlier stood up. It turned out he had a metal left arm, embedded in each joint were purple gemstones similar to that in the lamps. As he casually walked up to Jayce through the pile of groaning sailors, Alara went to strike him, leaping and bringing her improvised polearm down hard towards him.

He caught it with his right hand before pulling it out of her hands. He then rounded on her as she backed up quickly, fear grasping her as she looked up at him. Jayce intercepted, stepping between them, his two clubs ready for action. Instead of the heroic save he had hoped for, the giant grabbed him by the throat

with his metal arm, lifting him to meet his gaze. Jayce dropped both weapons as he went to try and break the grip, unable to breathe. He struggled desperately, as Alara stood stunned in horror, only for, as the world started to darken, a voice to call out: "That's enough!"

Immediately, Jayce was released, hitting the floor hard as he coughed for air. The muscled man looked at Alara and then scooped up Jayce under his arm, dropping him before the table he had come from. Jayce looked up at what he now clearly realised were the four Captains of the pirate ships. He staggered to his feet, looking at his rescuer still in the shadows. "Appreciated. Your men still owe me some drinks," he stated brazenly, to Alara's horror. The figure placed her hand out of the shadow, and she rattled her long, green painted nails on the table, as the other three Captains stepped nervously aside. Her eyes stared at him, green with a yellow core, like fire – they practically glowed. As Jayce started to question himself, she laughed, dragging her chair forward into the light.

"I like you, what's your name?" she asked, now clearly in the light. The woman, likely mid-twenties, had short, shoulder-length, grey hair, mingled with black and brown stripes like a tabby cat. She wore a long grey coat and had a green collar-like choker around her neck, accompanied with a bell. Sat on her lap was the exact cat, a big fluffy tabby with huge paws and a long bushy tail. It was only now, on closer inspection, did Jayce actually notice the other three cats, now held in their owners' hands. A ginger cat, wearing his own little red coat and hat. A brown cat wearing an eyepatch, and a black cat with piercing yellow eyes. "Jayce," he replied. She leant on her right hand, rubbing her cheek with her white fingerless glove, as she waved for him continue. "Jayce Exarga, that is my brother Damian, and Alara Vanathur. You are?"

She smiled, revealing a set of especially pointy canines. "Pleasure, the name is Captain Kitty Deliver. These are my sub-captains: Rebel Red, Somme Ankor, and Anne Muerte. I suppose you've heard of us, no doubt why you were staring?" she asked, standing up - although she didn't change much in height - and placing her purring cat over her shoulders. "Sorry, I haven't," he answered honestly to her disappointment. "Ah, shame. We need to work on that. We are the Delivery Kats, adventurers, pirates, far-travellers, you name it!" she said proudly, walking around the table and up to him. She sniffed him, to Alara's horror, and frowned. "Interesting," she added, before she walked away to look at her crew's injuries. "Your crew owes me for the drinks still, and they probably need to pay for the damages," Jayce boldly followed up with – Alara burying her face in her hands.

Kitty was genuinely taken aback, her otherwise coy smile simply exploding into pure joy. "You're joining my crew!" she laughed, pulling her money pouch off her belt and heading over to the desk to pay for his demands. Jayce was taken aback. He looked over at Alara, who was equally shocked and terrified at the idea. She shook her head with her eyes wide. "I apologise, Captain, I must refuse. I'm already on a journey of my own, and I'd like to see it completed," he stated, to the nervousness of her large crew. Kitty walked up to him, looking up at him and flashing her green eyes, as she toyed with her hair. Jayce blushed a little, but otherwise held his ground. She pouted and her head and shoulders dropped. "Fine. It's rude to say no to someone like me, but fine," she whined. "When your voyage is finished, come find me. I'll be listening out for a Jayce Exarga!" she declared, before walking off.

Her crew followed her, leaving a dazed Davarick behind with a tray of drinks in hand. "Sorry about that," he said nervously, handing the tray to Alara before he rubbed his jaw and ran out after his crew, bumping into the half-closed door on the way out. A few moments of silence passed before Corina interrupted it, slurping through her straw. "Well, that was refreshing!" she declared, picking up another drink and waving them over. Jayce felt the bruises on his body throughout the entire meal, whilst his eardrums were under assault from Alara. Eventually, she settled down, and with fresh food and drinks in their stomachs they returned to the ship. As Jayce looked towards the other piers, he noticed the Delivery Kats had already departed on their next adventure.

With the sails replaced, and the ship repaired, they departed promptly in the morning, reconnecting with their route, and continuing north. The journey remained uneventful, but eventually they passed an island with a giant white tower in the middle of it. Several navy ships were clustered around it as workers were hard at work repairing a large cube-like fortress around the base of the tower. Corina decided to give it a wide berth and they quickly left the strange location behind them, continuing onwards with refreshed intent to arrive at the Capital quickly. As the sun reached its highest point, with all five of them stood on the upper deck looking onwards, another storm formed up ahead, before disappearing within a minute.

Seize the Seas Tales: Ocean Crawlers

Not too far away from the site of the wild and dangerous storm that had enveloped Jayce, Alara and Damian, sat a large island. A quiet and undisturbed island covered in tropical trees and large sandy beaches. On one of these beaches

lay an intruder. A creature unknown to most of the world, a creature from the deeps themselves. Gulls squawked and fluttered around it, feasting on its decomposing flesh. Its huge tentacles strewn about, covered in scars from old battles and deep tears and cuts from its last one. Its eyes remained open, never to close again. Here on this lone, otherwise quiet, beach, a kraken lay dead. Slaughtered and culled by the ocean crawlers.

Chapter 5: A Drop in the Water

A fleeting storm was not the most unusual of occurrences on the open seas, but a fleeting storm appearing from nowhere in a cloudless sky was, by all means, an unusuality. Thunder and lightning consumed the horizon ahead of them, cracking the skies and crashing down upon the waters in rapid bursts of light. It took a few moments for the sounds of the thunder to reach them, marking the storm around two kilometres away, according to Corina. However, as soon as the lightning was discharged, the clouds disintegrated before them, leaving no visible trace in the sky. Jayce made his way to the bow of the ship, Corina's binoculars in his hands.

"What do you see?" Corina asked from the stern, one hand on the wheel, the other on her world map. He peered through the lens; the skies were empty, traceless of the storm, but the sea was littered with debris. Destroyed vessels, at least five in number, were drifting, capsized, cracked, shattered, in the waters. "There's ships, they've been sunk!" he called out to the rear, prompting both Damian and Alara to immediately make their way over to him. "Was it the storm?" Alara asked, squinting to try and see through the sun glare as she covered her eyes. "Was it the monster?" Damian asked, too quietly for the others to hear. "Must have been, there's at least five ships!"

As soon as the words left Jayce's mouth, the horizon erupted in flames, followed by a row of explosions as the armaments of the ships ignited. The blast was huge, and before long, the yacht encountered the waves caused by the explosions, rocking the ship heavily, as they continued onwards. Holding onto the railings tightly, Alara looked back to their captain. "Corina, should we not turn away from it?" she asked, staring at the devastation before them. "No," she yelled back, both hands now on the wheel. "We push forwards! If there are any survivors, it's our duty to attempt to rescue them!" she called out. "Jayce, raise the sails halfway. Slow us down."

By the time they approached the disaster, the majority of the flames had been put out and most of the debris had sunk. Smoke filled the air, and a stench unfamiliar to Jayce, Alara, and Damian - the scent of death - lingered everywhere, but they saw no bodies, living or dead. The hulls of the ships were painted, although most were covered in scorch marks or damage. "Hello!" Damian yelled, off to the port side to any potential survivors. Alara nodded and mirrored his actions from the bow as Jayce stood on the starboard side. "Hello!" they all yelled.

Jayce scoured everything he could see, peering through the smoke whilst breathing gently through his t-shirt. It hurt his lungs to inhale, but he knew it wouldn't do any long-term damage. He ignored the blood stains in the waters, the blast holes in one of the ships, and the various flags in the waters, looking for something, anything, still alive. As they cleared the wreckage, he spotted something floating on a chunk of ship hull, about eighty metres away. "There!" he yelled out, diving over the railing without hesitation and swimming towards it. Alara called back after him, but he didn't catch it as he focused on his objective.

It was a girl, a young one, around Damian's age, most likely. She was dressed in loose-fitting, plain, clothes of cream and brown colouring, but her hair stood out against the bland colours. It lay plastered to her, midway down across her back; a dark, yet vibrant, orange colour that stood out against the half-submerged blue and gold hull she was laying on. He couldn't see her face as he swam towards her, but as he neared thirty, twenty-five, twenty metres, she let go of the wood, sinking below the waves. "Shit!" he yelled, pushing every ounce of energy he could into his front crawl. As he reached near enough to her position, the bubbles from her lungs still popping at the surface, he dove down, eyes wide open to see through the clear water. He kicked hard whilst pulling wide with his arms to catch up to her as she sank, limp in the water, an endless abyss beneath her.

His lungs screamed at him as he continued, exhausted, after her. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, he caught her. He pressed both hands under her shoulders and pushed her hard upwards before swimming up after her, wrapping an arm under her shoulders and carrying her with him to the surface. With the very last of his breath, he cleared the surface after her, taking a deep breath of air, clear of death and smoke. "Here!" he yelled out to the others, as they neared his position. He lifted her head, resting it on his shoulder as he kept them both above water. When the ladder to get on board came close, he rolled her over, placing her on his right shoulder before pulling himself, and her, out of the water. Ottar grabbed her when she was in reach, resting her gently on the decking and immediately checking if she was breathing as Jayce collapsed onto his knees next to her, panting heavily.

She wasn't. Ottar quickly tilted her head back and began to attempt to revive her. As soon as the first breath went in, she coughed and spluttered, rolling onto her front, releasing all the water in her lungs in gargling chokes. She tried to push herself up from the deck, both arms shaking heavily as she brought her head upwards. She looked straight at Jayce, her eyes a sparkling orange, amber colour - full of life and stubborn determination - as she pushed herself. Her eyes rolled

back, and her body gave out, falling straight down into Jayce's arms as he caught her. "Bring her downstairs, we need to get her out of those wet clothes," Corina ordered. Ottar picked her up and they disappeared quickly down below, heading straight to Corina's room. Alara placed a hand on the dripping wet Jayce before handing him a towel. "You did good."

Jayce stripped off quickly, hanging up his wet clothes and wrapping himself up. He rushed to get dressed, as the others went to Corina's room, and when he returned she was being dried off by Alara and Corina, her clothes removed, and her body supported upright by Ottar. Jayce assumed Corina had just finished checking over her for injuries. Damian was turned away, but Jayce ignored his inherent awkwardness, instead rushing over with some of Damian's clothes and helping to put them on her. As Jayce and Alara struggled with one of Damian's shirts they both faltered, staring at her back. She couldn't have been older than thirteen, Damian's age, but across her back was a large intricate tattoo, starting just below her shoulders, running down her spine. They looked at each other but both decided to ignore it, immediately helping place her on Corina's bed before gently placing the duvet over her.

The whole group relaxed, a wave of relief settling over them as she slept soundly. "Well done Jayce," Corina stated. "We have to keep an eye on her, but you likely just saved her life," she concluded, prompting Ottar to give him a proud smack on the back. "What do we do now?" Alara asked, taking a step back. Corina pondered for a moment. "We should take her to the Capital, if there's anyone who could help her - the Navy is probably the best bet." The others nodded. "We'll do rotations, but someone should remain in this room at all times. Water may still be in her lungs, so make sure to keep a close eye." She pointed at Ottar, indicating he take first watch, but Jayce stepped forwards, pulling up a chair. Corina nodded and stepped out of the room, followed by Alara.

"I'll make something warm to eat," Ottar promised, placing a huge, but gentle, hand on Jayce's shoulder before walking out, leaving Jayce and Damian behind. Damian stared at the girl, unsure of something, but he shook himself off and nodded to Jayce, before leaving as well. After an hour, Corina returned, carrying a rolled up sheet of papyrus and a bowl of soup in her other hand. "How is she?" she asked. "No change. Thanks," he replied, taking the bowl. Corina pulled out a spoon from her pocket, as well as a piece of bread. "Do you think anyone else survived?" he asked. Her otherwise stern face softened, and she shook her head. "We looped back, most of it had sunk and there were no signs of life," she said gently.

Jayce nodded, putting the bowl and bread down for a moment on Corina's bedside table. "Do you think her family was with her?" he asked, holding his chin as he leant forwards. Corina rested her hand on his shoulder before hugging his head. "I don't know, we'll find out when she wakes up. Until then eat your food and remain vigilant," she told him gently. He nodded, looking up at her. "Now, I have a gift for you. I got it when we stopped off at Tachus." She handed him the bound roll of papyrus. He unfurled it, gasping as he looked at the copy of the New World map. "It's yours to keep, wherever you decide to travel, and under whichever flag you choose - Navy, Marines, Guild, or Renegade." He stood up and hugged her properly. "You're more than welcome. I'm not sure what will happen when we reach the Capital, but we are going to be travelling for a while longer afterwards, so, if you need somewhere to go when Alara leaves, you can come with us a little longer. Although, I'd talk to your parents first," she advised, hugging him back. He released her, nodding before sitting back down with the map in hand. She left him and he ate his soup contently.

Alara popped in a while later. By this point, the sun had set, and Jayce felt exhausted. "Hey," she said with a smile, a lamp in hand to see through the darkness. Jayce turned and smiled back weakly, the light of Corina's bedroom barely on. "Hey, you alright?" he asked. She nodded, but he could tell something was bothering her. "It's been a long day... days," she admitted, pulling up a chair. "I'm on watch till midnight, then Ottar will take over, so get some sleep." He nodded, leaning back, and shutting his eyes. Alara sighed and scooted closer to him, to share the blanket she had brought with her. "What do you think that tattoo was?" she asked him, leaning her head on his as he turned to lean on her. He shrugged. "Maybe it's a tradition amongst her people. All islands are different, I wouldn't be surprised if the people are too. The Frontier is on the edge of the world, after all - so who knows," he mumbled, barely finishing the last few words. Alara nodded, pulling out a book, preparing for a long night.

Jayce woke up in Ottar's bed, just down the hall, with the sound of the sea rushing by the open window. They were travelling already, and travelling fast at that. He got up quickly, going to the door to find Alara stood there about to knock. "Morning. She sprung a fever early this morning and has been struggling to breathe, so we're on our way to the nearest major island to find a doctor," she said calmly. He immediately rushed past her into Corina's room to find Damian softly pressing the girl's brow with a wet cloth. Panic started to build in him, but Alara snapped him out of it by grabbing his arm and turning him towards her. "There's nothing more to be done, except try to lower her temperature. Get some

food, have a shower, we'll be there soon. You've done everything you can, she's still here because of you. Okay?" she asked, pressing both sides of his face with her hands, and meeting his worried gaze. Slowly, he nodded, and she let him go.

After eating plenty of the fresh fruit they had bought from the Guild Pit, shaving and showering, Jayce stepped out onto the main deck. Cool winds soared past him, and the sounds of birds, common gulls, filled the air as they flocked around the yacht, small islands passing by and the waters becoming significantly shallower. "Afternoon Jayce!" Corina called, from behind the wheel. "We're nearly there, so, if you feel you need to be busy, take over from Damian and try to cool her down. He's been there all morning," she told him, her hair loose and flowing in the wind with her usual silver and pearl hairpin tucked onto her shirt's collar. He took one more quick glance around them, unable to recognise where they were, before heading back down to take over.

He bumped into Alara coming up the stairs. "Ow!" she yelped, as she bumped the back of her head. "Oops, sorry," he said, immediately letting her pass as she rubbed her scalp. She waved it off and he continued down and through the hallway to Corina's room. The door was open and Ottar was leaning against the wall with his eyes shut, he was still awake but resting, whilst keeping alert in case she deteriorated. He opened one eye as Jayce approached, sucking in his gut to let him pass before stumbling to his bedroom for some proper rest. Jayce walked inside Corina's room and grabbed the bucket Damian was using to dampen the cloth. He carried it out and up the stairs onto the top deck, heading straight to their water purifier. He emptied the bucket over the edge before refilling the bucket halfway with fresh water and returning with it to Corina's room.

"Get some air, you look tired," Jayce ordered, pulling up a chair and grabbing a fresh cloth. Damian opened his mouth to protest, only to yawn instead. Now unable to protest, he nodded and got up. "Tell me if there's any change," he requested. Jayce nodded and opened all of the windows in the room, hoping some fresh air would help. As he sat there, gently dabbing her forehead and cheeks with the cold cloth, Jayce couldn't help but ponder as to why Damian was so keen to help. He had never expressed much interest in kids his own age, opting instead to socialise with Holli and Alara instead, both of whom were a year either side of Jayce. It was odd, even for Damian.

Jayce tended to her for a little longer, but eventually Alara returned. "We're twenty minutes away. Get your things together - we'll be there soon." She

watched over the girl as Jayce packed basic travelling gear, ready to go get the doctor, along with Corina. Ottar would remain behind, watching over her, whilst Alara and Damian ensured they were docked properly, and the fees had been paid. "Right, you ready?" Corina asked, as Ottar steered them in. Jayce nodded as he looked up at her, already hanging off the ladder. They touched down, Damian and Alara throwing the docking lines to the awaiting dockmasters, as Jayce hopped off onto the pier, with Corina following behind. "Excuse me-" called the harbourmaster, as Jayce hurried by, heading to the island's town square. "Apologies, my associates will handle the fees. Could you point me in the direction of the doctor's house?" Corina asked, as Jayce zoomed away.

The island was larger than Last Drop, at least twice the size from Alara's estimate, as she watched Jayce run off in one direction and Corina stroll off in another, yelling after him. It was crescent-shaped, flatter than their home, but still slightly elevated towards the core. As they were still within the Frontier region - according to Corina's map - the island still held a tropical climate, albeit as they were more north and had started the slow descent towards autumn, the air was cooler.

The waters of the large crooked bay were crystal and the island as a whole was idyllic, a picture-perfect paradise with white sandy beaches lining the entire visible side of the island. The inhabitants had formed a large town around the harbour, with a clear town square populated by market stalls. A church lay visible from the harbour, adjoined to the square, with a town hall facing opposite; both buildings were crafted out of white and grey bricks with domed roofs. The rest of the town matched the colourings, using the same style of bricks, however their roofs were covered with red slate instead.

Jayce ignored it all as he raced through alleyways, running past stationed Navy guards and Priests congregating throughout the centre of the town. He glanced at every sign, looking for anything to indicate a doctor's house, until finally he spotted it near the edge of the town. It was a small building, a humble abode, with a symbol of one of the Church's many gods. He raced to its doors, his lungs bursting, and body exhausted, as he charged inside. Corina was already there, talking to a rather short and stout man in his late sixties. "Ah, there he is. Jayce, we're heading back," she stated, as the doctor handed him a large leather bag, whilst grabbing several bottles containing strange-looking plants to take along. "Here you go son, don't drop it," he stated with a gruff voice, his bald spot glinting and the remaining long silver locks tied into a ponytail. The doctor took

off his glasses, slotting them into his white coat along with the bottles, before he stepped out of the door, with Corina leading the way.

Corina introduced the man, Doctor Valene, as they walked along the shore to the harbour in a brisk manner. Jayce held onto the doctor's bag tightly, getting his breath back and answering the doctor's questions about his rescue of her and how she had been over the last twenty-four hours. "Understood. I have my suspicions, but I'll know more when I see her. You did very well with your rescue," he stated, as they walked along the cobblestone pathway up to the harbour. Jayce nodded and thanked him, stepping quickly ahead, and walking past the various navy frigates docked in the harbour to their significantly smaller ship, roughly half the size, hidden at the end of the pier. Alara sat with Damian, dangling their toes over the edge of the pier as they waited. As soon as they spotted the pair returning, they jolted upright and walked towards them. "Ah, these must your other two helpers. Well done so far, Corina said you've all been very helpful in looking after her," he said, with a kind smile.

The pair looked at each other and then nodded vigorously, before looking towards Corina. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, pointing the doctor towards the ladder. Once all on board, they made their way down the stairs, through the living room, and towards Corina's bedroom. "Oh my!" exclaimed the doctor, as he spotted Ottar with her. "A baned, I was not quite expecting... ah never mind." He walked up to Ottar, looking up at him through his glasses, before nodding and then shaking his head. He rested a hand on Ottar's arm. "You have my deepest sympathies," he said, before he walked past him to get a look at the young girl.

Jayce didn't quite know what to say as he saw the doctor's reaction to Ottar. However, Ottar noticed Jayce's expression and shrugged before stepping out of the crowded room, dragging Damian and Alara with him. The doctor checked her temperature, listened to her ragged breathing, looked inside her mouth, and then took his bag from Jayce. "She's got an infection from swallowing all the seawater. It's not too difficult to treat, but I'll need to check to see how she's doing tomorrow morning." He started to grind several seeds from his bag and then added a little of the liquid from one of his bottles, containing the plants Jayce didn't recognise. He washed his hands in some strong-smelling alcohol before rubbing the salve onto his finger. He then rubbed it on the inside of her mouth. The girl instinctively pulled a disgusted look, but she quickly relaxed. They sat there for ten minutes, with the doctor timing it on his watch, before, using a

syringe, he squirted a blue, clear fluid into the sides of her cheeks. Her breathing eased almost immediately, and the group let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Her fever should go down overnight; I'll be back tomorrow morning," he stated, washing his hands out of the window from a bottle he took out of his bag. "Thank you very much, doctor," said Corina, pulling out her purse and going to give him a payment. He held up his hands. "Pay me if she's recovered by morning, but before I go, I do have one bit of advice for you folk," he said quietly, "I'd get out of Crooked Bay and make your way to the Capital sooner rather than later. More significantly, it's probably best to keep this girl and your friend onboard," he said suspiciously. "Dangerous world for a young lady like her," he continued, with a tone of sadness and a well-hidden look of regret. He walked past them, heading to disembark. Corina and Jayce looked at each other and then back at her as she slept softly, her breathing clearer and her face significantly less flushed.

Despite having the perfect chance to explore the new island properly, Jayce refused to leave the girl's room, and it wasn't long before Damian joined him, eager to help in any way. With the sun setting quickly and the group exhausted from their tense voyage, the others decided to stay on board; they'd explore and restock tomorrow, they agreed. Alara peeked in on the trio, dressed in her pyjamas and curious to see if there was any change. Instead she found Damian asleep, curled up on the floor and Jayce deep in thought. His eyebrows furrowed and hands on his chin, his signature thinking position. She smiled, closing the door behind her, and heading downstairs to sleep in her borrowed hammock, Corina claiming her bed for the meantime.

Jayce kept his eyes open for as long as he could, trying to understand what the doctor had told him, but before long his eyelids started to droop, and he found his head bouncing until finally he drifted off to sleep. He awoke on the floor to a gentle prodding on his back from a small foot. "Excuse me?" asked a soft female voice. "Hello?" she continued, poking him a little harder with her toes. Jayce jolted upright, looking up at the wide-eyed redhead sat on the bed before him. A second later, Damian bolted awake as well and the girl jumped in surprise. "Um, sorry. Where am I?" she asked, her orange eyes wide in the soft light and an inquisitive and friendly smile on her face. "You're on the Heavenly Hand, we're docked at Crooked Bay," Jayce replied accurately. The girl nodded and opened her mouth to say something, only to close it again and shake her head.

"I need to go north. Now. To the Ice Floes," she stated quietly, with a sense of panic on her face. "Where are the people I was with? How did I get here?" she

continued, getting increasingly more panicked. "Hey, hey," Jayce interrupted, trying to calm her as Damian sat stunned. "It's okay, we can get you north. Your ship sunk in a storm... I pulled you out of the water and we brought you here. I'm sorry, no one else made it," he said gently. Tears formed in her eyes, but she wiped them away. "I see. I don't remember a storm - we were attacked," she corrected, tucking her knees into her body, and hugging them. Jayce stood up and sat down next to her. "My name is Jayce," he stated and then pointed at Damian. "I'm Damian," he added astutely. The girl repeated their names and nodded. "He's my foolish younger brother. What's your name, do you remember?" Jayce asked, extending a hand to her. She looked insulted at the question and clearly held back her tongue, but she grasped his hand shakily and smiled at him. "Right, sorry. I'm Wicke."

Seize the Seas Tales: Alara's Justice

The sight was ghastly. Debris, wreckage, and death was everywhere. She had seen no bodies in the destruction, but she sensed they were there, sinking slowly into the depths all around them. She heard a splash to her side and spotted Jayce swimming quickly off towards a piece of wreckage in the distance. "Jayce! What are you doing? It's dangerous!" she yelled after him. She went to find something to help her see better through the smoke, only for something to catch her eye in the waters nearby. The hulls of some of the ships were blue and gold, Imperial Navy colours. These were Navy vessels that had sunk. A flag then caught her eye. It was a deep maroon colour, with a white crown on top of a cross, rays of light shining upon it - the flag of the Holy Church of Reclamation. These ships, no, this fleet, had been an inquisition. She turned and looked at Jayce as he climbed back aboard with a young girl on his shoulders. What happened here and who was this girl? Something was not sitting right with her.

Chapter 6: Wanted: Murderers, Thieves, and Sorcerers

Wicke looked at the both of them; it was obvious they were brothers, but she could see immediately where they differed. She was more than used to seeing the differences between similar siblings. One looked more confident and definitely more collected, almost arrogantly; the other hid a sense of insecurity, but was the more brash and outspoken. She smiled, they genuinely seemed genuine. She slid her body out from under the covers, her clothes sticking to her sweaty body. "Whose clothes are these?" she thought. As she tried to stand up tall, her legs wobbled, and the ground rushed up to meet her.

"Careful there," said Jayce, as she landed weakly in his arms, "You haven't eaten in a while. I'll get you some food. You should stay in bed and rest, at least until morning. I'll be back," he promised, with a kind smile, before leaving to head to the living room. She looked over at the younger one - he hadn't stopped staring at her since he had woken up. She squinted a little and then stretched open her eyes, staring back. "Sorry, have we met before?" he asked, startled. Wicke furrowed her brow, trying to think through the fog in her head. "No... I don't think so," she replied. Damian pondered for a moment and then shook it off. "So, Damian, was it?" she asked, presenting an overly mature façade. "Could you tell me what I missed?"

By the time Damian had told her every intricate detail of their voyage, from leaving Last Drop, to their finding of her, to their arrival at Crooked Bay, Jayce returned with some soup and Corina in tow. Wicke nodded along and then pointed to Corina as she walked in, uncertainly stating her name to Damian for clarification. "That's correct - Wicke, is it?" Corina asked, sitting down in front of her. Wicke nodded, her fair skin still a little bit flushed. Jayce handed her the bowl of soup and a spoon. She held the soup weakly, and her hand shook uncontrollably as she grasped the spoon. She sighed, blushing heavily as she looked towards Jayce. He immediately sat down next to her and helped her eat, pausing to allow her to answer Corina's various questions. "Could you tell us what happened?" Corina asked, pulling up a chair.

"We were sailing north, or at least northeast, to make our way to meet my group at the Ice Floes. Then we were attacked. As we fought to defend ourselves, our ship began to sink and before I knew it, I woke up here," she stated, vaguely and cautiously. "Were you sailing with your family?" Corina asked. Wicke shook her head and then looked down, her eyes glistening. "No, they were... friends, trying to help me get to my family." Corina nodded and rested her hand on the girl's

leg, opening her mouth to speak - only for Wicke to bolt upright to her feet. "I need to get north - as soon as possible!" Wicke reinforced, looking directly at Corina, her nose red and dripping slightly. "I'm sorry for the loss of your friends. You have my sympathies. We are headed to the Capital, I can take you there, but you will need to find other means up north," Corina said softly.

Wicke's heart dropped as she listened to Corina. "Please, you've got to help me," she pleaded, "I've got no one else." Corina shook her head and stood up, looking at Jayce. "The journey up north is dangerous, very dangerous. It is also the wrong direction from where I am heading next. After we drop off Alara, well, it's up to Jayce what he wishes to do, but we are going east," she stated, clearly offering Jayce a choice. Immediately, Jayce understood, nodding to Corina. "I can't promise anything, but I'll try my hardest to get you home!" Jayce told her, intercepting the conversation. The young girl looked at him, and then back at Corina, unsure of what to think. Finally, she nodded. "Thank you. And thank you for saving me."

Corina nodded, thinking hard to herself, before straightening up and looking over the youngsters. "It's late. We'll figure out the details tomorrow. The doctor will be round in the morning - until then, get some sleep," she ordered, pointing at both Damian and Wicke. The two teens nodded and Wicke lay down, falling asleep almost immediately, as Damian went to protest. Corina dragged him out before beckoning Jayce to follow with a simple tilt of her head. Damian shuffled away to the lowest deck, leaving the pair to talk.

"What are your thoughts?" Jayce asked her, crossing his arms. Corina leant against the wall, in a surprisingly casual manner, for her, and folded her arms. "What she's asking for is dangerous - very dangerous. Due to the way the ocean currents of the world are, the path north is treacherous. There is also little up there, so why her family are there, and why she's so far south, is... odd," she said quietly, careful not to be overheard. Jayce nodded. "She also didn't mention the storm, but that can be excused," she continued. "If you're going to help her, as undoubtedly you will, know what you are risking. The wreckage contained Navy frigates - she said she was attacked. If she was on those frigates, who was brave enough to attack them and why? If she wasn't..."

"What?" Jayce asked, waiting for her to continue. She sighed and shook her head, before smacking his forehead softly with her fingers. "Think. I know it's late." Jayce took a moment, and it sank in. "If you're going to help her, and I'm not saying you shouldn't, that's what you may be up against," she said seriously,

ensuring the message got across. "I understand. If she is being hunted, handing her over may be the end of her. If not, then I am just taking her home. Regardless, she asked for my help and I'm not going to abandon her to the world," he said resolutely, but still quietly. Corina nodded, a small smile on her face, that was quickly replaced with her usual stern face of responsibility. "Good answer. You know what Alara will think of this, so choose your words wisely. I'll help you as best as I can when we get to the Capital. Now, get some sleep. We have a big day ahead."

Jayce returned back to Corina's room, covered her lamps, and lay down on the floor. He awoke early in the morning to the sound of knocking. He immediately looked over to Wicke's bed, only for her to not be there. He jumped up, rushing over to the door and opening it. Alara stood there. "Where's Wicke?" he demanded. "Good morning to you too. She's with the doctor in the living room. She didn't want to disturb your sleep, after everything you did for her." Jayce immediately stepped past her, to Alara's clear annoyance. As he stormed into the living room, Doctor Valene looked up towards Jayce, before turning back to Wicke as he finished his check-up. Her hair was damp, and she was dressed in clean clothes - borrowed from Corina.

"Good morning, Jayce!" she said with a smile, keeping her eyes clearly on the doctor. "Morning, Wicke," he replied, relieved. "Morning, doctor, how is she?" Doctor Valene reached into his bag, pulling out a hard sweet and handing it to her before leaning in and whispering a few things to her. She looked slightly shocked, but nodded. "She's perfectly healthy, surprisingly so - which is good. It will take a little bit for your breath to fully return, so I suggest you don't do too much strenuous exercise for a few days," he stated, standing up and patting her head, before walking out of the living room to talk to Corina.

"You worried me, when I didn't see you," Jayce said, mildly scolding her. Alara looked at the pair, confused. "Sorry, should I have woken you?" she asked. He shook his head, realising it was silly. "No, never mind... I meant what I said last night," he replied. Her eyes lit up a little and she nodded, before getting to her feet and popping the sweet in her mouth. She went to walk up the steps to the top deck, but faltered, before turning back around and heading to Corina's room. She emerged with a blue shawl wrapped around her head.

Jayce looked at her confused, but ignored it, sticking his head out onto the top deck just as Corina finished her conversation with the doctor. She went to hand him payment, but he refused. "It's not much, but if I can help ease my conscience,

I will," he stated, closing her hand and disembarking. As he walked away from the yacht, he turned around on the pier and called out to them. "Good luck!" He then disappeared into the crowd of dock workers, carrying crates of cargo between the various vessels docked on the pier.

Wicke stuck her head out behind Jayce, as he stood on the stairs, to look around briefly. Deciding it was safe, she stepped out onto the top deck and sat down on one of the deckchairs. As Jayce went to follow her, Alara grabbed the back of his belt and dragged him back down the steps, accidentally bumping his head. "Ow! What was that for?" he demanded. She ignored him, stepping halfway up the stairs and beckoning Corina over. Ottar and Damian emerged from the hold. "What is it?" Ottar asked, looking up at them.

"We need to talk," Alara declared. Jayce immediately looked over to Corina. She gave him a slight glance and he immediately knew what Alara wanted. "We need to talk about what to do with her," Alara stated, as Damian and Ottar sat down on the seats. "What do you mean? We're taking her with us to the Capital," Damian stated, confidently. Alara looked at him, something about her demeanour completely alien from what Jayce was used to. A look he had only seen once before, a few weeks prior. "I think it's best we take her to the local Navy base, or if not here, then the one in the Capital," she stated. Immediately there was a shift in the atmosphere between the group. "If there's anyone who can help her find her family - it's them."

There was a faint rustle of movement from the deck above, that only Jayce heard. "No," he stated. Alara glared at him and then looked at the others. Damian shook his head as well. "I said I would take her. The Navy doesn't have time to help with something like this. She would be put in an orphanage, or relocated elsewhere. It's a lot, but I'm going to help her!" said Jayce, crossing his arms and tying off the conversation. "We'll take her to the Capital; the decision can be made there," Corina intercepted, as Alara went to protest. Alara shook her head, but sighed, realising she wasn't going to win this discussion. "Fine." Jayce looked at the others for confirmation and then walked up the stairs to the top deck. He looked around - Wicke was gone.

They scoured the yacht for her, but there was no sign of her. Jayce turned on Alara. "She must have heard what you suggested. Do you have no empathy at all for her? She has no one she knows here. No. One. And the first thing you suggest is we drop her off and wash our hands of her. She's a kid," he yelled, with increasing panic in his voice. Alara blushed a deep red, but she held her

tongue. "This isn't helping," Corina said calmly, stepping between them. "We need to find her. She won't have gone far. You and Damian go to the town, she'll be around there somewhere. We will resupply and prepare for your return. Ottar will stay here in case she comes back," she declared. Jayce nodded, looking over at Damian, before rushing down the ladder and onto the pier.

The pair bolted off, rushing quickly past the various workers and Navy sailors located throughout the pier and adjacent harbour. Jayce headed straight for the doctor's house with Damian in tow. There were many people about and it was only as he reached the door, that Jayce realised he'd left Damian in his wake. The doctor wasn't in, eliminating Jayce's first guess. "You need to slow down!" Damian complained, unable to keep up. "Sorry, you're right. Rushing won't make it easier to find her. Do you have any ideas?" he asked.

The sound of midday bells rang out throughout the town. A beautiful chime that eased them both. "The town square might be a good place to start," Damian suggested. Jayce nodded and the pair sped off in the general direction, looking at every face, down every alleyway, that they saw. The centre of the town was bustling; people of all kinds were shopping in the markets, families were dining in the various cafés, and Navy sailors and Priests were everywhere.

The majority of the Navy sailors were dressed in their uniforms, although some on shore leave had switched to more casual clothes, with small bits of Navy-branded clothing to identify themselves. For the majority, they wore a simple, double-breasted, white shirt, tucked into a pair of coloured parachute trousers affiliated with their specific fleet. These sailors wore a set of deep green trousers, representing the southern force. The trousers themselves were held up with a thick black belt, clasped at the centre, over the belly button, and sporting the symbol of the Imperial Navy - a compass with two silver swords crossing behind it, sat over a black anchor on a white background. In the case of these belt clasps, their background was replaced with an oval, golden-bronze buckle. To tie off the look, their trousers were tucked into a set of black shiny boots that stopped just below the knee. An ascot tie laid around their neck - the colour of their respective fleets, and finally a suncap, branded with the word 'NAVY' in silver. This cap too, matched their respective fleet in colour.

To Jayce, it was a strange uniform; one that he could only imagine was rather heavy from the legs down, and offered no actual protection from weapons. On the other hand, it did look rather cool and brought a strange sense of pride to him as he saw the various groups congregated. He shook it off and refocused,

continuing their search for Wicke. Everywhere they looked, Priests and Deacons could be seen talking to each other and the various denizens congregating around the church, as the large bells at the top of the light-coloured building rang out through the gaps in their domes. The main doors opened, and they all headed inside, along with a significant portion of the Navy sailors.

A sigh of relief came out of Damian, and Jayce too felt himself ease, as the streets cleared up a little, offering a better view. One of the town hall's large walls caught their attention. It was plastered in sheets of paper that flapped slightly in the soft sea breeze. Various people stood looking at it, so the pair nodded to each other and crossed the plaza to investigate. Several of the citizens noticed their approach and eyed them up, before picking up their things and continuing onwards leaving the majority of the wall just for them. "What is it?" Damian asked, as he looked across the huge collage.

"Bounties," Jayce stated, his eyes immediately focusing on the photographs and drawings of various pirates and criminals, all displaying lists of their crimes, as well as their monetary reward. Several read 'CAPTURED' or 'DECEASED' in large red writing, stamped across the photo or drawing. "Hey, isn't that..." Damian said, pointing at a cluster of four posters, drawing the attention of the few other viewers. Jayce immediately elbowed him to silence him, as he spotted the four posters of the Delivery Kats. "Uh, I mean, what strange-looking, criminal scum!" Damian reiterated, to the odd looks of the few other observers.

"Yes, yes. It is. Don't draw attention to ourselves, otherwise we may get in trouble," Jayce whispered. "Come on, we need to keep looking," he said more loudly, moving away from the wall. Damian went to follow, only to falter as he stood in front of a row of five posters, with the slight remains of a torn one plastered above them. He gasped as something came to his mind. He pointed at it, unable to voice his words as Jayce turned to look back at him. "What is it?" he asked, looking at the four he was pointing at. "These were back home. On Sara's desk," he stated, his mind racing. Jayce read their crimes: 'Aiding a known fugitive', 'Heresy', 'Assault', 'Escaping arrest', the list went on and on.

"So what?" Jayce asked, looking up at the remaining poster, the majority of poster torn away, except for a tiny bit of the portrait. A tiny trickle of their hair visible in the corner. A dark orange colour. Jayce's mouth fell open as he put it together and looked at Damian. He nodded at his older brother, eyes wide. They hurried away, immediately checking down the nearest alleys for her, until

finally, a few streets away, her little feet just visible from behind several stacks of boxes, they found her.

Muted sobbing came from behind the stacks, tears and snot dripping from her nose onto the cobblestone, as she sat, head tucked into her knees, with her wanted poster scrunched up in her left hand. "Wicke?" Jayce asked, approaching her slowly and crouching to face her. She looked up through her borrowed shawl, her hair mostly hidden and eyes puffy and red. "Heya kiddo," he stated, putting on a nervous smile. She looked up at Damian and then back at Jayce before she dropped her head back down. "Go away," she muttered defeatedly. "I certainly won't. And Damian's more stubborn than I am, so he's not either." Jayce said, scooting around and sitting down next to her. "Why'd you run away?" he asked, fully aware of the answer, "You made us - me, worried."

She didn't bother to raise her head. "You were going to leave me here, hand me over!" she said, a little too loudly for their liking. Damian looked nervously around the alleyway. "We weren't, that was Alara's dumb idea!" he stated, crossing his arms in front of her. Jayce held up a hand, exchanging a quick look of control to Damian. "She did suggest it, but we all voted against it," he told her assuredly. She scoffed. "Great, how wonderful! How reassuring!" she said sarcastically, raising her head to look at him, before pushing him away weakly. "You lie, that's all you adults do!" she sobbed. "You promise things, break them, and leave me alone! I hate you!" she yelled, throwing the ball of paper at him and swiping at him.

Jayce caught her flailing hand and got to his feet, holding it tightly. "I promised you I would do my best. I meant it, Wicke. I'm taking you north - to the Ice Floes. Even if it's just me and you. We will find your family," he promised, not breaking eye contact, or letting go of her hand, as he bent over to look down at her. She looked up him, her vision blurry and her eyes and nose stinging, a fresh flood of tears obscured her vision as he pulled her up to her feet before turning around and putting her onto his back. "You promise?" she asked into his shoulder, as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "I promise. I don't break promises without real reason. I will get you home."

She nodded and Damian looked up at her. "So what did you do?" he asked out of curiosity. Jayce glared at him, only for a voice to interrupt them. "Excuse me, can I help you..." asked a soft, well-spoken, young man dressed in long brown robes, with a ring of black beads, all etched with a symbol, hanging from his belt, and a sheet of paper in his left hand. A Deacon of the Holy Imperial Church of

Reclamation. Wicke let out a horrified gasp. His face contorted as he looked at the three of them; his eyes resting on Wicke and recognition spreading across him. She stretched her right hand out towards him, a deep swirl of intricate black lines appearing on her index finger that spread across her hand. She muttered something in Jayce's ear, in a language he didn't recognise. The Deacon yelled out, grabbing his sheet of paper and bringing it in front of him. "Hel-!" he yelled out, interrupted as the large stack of crates fell on top of him. "Run, run now!" Wicke called out, as Priests dressed in black robes came around the corner to investigate.

Without hesitation, Jayce turned and ran, with Wicke holding onto his back and Damian close on his heels. They ran through the alleyways, avoiding the main roads as much as possible, as bells rang out across the city. They took the long route back to the harbour, stopping in the alleyway closest to their ship. "You have some explaining to do!" Jayce told her, as he set her down. She nodded. "We'll talk once we're out of here," he stated, taking her hand, and then grabbing Damian's, before stepping out into the very busy harbour. They tore through the crowds, the two youngsters using Jayce, like a plough, to clear the way as they stuck close to him.

Conversations and rumours quickly began to spiral around them, as the town's alarm bells continued to ring out, but eventually they made it onto their pier and clambered onboard The Heavenly Hand. Both Damian and Wicke collapsed to the deck exhausted, as Ottar came up from below decks. "What happened?" he asked, looking out towards the town. "Church. Want. Her," Damian wheezed, pointing to Wicke. Ottar nodded and looked at Jayce for a more collected statement. He took a deep breath. "She's got a bounty from the Church; we were spotted and need to leave now!" Jayce stated, moving to ensure the ship could leave at a moment's notice. Ottar looked at her, smiled, and then went to help, stepping onto the pier and holding position by the mooring ropes.

It wasn't long before Corina and Alara returned, both carrying several boxes of items and cargo. "Corina!" Jayce called to her. "We need to go! Now!" Without hesitation, Corina picked up the pace, hurrying over to the ship; Alara, confused, following closely. Jayce leapt onto the pier and helped carry the items on board as she looked at him for clarification. "Those alarm bells are for us, they'll either lock down the harbour, or start searching the ships for us," he stated urgently, to Alara's horror. "Did you find her?" Corina asked, clambering up the ladder onto the top deck. Jayce nodded. "Good. Alara stop acting like a coconut and help!" she ordered, grabbing everything she needed to set off. Alara and Jayce swiftly

climbed up, Alara clearly wishing to say something, but otherwise holding her tongue, once more. Ottar released the mooring lines and leapt onboard as Jayce lowered the sails.

They swiftly turned the ship around and sailed away from the pier - the source of the trouble peeking her head out from below decks. She held out her right hand towards the now-tied mainsail. Corina and Ottar stood on the aft deck, both looking at her curiously. Jayce, Damian, and Alara, all stopped and looked as well. "You should see this!" Damian stated, giddily. The intricate black lines once more appeared around her finger, before spreading across her hand as she lifted her other un-tattooed hand and held it in the direction of the eastern wind. Again, she repeated the alien words that Jayce couldn't understand, and the wind twisted around her, turning to a north-facing wind, travelling straight into their sail. It buckled and billowed outwards as it caught the newly altered and strengthened gust, forcing the ship forwards with a boost of energy that caused the entire group to stumble. "What in the abyss was that?" Alara asked horrified. Damian danced with joy and Jayce beamed proudly. "Magic!" he laughed, looking upwards towards a very curious Corina.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Deacon's Vision

With lunchtime prayers complete, William left the holy church to go and be with the people of Crooked Bay. He strolled through the streets, his mind clear and body calm as he waved casually to the locals and wandered his usual route in this glorious Gods' given day. Oh, how the great Lords had blessed him for his luck. After years upon years in that stinkhole to the east, the great Archbishops had sent him somewhere pleasant. Somewhere with enough people and enough men of cloth that he didn't have to do anything. Finally, after years of scrubbing and cleaning those filthy street rats, and babysitting the endlessly monologuing crones of Gryphon's Tower, he was free to coast through this pointless and arduous existence.

Two boys rushed past him, bumping him as they ran, turning into an alleyway up ahead. He opened his mouth to scold them, but decided against it. Today was a good, calm day after all. He took a deep breath and continued onwards, glancing briefly into the alleyway as he passed. He could only see one of the boys, the smaller one looking down at something behind a large stack of crates, with his arms crossed. Again, Deacon William paused, and then he continued onwards. As he walked away, something nagged him in the corner of his mind, and he let out a sigh before turning around, pulling out his holy scripture from

his belt, a copy of a page from the Pope's holy book - just in case. He walked into the alleyway...

He crunched under the stack of crates, thrown at him by the heretic, and the world went dark as he hit the floor. From the darkness, a throne appeared before him. White and gold with a crowned cross behind it. A man sat in it, one he recognised immediately. William fell to his knees, prostrating himself before his holiness - Pope Alexander. "Your holiness!" he proclaimed; his face planted in the floor. The Pope smiled, his face blank: a plain canvas within the dream. Golden light surrounded him, and his long white robes flowed around the holy leader.

"You may touch it," the Pope declared, stepping up out of his throne and presenting his ringed hand to the young Deacon. "Thank you. Thank you!" William proclaimed, taking the hand in both hands and looking up towards the Pope, only to be blinded by golden light. "I have a task for you, William," he said softly, the very words sending shivers down his spine. "Come to the Capital, and take your place as a Priest within my Holy Church. You are meant for more, by the Gods' own declarations, you, Deacon William Vikare, shall become one of my chosen. An Archbishop within my Holy Court!" he declared. William's hands slipped through the Pope's, and he fell through the floor, falling into an unending abyss. "I shall be waiting."

William awoke with a jolt, in a soft plain bed in the local infirmary. "Calm yourself, brother. It is okay," stated Priest Dux, resting a hand on William's bruised chest. William blinked heavily and refocused. He slid out of bed and got to his feet, against the Priest's protests. "I received a vision. I must leave for the Capital immediately. The heretic known as Wicke has survived!" he stated boldly, to the surprised Priest. "Fetch me a ship, brother, I must leave immediately on this pilgrimage."

Chapter 7: Warning: Colossal Vessels in Operation on this Highway

Crooked Bay fell behind them, fading into the south as they sailed north, skipping across the waves at a breakneck pace. Wicke stood there, the tattoo-esque markings still standing out on her extended right arm. After a few minutes of holding the position, her arms started to shake, and pain spread across her face until eventually she dropped her arms - the marks fading into nothingness. The strong aiding wind faded, and the yacht slowed as she sat down, breathing heavily. Damian laughed as he ran up to the aft deck to look at how far they had travelled, whilst Alara scowled and headed below deck.

"Well," Corina said eventually, as she looked towards Jayce from behind the wheel. "That was something unique," she concluded. Wicke looked towards her, panting heavily, a small smile building up. She looked towards Jayce, who gave a big smile and a thumbs up; she returned the gesture and promptly lay down on the floor. Alara's stomping footsteps warned Wicke to roll out of the way as she climbed the stairs to the top deck, carrying a tray of sandwiches. "Here," Alara offered scornfully. Wicke spitefully went to refuse, only for her stomach to declare other intentions as it dawned on her how hungry she actually was. She grabbed several, stuffing one immediately into her mouth. "Woah there, you can always have more!" Alara stated, lifting the tray away from her and walking over to Jayce.

"So you've rescued a Witch then?" she stated coldly, teasing him as he reached for the tray. Jayce glared at her and snatched a sandwich quickly, ignoring the statement. Wicke, on the other hand, turned a deep crimson colour, her red ears peeking out between her now loose hair. "I'm not a Witch!" she yelled. Alara turned to face her, sneering. "You used magic, how are you not?" she retorted childishly, before continuing on up to the aft deck. "I'm a Sorcerer. Witches use rituals and alchemy to enhance chemicals and potions. If you're going to look down on me for being able to use something as simple as magic, at least get it right!" Wicke scolded.

"What's simple about it?" Jayce asked, munching on a cheese sandwich. Wicke paused and then shrugged. "It's something anyone can do. Even probably her," she stated, finishing her food and walking up to Jayce with her hands open in a begging position. He sighed and handed his other sandwich to her, the food disappearing in a flash. "Can you teach me?" he asked curiously, visions of heroism immediately bubbling in his head. "No!" yelled Alara. "You're not learning magic!" Wicke ignored her, but shook her head regardless.

"I'm a novice, I wouldn't know how to unlock it for you. My family might be able to," she stated, clearly disappointed with herself. Jayce patted her head and nodded. "That's fine. We'll talk about it later. Alara, are there anymore sandwiches?" An empty tray flew down the stairs at him.

Within the hour, after Alara had vented very aggressively against Jayce, with a polearm during training, they left her to watch the wheel and headed downstairs to accommodate their new semi-permanent addition to the crew. "You'll be in Ottar's room," Corina stated, opening up the door for her, whilst Jayce disappeared to the hold. "I'm sorry, we ran out of time so weren't able to get any new clothes. Damian has kindly agreed to share his with you - they may be a little big," she added, pointing at the small pile of basic clothes laying on the bed.

"Thank you," Wicke said gratefully, as she sat down on the bed, looking through the pile of ragged t-shirts, torn jeans, and rather grim-looking socks. "Where's Ottar sleeping? I don't want to be any trouble." Corina smiled and shook her head. "He's downstairs with the other three. Don't worry, they'll survive his snoring," she affirmed, before walking away to leave Wicke alone in her new quarters, the socks immediately getting discarded to the corner of the room.

Not long after, Corina summoned the crew up to the top deck, with a mild sense of urgency. "Take a look, crew. We're now on the final straight!" she declared, pointing ahead at a gigantic set of white marble arches emerging from the sea; each at least a hundred, if not more, metres high. The water ahead of them looked strange. There were two sets of waves running in the same direction: an outer flow, no different to the rest of the open waters, but between the huge arches the waves flowed much faster.

"Welcome to the highway and welcome to the Empire's Heart!" Corina called out as they passed through, the yacht leaping forwards as the ocean currents carried them north. "Raise the sails, we won't need them whilst on the highway!" Corina ordered, locking the wheel. Jayce held his hand up to belay that order, instead giving a smirk to Wicke and waving his hand in an unusual fashion. She immediately understood and put her back against the wall.

Jayce held on to the railings, and Damian mirrored him. Corina nodded in acknowledgement and gripped the wheel tightly, as Alara protested before following the others. The swirling patterns wrapped themselves around Wicke's finger before spreading along her right hand as she guided the winds with her left. The whole process took six seconds to Corina's count. The ship lurched forwards, combining both boosts to tear across the sea. Jayce and Damian

whooped and cheered and even Alara struggled to hide a smile. "How long can you hold it for?" Jayce asked, as Wicke stood against the wall, her hand right pointing in the sail's direction. "Oh, a simple spell like Gust, I can hold until I get tired. My body will fail me before I run out," she stated simply. "Run out?" Jayce asked. She nodded. "Like fuel?" he asked curiously. She pondered for a little, trying to think of the best way to explain it. "Yeah. It's been a while since I've had to explain it. There's better explanations for it, but magic is harnessed like water from a bucket. Most of the cost comes from the first casting, maintaining it is more physically taxing than magically."

Jayce nodded, thinking he understood. Eventually she relaxed, rubbing her aching arms and slowing the ship down. Jayce raised the sails and then got her a snack, before sitting with his feet overboard. She came and joined him, sitting down next to him, and looking out towards the world passing them by. The once empty waters now teemed with activity - all around the ship large shoals of fish flew by them, using the highway current to travel quickly. Large, black, thunder dolphins leapt out beside them, the water crackling as they accelerated with a boom out of the water, flying high before landing back down with a crash.

It wasn't long before Jayce and Wicke spotted other ships using the highway to travel. Mostly medium-sized, dual-deck cargo ships called Ogres. They had a single sail, with a small crew quarters located below the aft deck; the rest of the ship was a big cargo hold - escorting them were more heavily armed mercenary ships. The current sped the fleet away faster, due to their larger hulls, but some pulled off the highway earlier, sailing away to other nearby islands to trade.

The group mostly mingled on the top deck, looking out at the islands flying by them, but eventually the skies began to darken, and Corina gave an announcement. "Right, listen up! We are going to be sailing day and night for the next few days to get back on schedule," Corina stated. There was a rather lacklustre response, but after Ottar volunteered to do the nights, the enthusiasm returned. The rest of the day fell away, with little other than horizon watching filling the evening. At night, large buoys lit up the highway, providing visibility in the darkness; several ships could easily be seen anchored at the sides of the highway, large lights illuminating them just beyond the current.

The days passed quickly, Jayce mostly keeping out of Alara's way, but otherwise acting as a training dummy for her to practice on as she switched between her wooden katana and a large polearm, the latter for no other reason than personal enjoyment. Damian lounged around as much as he could, until eventually Corina

got fed up with his idleness and set him to continue his studies. Wicke asked if she could join in, and Corina gladly accepted the new student, extending her entire library to the knowledge-hungry teen. She could be found at all hours of the day reading Corina's collection of non-fiction and fiction tomes - inadvertently engaging Damian's sense of competitiveness, as he found himself swiftly no longer the prized pupil.

Jayce took to analysing the map Corina had given him, taking note of every island they passed and physically attempting to estimate how long they had before they arrived at the Capital. Finally, as they reached the final few nights, according to his estimate, Corina decided to let them rest. They pulled over as the sun began to set, the air now noticeably colder, as autumn truly came upon them. With the anchor dropped, dinner in them, and most of the group exhausted, Jayce found himself sat on the bow of the Heavenly Hand, his feet dangling over the edge and eyes looking up to the sky. It was calm, and quiet, despite the rushing waves not too far away from them; the glow of the buoys were bright in the near distance.

It had been a ride, a journey, an adventure to say the least. He thought to himself, as he lay down and looked upwards to the sparkling gems in the sky, the moon a tiny smile in the canvas of the night. A face looked down at him, swaddled in a warm blanket, her eyes shining in the low light and a blue pearl dangling from her neck. She sat down next to him, dangling her feet over the side and resting her head on his chest. "I thought you were mad at me?" Jayce asked, as he put an arm around her shoulder. "I am," she replied softly. "But we'll be at the Capital soon and I don't want to feel this way when I get there," she stated, pulling herself up and using his arm as a pillow as she placed the blanket over the two of them.

"And how is it that you feel?" Jayce asked cautiously. Alara tilted her head to look at him before looking back up at the night sky, a slight shiver running through her. "Angry... worried? In all honesty, I don't know Jayce." He rolled over onto his side and looked at her, she mirrored him before flicking his nose. He smiled and shook his head. "Well... vent. Pretend I'm Holli, and Jayce has done something stupid, again," he stated, with his full attention on her. She laughed softly. "Well... Holli. Jayce has travelled hundreds of kilometres across the sea, intent on not returning home, but he doesn't know what he wants to do or where he wants to go. He has the resources, the arrogance, the connections, and a stupid level of intelligence to do anything he wants, yet he is determined to find some grand adventure," she laid out. "He's not only abandoned his

parents' dreams for him, but he's also actively become friends with pirates and renegades. He's basically adopted a wanted Sorcerer criminal and now he is having hero fantasies." Jayce opened his mouth, and she placed her finger on it to stop him from talking.

"He's in danger, so much danger that he can't even begin to realise that he's in the dragon's lair. And-" She choked a little on the lump forming in her throat, and turned away, clearing her throat, determined to say her piece. "And he doesn't realise that the next sunken ship, the next graveyard in the sea, will be his own. So, Holli. How do I tell him to not be a hero to this little girl, to stay safe for Damian, for Corina, for his parents. For me," she turned over, her eyes terrified. Jayce looked at her sadly and nodded. "Sometimes, you just have to let people make their own mistakes. Let them leap off a cliff to try to fly. Dive into a deep abyss to find a sunken treasure. Let a wannabe hero play pirate," he said, meeting her gaze before sitting up, rolling her off his numb arm.

Jayce looked out to the open sea, the line of glowing buoys not too far into the distance. "Holli would say: Jayce is foolish and stubborn, but he's also brave and wants to do something good. This girl he rescued is no older than his brother and she's all alone. If he doesn't help her, then who will?" He sighed, stepping back into himself. "She can do things I have never seen before, Alara. Cast spells, use magic, and who knows what else. If a little girl can do that, what else is there in the world that we have no idea of? What more is there, out there, beyond our world? Beyond the reach of the Navy? Of the Marines? Who else is running from the Church for a crime of existing? I can't stop the Church, I can't change the Empire, but I can help these people to the best of my ability," Jayce said softly. "And if I don't try to do some good, real good, then what's the point?"

Alara stayed there, with her back on the floor, holding the blue pearl tightly. "But couldn't you change things from within the Navy? Work your way up to the top and make the changes there?" she asked. Jayce didn't have an answer. He remained quiet, so she sat up and leant on him. "I don't know... probably," he answered honestly. "What of Wicke, couldn't your parents help her? Wouldn't your parents help her? Surely they would, and if they would - with their ranks - wouldn't others be sympathetic. The Church's views are the Church's views. Surely the Navy isn't so moronic as to follow that cult's doctrine, rather than their own morality?" she asked. Again, he didn't have an answer.

"I know the Navy is good, it has to be... They could help her, help you," she pleaded. "What if they're not?" Jayce asked her, loudly. She flinched. "What if

they follow orders blindly, hunt down good people because they're told to? Kill people because they're told to? What if the Navy aren't the good guys here?" he asked rhetorically. Alara opened her mouth to answer. "What if you're wrong, and the minute she goes to the Navy, they execute her? Then her death, the death of a child is on our hands."

He met her gaze, conflicted thoughts and feelings tearing through him. This time, Alara didn't know how to answer. She didn't know what to say. "I don't think there is an answer... at least not a right one. We'll be arriving there soon, and we'll give our final points then," Jayce concluded. She nodded, doubt coursing through her, and horrible images of worst-case scenarios running through her mind. "Then we won't talk of it until we get there. Let's just enjoy the night. Agree to disagree?" she asked, extending a hand to shake. He shook it and then grabbed her shoulders tackling her down carefully to the deck.

They awoke to the glaring sun, but decided to lay there for a while longer, both thinking heavily on the night before. "Woah! Look at that!" came an excited voice from the middle of the deck, as the sun was blocked out and a shadow covered the entire yacht. They bolted upright, immediately expecting an incoming disaster. After blinking a little and rubbing their eyes, they realised what Damian was looking at. It was huge, at least a hundred metres long. A giant pill-shaped ship that took up a massive portion of the highway. It had eight giant sails, with an equally big jib at the front, two horizontal sails each on the port and starboard sides, with four up on the top deck. A large fleet of smaller cargo vessels, and Navy escort ships, sailed around the behemoth.

"I've never seen one before! I didn't actually believe they existed!" Jayce exclaimed, as he looked excitedly at Alara, before they made their way over to where the others had collected. She nodded, following behind as she watched the fleet sail past; a Titan was truly something to behold. "Must be on its way back to the Capital from the Frontier islands. Just imagine what it's got on board," she stated, as they reconvened, Wicke giving them both a confused and surprised look as they emerged from the front of the yacht. For a ship of its size, it moved surprisingly quickly on the highway, almost too fast for its tiny escorts to keep up. It was only as they watched one of the side sails unfurl and the ship turn slightly that they realised the sails were actually brakes for the ship whilst riding the currents. The fleet soon became a small dot in the horizon and Corina snapped them back to attention. "Right! Let's get going, we have two full days of travel left and then we will be at the Capital, so make the most of it, enjoy the

sights and get prepared!" she stated, looking at both Jayce and Alara. "Raise the anchor, let's go!"

They made their way back onto the highway, the waters once again accelerating the yacht. The majority of vessels within the local region had all cleared the highway, or had disembarked to head to the other islands within the Imperial Heart, so Jayce and Wicke made the collective decision to speed up their journey and see if they could get there for the following day. Jayce unfurled and tightened the sails, dropping their speed slightly, before getting behind the wheel. Wicke carried up a chair to the aft deck and sat down in it. The last couple days of rest, exercise, and good food had brought healthy colour to her face. It was clear that, even before they found her, she had been eating poorly, from her previously stick-like figure. Her frame was still small, but she looked healthier, and Jayce was glad to see it.

"Ready?" he asked, looking towards her with a big grin. She nodded and had one last stretch. "Ready," she confirmed. Jayce gripped the wheel and gave a thumbs up. She looked up at their flag and determined the wind's direction, before pointing her left hand to it and her right at the mainsail. Again, she called out her unusual chant and the magical tattoos appeared on her hand as she harnessed the wind. The yacht once more shot forwards with a burst of energy, unfortunately a little bit too much, as the chair Wicke was sat on tipped over backwards. "Ow!" she complained, as her feet pointed to the sky. The spell ended and the ship slowed down once again as her temporary tattoos faded.

They looked at each, before bursting into laughter as Jayce helped her up. "Maybe adjust for the acceleration before sitting down," he suggested, as he righted her chair and got back on the wheel. She smirked and nodded, getting back into position and trying again, this time with both feet planted to brace herself. They swiftly built up speed, and once she felt comfortable, Wicke went to sit back down, accidentally lowering her left hand. She put her left hand back towards the wind, but faltered when she realised the spell hadn't ended. Jayce looked at her and she looked back at him. "I thought you had to use both hands," he stated, locking the wheel. She nodded. "I thought so too," she said, as she looked down at her left hand, now resting on the chair's arms.

Curious, Wicke spent the morning experimenting, finding that as long as she had the correct initial position, and kept her right hand pointed in the direction she wanted the wind to go, she could stay in whatever position she wanted. However, after a very annoyed Corina yelled at them from below deck, for all

the accelerating and decelerating, she decided to figure things out another time. As she got into position once more, her left hand in the wind and her right to the sail, the tattoos didn't appear. "Ah damn," she muttered, scolding herself. Jayce looked at her confused, as he corrected the wheel for their new direction, as the current on the highway bent a little more east.

"What's wrong? Something up with your magic?" he asked, leaning against the railing. "I've run out. I'll try again in an hour or so," she admitted, disappointed with herself. "Oh right, so can you no longer cast any spells?" he asked, out of curiosity. She shook her head. "No, I can. I just can't cast any of the same tier," she stated, to Jayce's further bemusement and confusion. "Tier?" he asked, "Explain, slowly please."

Wicke pondered for a moment, thinking best on how to explain it. "Most magic runs in different levels, tiers. There are at least six, I think," she detailed. Jayce nodded; it was easy enough to understand. "Each tier has a different pool for Magical Energy, Mana, Magicules, Spirit, Qi, whatever you want to call it." Jayce immediately went blank, and she recognised she'd lost him. "Different coins for different purchases," she tied off.

"Ah," he said nodding. "Can you demonstrate?" he asked. She nodded and put her middle finger to her thumb holding the position for a few seconds before saying a single unintelligible word, clicking her fingers. The usual black tattoos appeared on her finger, this time not spreading to her hand. A small flame appeared just above her finger. "This is a tier one," she said proudly. "Most people could easily learn this." Jayce nodded and he went to touch it, only to immediately yelp at the heat. She quickly dropped it, the markings disappearing equally as quickly. Jayce sucked on his finger and blew on it to cool it down a little. "I think that's enough for today. You'll have to write some of it down for me to read through, at some point," he requested. She nodded. "Sure. Corina already asked me to, a few days ago."

Despite the constant interruptions from the two idiots on the top deck, Alara sat focused in the cargo hold. She held her references in one hand and a list of interview questions in the other. Her heart raced and she couldn't quite figure out exactly what she wanted to say. Her identification was easy, there was no ambiguity to those questions. It was the why's that she couldn't get quite right. Why did she want to join the Navy, not just the Navy - the Marines at that? Was it her parents, and ultimately Jayce's parents? Surely, her reasoning went further than that...

She sighed and leant back against the wall, feeling the rush of water on the other side as she sat back on the blanket and pillows she had stashed there. Her bed wasn't far away, but she liked the lack of noise, the privacy, and the slight chill. She'd be fine, of course she would. "Excuse me?" came a deep voice, as Ottar peeked his head around some of the crates with a small platter of cut-up fruit and some juice. "Need an interviewer?" he asked, pulling up an improvised chair and table. She nodded, a small smile building on her face as she took the food. She would be fine.

Seize the Seas Tales: Emperors and a Sorceress

Night had fallen, the second-to-last night, and once more The Heavenly Hand had docked to the side of the highway, just inside a large cove created by a ring of rocks. The water was calm, smooth almost, thanks to the barrier. The wind was low, and the skies clear once again. The sun had gone over the horizon long ago and the others were all in bed, but Wicke couldn't sleep. She sat over the ladder, her feet dangling over the edge, dressed in a t-shirt and Damian's baggy shorts. It was cold, but she didn't mind, and thanks to the moonlight, she could see deep into the water.

Bright bursts of light and colour illuminated the waters around them. Jellyfish, emerging from the depths to the surface, all kinds of colours: reds, greens, blues, yellows; they were huge. The smallest bells at least half a metre, with the largest being bigger than the length of an adult. They glowed softly as they filled the water around the yacht. She smiled as they floated there, extending their large tentacles deeply beneath them, a golden crown-like shape on their heads. She stepped a little bit down the ladder and touched one. It wobbled a little, but otherwise didn't react. A large cluster of them rolled away as a ginormous purple one emerged, at least five meters across in length and sporting the largest crown of them all.

"An emperor," Corina stated, as she looked over the edge down at Wicke. Wicke slipped on the ladder, but Corina caught her hand. "Careful now, these jellies aren't toxic, but their stings will hurt," she said, pulling Wicke back on deck and sitting down next to her. "Can't sleep?" Corina asked her. Wicke nodded, remaining silent as she looked at the jellyfish around them. "Is something worrying you?" she asked. Wicke hesitated, unsure of whether or not, she should or should not, talk to her. "It's your choice. I may look young, but unfortunately age has crept up on me," Corina stated. "Would you believe I'm fifty?" she stated

with a mischievous smile. Wicke's eyes widened as she looked at the older woman; she looked no older than thirty, thirty-five at most.

"Well? If you're not going to tell me, I can leave you to your peace," Corina offered. Wicke hesitated and Corina went to stand up. "I'm scared," she admitted, as Corina began to walk away. Corina sat back down and took the girl's hands. "Of?" she asked, her eyes hidden in the shade of the moon. "Everything. The Church, the Navy..." Wicke said, accepting Corina's surprisingly warm hands. "Well, there's not much that can be done about them at this moment, is there?" Corina offered. Wicke nodded. "The Church is scary. They are a danger and the message they send is a deadly one at that, but it is not just you they are after," she asserted. "There are more people like you, and more people with sympathies to you and your kind, their numbers growing every day." Wicke sat and listened. "The world is not against you Wicke, just a bunch of fools trying to grasp some sense of control in this world."

"Like these Jellies, they are adrift in an endless sea," Corina continued, letting go of Wicke's hands. She reached into her hair and pulled out her silver and pearl hairpin, handing it to Wicke. She then descended the ladder, before stepping onto a large red medusa. It held her weight and she took another step onto a green one. "They lost their purpose, and now they are grasping for something, anything, to give them one. You and the other Mages are a means to an end. Because you represent something they are afraid of - the past, and the reason they began. Do not fear them, Wicke," Corina told her, stepping across the bed of coloured crowns. "Let them fear you, and, oh, they will fear you - should you wish to stop running and fight them."

Corina clambered onto the giant, purple, emperor, standing tall and proud on top of its crown. Wicke stared at her, a sense of calm falling through her as she looked at the sight. "Jayce will protect you; I promise you that! He will take you north, and when you are ready, it will be up to you to choose to run, or to fight," she announced, before making her way back. Corina climbed back up next to her. "He will follow you, just as you follow him. And others will too. People across the seas are waiting for someone like you to help change the world. The Emperor," she stated, pointing out at the largest jellyfish, as it started to sink beneath the waters. "Is waiting for someone like you. Become the flame to ignite the past and you won't be scared again," Corina promised, taking back her hair pin with a charming smile. "Goodnight Wicke," she finished, walking away and shooing away an onlooking Damian, from the stairs to below deck. Wicke sat

there for a while longer, confused, but feeling more assured, and more confident, that Jayce would get her to her family.

Chapter 8: Crossroads

It had been a miracle that Jayce, Alara, or Damian had been able to get any sleep over the last few days - Ottar snored louder than cannon fire. Yet, despite complaining constantly about it, both Jayce and Alara had come find it comforting. It was the last night, the very last night, and they both lay there - Alara in her bed, Jayce in his hammock - trying to picture how the day ahead would go. As Damian let out a moan, followed by several names of popular food dishes, they both stifled a laugh, drawing the attention of the other.

"Oh, I thought you were asleep," Alara whispered, turning over and opening her eyes. "I thought you were asleep!" Jayce retorted, trying to look at her face in the darkness. "No, I can't sleep!" she snapped back. Jayce paused for a moment finally spotting her face. "Ah, there you are," he said with a soft smile. She scowled at him and turned over. "Too excited about tomorrow?" he asked, closing his eyes. "Too nervous, more than anything," admitted Alara, hugging her pillow. "They'd be fools not to accept you, besides..." he paused, shook his head, and let out a yawn. "Yeah, yeah. I know. It's what comes after that." "You'll be fine," he reassured, before it clicked to him. "We'll be fine," he added. Alara nodded, not that he could see it, and she shut her eyes. "You better be." "We'll be reading in all the Guild newspapers of Alara Vanathur, Hero of the Navy's Marines!" Jayce declared quietly. "Of course we'll be fine," he reassured, "Get some sleep, goodnight!" She paused for a moment and rolled over, looking for his face; he was already fast asleep. "Goodnight."

The faint sound of tower bells woke the pair up, both Damian and Ottar were nowhere in sight, so they immediately rolled out of their beds and ran up to the top deck in their pyjamas. It was blinding, but as their eyes adjusted to the sunlight, neither could hide their smiles. The waters of the bay were crystal clear, and the seabed was shallow enough to see all the way to the bottom. Ships of all kinds were coming and going in an orderly, yet chaotic, manner; cargo ships, fishing boats, and imperial warships flowed in all directions. Gulls and Guild Albatrosses flew swiftly between the three islands that made up the Capital.

The islands formed a triangle, with two long grey, stone bridges connected to the centre island. Two curved stone walls, lined with defensive cannons and turrets, created the main entrance to the artificial bay. Two large streams of ships had to funnel into the large gap between the walls to enter and exit. The left island clearly contained the Navy headquarters, rows upon rows of defensive walls surrounded a gigantic building built into a mountain. Countless small homes hid

behind each wall, the tops of their slanted orange roofs barely visible. A huge dockyard full of various warships extended out from the island in all directions. "Well, I guess we know where you have to go," Jayce stated, pointing at the blatantly obvious location, only highlighted thanks to the giant writing carved and painted into the headquarters itself. 'NAVY' it read, in a dark blue colour. Alara nodded proudly as she took in the sight.

The right island was covered in grey and white domed buildings, nearly identical to those in Crooked Bay. In the middle of that island stood a white palace that stretched out across the majority of the region, a giant, heavily carved dome in its middle, with a small, golden, pointed tower at its peak. Four smaller domes sat spread out around it, each marking a different direction, each one also clearly intricately detailed. The bells rang out from it, soothing to hear, but bringing a slight sense of unease to Jayce as he looked towards it. "The Holy Palace," Corina confirmed, from behind the wheel, cementing Jayce's theories. Several docks lead away from it, most of the ships flying the Church's flag: a maroon red flag with a white cross, marked with a gold crown at its top.

The middle island was something entirely different. The island was slanted away from them, rows upon rows of brown wooden houses meshed together leading up the mountain. All of the houses utilised a style of roofing unfamiliar to Jayce, with their edges and points all curving upwards. Green glazed tiles created a colourful and appealing aesthetic near the edges of the island, before transitioning to a blue colour as the eye progressed inwards to the city, before getting paler and paler into a brilliant white leading up the mountain. Almost every house was visible as they sailed towards the island, but what drew all of their attention was the colossal palace sitting above. It stretched high up, matching the style of the rest of the island with bright colours of pearl, platinum, and blue. Waterfalls ran off the edges of the palace, falling out of sight to the rear of the island. Beautiful white arches supported the huge blue roofs of the palace, decorated with huge boulder-sized pearls and giants made of jade. A long walkway, lined with cherry blossom trees, guided visitors through fields of flowers towards the main entrance: a giant, azure blue door, with a surrounding courtyard for visitors to listen to the Emperor's decrees. It was a sight to behold, one that took their breath away.

Thunder rumbled above it and that was when they noticed the enormous cloud floating above the capital. It was the largest Jayce had ever seen, bigger than the island it hovered over. Purple bolts of lightning circled throughout the entire thing, and throughout the entire time they sailed towards the centre island, it

didn't move at all, in fact, any of the few clouds within the sky that passed into it all seemed to end up consumed by the endless beast. "What is that?" Jayce called out to Corina, pointing at it. As Corina opened her mouth to answer, Wicke interrupted. "A floating island, the djinn home," she answered, surprised by her own knowledge. Corina and Jayce shared a look, but she nodded to confirm. "They're known colloquially as sky knights, but yes. Along with the ocean crawlers, they rule alongside us over the land, the oceans, and the skies," she added. It was then that Corina realised that Alara and Jayce were still in their night clothes. "Enough sightseeing, get dressed and finish packing. We'll be docked soon."

The pair rushed off to change, before racing around the yacht and grabbing their remaining unpacked things. Alara ended up with a large backpack and single carrying bag; and, after double checking she had everything she needed, before double checking for the third time, she made her way back up to the top deck. Jayce on the other hand found himself carrying a few more items, mostly random items he thought would be useful: his fishing rod, some rations, a pillow, and his sword. He handed a backpack, borrowed from Damian, to Wicke, ignoring his brothers' complaints, before putting on his own and picking up his two carrying bags. Corina guided them in, and the various harbour hands took the mooring ropes and locked them down.

After paying the harbourmaster for the space, and disembarking, the group found themselves stood at the very edge of the city. A path led off to the left, clearly heading straight to the Navy headquarters, whilst another went right, deeper into the Imperial city. Alara set down her bag and turned to the group; Jayce did the same, Wicke stood by his side. "Well," Corina stated, her eyes almost looking a little bit watery. "This is it. It's been an honour, truly, to see you both grow up. Alara, dear, I wish you the best. They'd be hard pressed to find a better candidate for the Marines." Alara nodded, opening her arms wide and hugging her tightly. "Thank you for everything!"

"Be good, kid. Keep your head down and your arms up!" Ottar advised, as he lifted her high into the air in a tight hug. When she was put down, she nodded before turning to Damian, the young boy sobbing as she hugged him. "Alara!" he cried. "I know, I know. I'll miss you too. Get strong and I'll see you when you're old enough to apply, maybe even on my ship!" she stated, wiping away his tears. Finally, Alara looked over at Jayce and Wicke. She opened her mouth, but hesitated. "I'm not going to change my mind," Jayce stated, knowing what she wanted to ask. She nodded, her eyes getting blurry. "I know." She looked at

him sadly, before picking up her bag to walk away. As she looked at the signs to take her to the Navy base, she hesitated and dropped the bag, turning on her heels and rushing into a tight hug with Jayce, tears streaming down her face.

"You're a fool Jayce, a fucking fool! You're going to get her and yourself killed playing pirate!" she sobbed into his chest. He held her tightly and took a deep breath. "I'll try and stay out of trouble then, don't want you coming after me," he joked. She looked up at him, letting go and wiping her eyes. "I don't ever want to have to point a gun at you, you hear me?" Jayce smirked and nodded, but Alara simply shook her head and turned away. "Don't be a hero, just stay safe," she asked, as she picked up her bag and walked away. "You too..." Jayce said quietly, as he watched her leave.

A few moments passed as reality sank in for the others. She was gone, the journey was over. Wicke pulled on Jayce's shirt sleeve, and he looked down at her. "I know. It's time." He picked up his bags and looked at the other three. Damian wiped his nose and stood up tall, stepping towards them. "So," he said brightly. "Where are we going first?" he asked. Jayce sighed and shook his head, Damian's face falling. "You're staying with Corina and Ottar," Jayce declared. Damian shook his head. "No. No, no, no, no, I'm coming with you!" he demanded. Corina stepped forwards and put a hand on his shoulder only for Damian to step away and shrug it off. "Why can't I come? She's going!" Damian asked.

"It's going to be dangerous, and you're too young!" Jayce stated, setting his trap. Immediately, Damian charged into it. "She's my age, why's it not too dangerous for her?" he questioned. Jayce looked at Wicke, hiding behind him, before looking back at his brother. He put down his bags once more and rested his hands on Damian's shoulders before leaning in. "She can use magic," he said softly. "Can you?" Jayce asked, leaning back and meeting Damian's gaze, before shaking his head and pulling Damian in for a hug. "Please..." Damian begged quietly. "Please, don't leave me too." Jayce let go and shook his head, wiping Damian's eyes with his thumb. "I'm not leaving, I'll see you soon!"

Corina gently took Damian by the shoulders, passing him over to Ottar. "Thank you for everything," Jayce said softly to her, accepting her hug before stepping back. She brushed his hair with her fingers, before handing over a small cloth bag to him. "If you're going north, you'll either need a ship of your own, or a transport that's heading there. It's not much, but this'll cover you at least halfway, if you get a good deal," she said, handing him some extra money. Jayce nodded, tying it to his belt. Corina then looked down at Wicke. "Remember what

I said. Stay safe, little one," Corina said with a kind smile, patting her head before turning and walking back to Damian and Ottar. Jayce picked up his bags, looked at Wicke who smiled nervously up at him, before turning to face the others. "Stay safe, and see you three soon!" he declared, before turning and walking into the city with Wicke by his side.

The Imperial Capital was huge, it sat on the largest island Jayce had ever been to, and every alleyway and building looked nearly identical. Strange guards dressed in full plate armour patrolled the streets, and people were everywhere, but no-one paid either of them any attention as they walked. Baned, of all kinds, huddled around in small groups, most wearing clothes with exposed collars, showing off a brand reading the word, 'Baned', marked into their fur or hide. Others all seemed to be clearly employed at the various street shops located throughout the city, each in work uniform or with an identifying piece of jewellery related to their job.

As they passed through the city centre, one of the armoured guards called out to them from behind and a cold shiver ran through both of them. "Excuse me!" she called out, from behind her shiny helmet. "Sorry to bother you, a kid took this from you," she said, presenting Jayce's money pouches. His eyes widened and he looked down at his belt: unsurprisingly, they weren't there. "Oh, thank you so much!" Jayce said, breathing a sigh of relief as he realised why she had stopped them. He put his two carrying bags between his knees and took back the pouches, opting to combine them into one pouch before he stored it more safely within his shirt, tying the string around his neck.

She nodded and went to walk away, but Jayce called her back. "Sorry, guard, uh, we're new here. Could you help us with some directions?" She turned back around and nodded. "It's Paladin, but regardless, what are you looking for?" she asked. "Transport north. Is there somewhere where we could go to find that?" he asked. She pondered for a moment, pushing up her visor to reveal a set of gold coloured eyes and little tufts of blonde hair. "If you follow that alleyway, and keep going straight, there is a set of piers on the north side of the island. You might find a ship going north there, or one to buy - if you can afford it. There's very little outside of danger to the north, so I wish you luck with your travels," she stated, with a kind and genuine smile. "Thank you, Paladin," Jayce told her and Wicke mouthed the same thing from behind him. She crossed both arms, bringing her fists to her shoulders in a salute, and nodded, before turning and heading off, her armour rattling slightly with each step.

Her directions were correct; they found a set of piers, each lined with several small to medium sized vessels: mostly fishing boats, but some were clearly displaying their intended destinations to potential passengers. Unfortunately, after asking the many fisherman and captains along the pier, it turned out none of them were sailing north. "Sorry, very little apart from death that way," said the tenth captain they spoke to. "I can take you east," she offered. Jayce shook his head and thanked her before stepping back and heading towards the few boats for sale. The cheapest, a shoddy looking fishing boat that would fit the two of them, and little else, was going for a bit over a thousand pearl.

Jayce untied his money bag and sat down next to a wall; Wicke crouched next to him, looking at the other boats for sale: one thousand eight-hundred, two thousand, two and half, four thousand. She sighed as she watched Jayce count their money. "Fuck!" he yelled loudly, before scooping it all back into his money pouch with a rattle. "How much do we have?" Wicke asked, standing up and holding her hands behind her as she rocked on the balls of her feet. "Eight hundred and forty three pearl, eighteen coral. We won't go hungry for a while - if we're smart, but not enough for our own ship... and we need one. Sorry Wicke, looks like we're stuck here for a bit," he said standing up, disappointed with himself. Wicke shook her head and put on a forced smile. "It's okay, we'll figure something out," she stated, overenthusiastically.

They left the pier, a dark cloud hanging over them, on top of the literal cloud over the city. "We're at least halfway to affording it, so if needs be I'll find somewhere to work for a little bit, a month or two and we should be able to afford it no problem!" Jayce declared, before smacking his own head in frustration. "Let's get some food, and find somewhere to stay," he suggested, to the very quiet girl trundling behind him with her eyes to the ground. After walking through the city, spotting more and more Navy sailors, Priests, and Paladins the higher they climbed, both Jayce and Wicke elected to keep to the less high-end parts of the city. The cobblestone streets got dirtier and dirtier, more baned could be spotted milling around in small groups, most of them members of the dog, cat, or ox families, and more and more shady figures could be seen in the alleyways. Wicke quickly picked up her pace, sticking right behind Jayce and eventually opting to hold onto his sleeve instead.

They found a decently large tavern on the northeast side of the island, a bustling establishment already, despite it having just gone noon; crowded by loud-mouthed drunks of all kinds. The Beast's Pen was certainly an interesting place, and most notably, clearly established by the many baned patrons, it was open to

everyone - a good place to lay low. They stood waiting in the doorway; a slender, but still massive, baned raccoon stood in their path. "Excuse me!" Jayce stated, as he tried to get through, only for the figure to not budge. The baned turned and looked down at him, an unamused look on his face - for a raccoon. His eyes flicked to Wicke, and he put on a smile, stepping to the side. "Sorry," he slurred, fumes of booze drifting from his mouth as he let them in. Wicke thanked him as they passed, and he gave a nod in appreciation.

Round tables and chairs, of all sizes, littered the tavern, occupied by many patrons eating hearty meals and drinking beers and ciders by the barrel. The pair made their way past the many guests to the main bar, both of their tummies rumbling as they smelt the food. Wicke kept her eyes on her surroundings, eventually pausing as she spotted something on the wall. Another baned stood behind the bar, an ox with his horns both cut back, a silver necklace showing off the taverns sign hung from his neck, an identifier of his employment. "Hey there!" he stated, as the Jayce leant across the bar, with Wicke by his shoulder. "How may I help you?" he asked with a friendly tone, offering them a menu each. "Maybe in a little bit - we were wondering if you had lodging available?" Jayce asked. The room around them got increasingly louder and Jayce couldn't quite hear what the baned had said.

The ox recognised this and held up a hand briefly before lifting his head up and taking a deep breath. "Oi!" he bellowed, the windows rattling as the tavern fell silent. "I'm trying to help these two," he declared. Several soft apologies could be heard echoing around the room, before the chatter resumed on a softer, yet still raucous, level. "Right, sorry about that, they often get a little bit too rowdy. For a single room, it's a pearl a night, would you like a joint bed or two separate?" he asked, reaching under the bar for a set of keys. Jayce held up two fingers and he nodded handing them each a key with the number four etched into it. "For an extra fifty coral, food and drink is included and will be brought to your room in the mornings and evenings," he offered. It sounded reasonable to Jayce, so he scrounged inside his coin bag and pulled out a round and near-flat red pearl and an additional blue one. "Ten nights, please," Jayce asked, sliding them over.

The ox nodded, and pulled a large leather bound book out as well. "For stay's longer than a night, we ask that guests sign in," he passed it over to them, along with a quill and ink. He then turned around and dropped the two coins into a small glass bowl full of water; after checking the money floated, he put the coins inside the till under the bar and took back the logbook. "Jayce and Wicke. Pleasure to meet you, my name is Tau. If you see another person behind the bar,

her name is Lisa. Your room is just up those stairs, fourth door down the hallway. Feel free to come and go as you please at all hours," he tidied off, pointing them towards the stairs tucked away in the corner. They thanked him and made their way to the first floor, using their key on the fourth door and stepping inside.

Expecting the worst, the room was surprisingly nice. It had a shuttered window that looked out onto a busy street, the beds were firm but comfortable, with strong wooden frames, and they even had a bathroom with a functioning toilet and bath. They were decently clean, but the toilet had functioning water flow and the taps ran both hot and cold, so, even had they not been up to standard, Jayce certainly wouldn't have complained. As he looked at them more closely, he spotted several more of those small purple gemstones embedded within the parts of each item: they glowed faintly as he touched them. When the shutters were closed, a single lamp lit the room, and with the door closed the cacophony from the downstairs became a soft murmur in the background. "Well," Jayce stated, as Wicke chose her bed - the one nearest to the shutters. "I think this isn't too bad for the next few days." She nodded in agreement and took off her backpack.

"How do you think we are going get enough money for a boat?" she asked, as she took off her worn shoes and rubbed her feet. "I don't know, maybe the harbour needs some haulers? Or I could see if this place is looking for temporary staff for me and you to work?" he suggested. "Have you got any ideas?" he asked, dumping his bags on the floor and rolling backwards onto his bed, smacking his head onto the wall with a loud thwack. As Jayce rubbed his head, Wicke pondered. "Are you any good at fighting?" she asked, glancing briefly at his somewhat muscular build. "Capable enough. Why?" he asked, sitting up. She got up, slid on her shoes, and walked out of the door, Jayce getting up to follow her. "Wait here, I'll be a second."

She headed downstairs and returned quickly, carrying a large red and gold poster in her hands. She slammed it onto the wall, pointing at it proudly. It showed off a rather large arena, filled with spectators, cheering as a small male figure faced down a roaring polar bear baned wielding a monstrous axe. Various other notable fighters were presented alongside the poster edges stating their weapons of choice and titles. Underneath read: 'Are you tough enough to complete the Champions Run?'. A prize pool of five thousand pearl, alongside the deed to the Imperial Arena was on offer, with an entrance fee of only fifty pearl. "Well?" Wicke asked.

"That's a big prize pool!" Jayce stated. "It's big for a reason and these are professional fighters. I'm not sure, Wicke." He read the details: the arena was in the southeast part of the island, not too far away from their current location. To win the prize, you had to defeat the champion and all of the fighters leading up to him, without a loss. He looked back at her, she had gone to lock the door and shut the shutters. She then turned to him. "I have an idea." Wicke took a deep breath and made a fist with her right hand, the glowing lines extending across her fingers and up her hand as usual, however this time the lines continued to spread all the way up to her shoulder. She spoke again in the strange language and extended her fingers, touching Jayce in the chest.

In an instant, the vague sounds of the world around them distorted, Wicke's tattoos remained on her arm, and she seemed to slow as she stepped back from him, each step moving at a snail's pace. "What did you do?" he asked, his own words sounding slow as they left his mouth. He moved his hands looking them over, they remained at a normal speed, whilst she continued to move back slowly. She turned and made her way to the shutters opening them in slow motion as she kept her marked arm out of sight from potential onlookers. Jayce stepped to the window and Wicke jolted backwards out of the way, slowly. The people around the streets were all moving in an equally slow pace.

The world then shunted, and time moved normally again, except Jayce stood frozen, his body unresponsive as he tried to move. "It's called Haste, we used it to pick vegetables and perform chores more quickly back home. The only problem is when it ends the person it was affecting can't move for six seconds," she told him, as he regained feeling in his body. "How long can you use it for? And how many times per day?" he asked. She thought a little and then nodded to herself as she sat down on her bed. "At least four times a day, I can hold it for as long as I want when its cast. The problem is I need to touch the person I'm boosting and if I get interrupted it will stop and they will freeze," she stated. Jayce nodded, a fitting cost and one to be wary of. "I think that'll work. As long as we're careful, and you have long-sleeved clothes on, we can use it to win the arena. We'll complete the Champion's Run, earn the prize money, buy a ship and sail north before you know it!" Jayce declared, turning to face the poster with a confident smile on his face.

Seize the Seas Tales: Welcome Aboard

It took a while for the tears to dry up on Alara's face, it was mid-morning and already she wanted to go to bed. After sniffing deeply and wiping her eyes on her sleeve in an alleyway, she picked up her bag and continued forwards to the west of the centre island. More and more Navy sailors passed her on her journey, most dressed in casual clothes and only identifiable from the way they stood - too straight for a normal person. Others wore their uniform, each often wearing a different colour of the four main fleets: red, blue, green, and yellow. The city was beautiful and, despite walking with sincere purpose, she couldn't help but admire the wooden buildings and their intricate roofs. Cats wandered the alleyways, birds squawked above, and the people moved with purpose.

It wasn't long before she eventually arrived at the bridge that connected the western island to the central one. It was huge, spanning over a kilometre and made out of neatly cut stone, perfectly smoothed in comparison to the cobblestone in the city. Carts flowed both ways, carrying goods and items between the two islands, and small boats followed the bridge, carrying more items at a quicker pace. Large defence towers stood strong, dotted along the bridge every hundred-or-so metres, guarded by armed soldiers ready to man the cannons and defend the bridge from potential invaders. The various men and women looked at Alara as she passed, several taking note of her bags and giving her a thumbs up or a smile as she carried onwards.

Around the middle of the bridge, one of the towers encompassed the entire path, with a set of portcullis gates creating a checkpoint. An officer, a Lieutenant, from the familiar uniform that the lower ranked sailors did not have, sat behind a desk. "Identification and purpose," he said, bored as he sat uncomfortably in his chair. "Alara Vanathur, I'm here for enlistment," Alara declared, handing over her papers and smiling at him. He didn't smile back, and without even looking, he gave her back her papers, along with a guest pass and pamphlet. "Follow the main road to the central building, they'll handle you there," he stated unenthusiastically. Alara took back her papers and attached the pass to the belt, before thanking him and carrying on.

He hadn't been quite what she was expecting, but that wasn't going to ruin her experience. She devoured the simplistic information the pamphlet provided, as she walked the remaining few hundred metres to the island. The Citadel, as it was named in the pamphlet, was even larger up close. A veritable fortress, with five colossal walls protecting the embedded headquarters. Courtyards and

barracks decorated the rear of the island, now visible as she walked towards it. Countless vessels stood docked and massive guns lay on the north side to protect the outer island from attack. The buildings were all made from white stone, with orange slate roofs forming ringed compounds between the defensive walls. Several portcullis gates provided passageway between each wall, as she followed the main road all the way up to the headquarters, passing endless sailors dressed in their simple uniforms.

It was fantastic; the shouts and calls of Navy sailors working on the docks, carrying cargo, and making repairs, filled her with anticipation as she walked up the slope. As she stepped through the main doors to the headquarters, past numerous armed guards, her heart felt like it would tear itself out of her chest. A long row of desks lay before her, manned by numerous attendants ready for the many visitors the base got. Alara stood in line, and after several minutes of waiting, she was called forwards. "How may I help you today?" asked a neatly dressed, young woman with glasses.

"Hi there, I'm here to enlist," Alara said with a smile. The attendant nodded. "Wonderful, Marines or Navy? And can I take your name, please?" she asked, reaching for a form under her desk. "Alara Vanathur, and it's for the Marines," Alara stated. A form was slid over to her before the attendant stood up and pointed to a line of tables and chairs in the corner. "If you go and fill out this form and then head on through those doors, someone should meet you for an interview," she stated, pointing again to a large set of wooden doors with a large glowing sign above it that read: 'Applicants'.

Alara took the form and thanked the attendant, heading over to the tables with her bags. Various other potentials sat there already, most of them young men, likely Jayce's age. The form asked for her date of birth: the sixth day of the fourth month, Roseus, 562 PD. Also, her hometown, Last Drop, and her full name, Alara Vanathur. It also asked for various details about her application, purely to ease along the process. She finished it off by pressing her signet ring into the blue ink provided and marking her personal crest onto the paper; all around her the other applicants did the same. A symbol of reaching maturity and a direct relation to a person's heritage; Alara's had a 'V' with a set of wings coming off it, her name etched into a circle around it. She then wiped her ring and picked up the form, walking with it through the doors.

A tall, middle-aged man stood waiting for her, leaning against the wall of the corridor with his arms crossed. He wore a three piece grey suit that bulged tightly

against his broad frame. Despite being indoors, he wore black sunglasses. Trailing from his shoulders was a cape that stopped at his knees, grey to match his suit but with traces of gold etching throughout. His grey hair was neatly cropped and stood out strongly against his dark brown skin. "Alara, I presume?" he asked, stepping forwards and extending a hand to shake. "Yes?" Alara replied, shaking his rough and massive hand. His grip was strong, terrifyingly so, as they shook, but he held her hand with an element of gentleness. He released her and stood up straight, towering over her, arguably close enough in height to nearly match Ottar. "Vice-Admiral Marcus Barome. I'm here for your interview. Follow me." He turned, and Alara gulped heavily as she followed quickly in his wake, past the other waiting candidates who all stared at her in shock.

Chapter 9: An Unfair Price

The day was still ahead of them, and it grew increasingly obvious, as Jayce and Wicke formulated their plans and strategies, how much Wicke stood out. Compared to giant animal people, an average-height teenage girl was of little significance to people wandering the streets; a teenage girl muttering under her breath with tattoos all down her arm in close quarters, on the other hand, not quite so much. "Well, how do we hide it?" Wicke asked, pacing back and forth in their bedroom within the Beast's Pen. Jayce grabbed his money pouch and rattled it. "We go shopping."

After emptying out their backpacks, the pair headed downstairs and walked up to the counter. Somehow, if that was even possible, the entire place had become even busier. Jayce leant across the counter, finding a small space between the other patrons. Tau eventually spotted him and came to serve him. "Hey there, how may I help you?" he asked, taking a moment to stretch his arms. "Hey Tau, do you have any idea where we can buy some clothes?" Jayce asked, over the noise. He paused for a second and then beckoned for Jayce to follow him, moving along the bar, past a broad-shouldered, short woman, that Jayce assumed was Lisa. Wicke followed closely behind, her eyes on everyone around her. They rounded a corner, coming to the kitchens where several baned of all kinds were cooking. "I'm guessing this is your first time in the Capital, then?" Tau asked as they walked, pushing aside a curtain to a small bedroom. "Yeah, we got here this morning," Jayce replied, waiting outside as Tau rummaged inside a chest.

"Very nice. Where are you two from?" he asked, turning around with a large map, that looked significantly smaller in his hands than in Jayce's. "Last Drop," Jayce stated, as he got into a better position to see the map from behind Tau's huge frame, Wicke curiously looking over as well. "Haven't heard of it. Is it far?" Tau asked, looking at the pair curiously. "Near The Frontier," Jayce added. Tau nodded, giving a bemused grunt. "Interesting. Anyway, you can have my map. The best place to shop would be the Isle of Sanctity, the eastern island," he clarified, flipping over the map and showing it off to the pair.

"It's very... religious, but the shops are fair-priced for your people. Lisa normally goes for me. I take it neither of you are devout believers?" he asked, handing the map to Jayce. "No, we don't really see eye to eye with the Church. What gave it away?" Jayce asked, handing the map to Wicke. Tau laughed and shook his head, rubbing the stumps of his horns. "Well for one, you're talking to a baned."

"Ah, right," Jayce said, unsure of how to reply. Tau shook it off and led them back to the main room. "Keep your head down, they're getting more fanatical by the day. Otherwise enjoy! Do you want to leave your keys here?" he asked, as he got behind the bar.

No longer worried about losing their keys, the pair set off through the city to the eastern Isle of Sanctity. The walk was calm, the streets surprisingly empty for this time of day, and despite their growing curiosity of the arena, the pair headed straight for the connecting bridge. It was here, as they began the kilometre-long journey, that foot traffic began to pick up. Hundreds of citizens were travelling between the central and eastern isle, with most carrying bags of shopping or holy trinkets purchased from the island. Members of the Church littered the bridge at various points, talking to various travellers as they passed; Wicke stuck as close to Jayce as possible, keeping her head down, clutching his arm and hiding behind him as they walked. The bustle only aided them, and despite the pushing, Jayce was grateful for the crowds.

Along the way, they passed various ranked members of the clergy, ranging from the lowly Deacons dressed in brown, to the Priests in black, and even several Bishops in purple. Paladins, too, stood guard on the bridge, their heavy plate armour shining brightly, almost blindingly, in the sunlight. However, a new group also lay mingling with the crowd, Sisters of the Holy Church. To begin with, and ultimately for the majority of the walk, neither Wicke nor Jayce noticed them. They hovered like ghosts behind the other Church members - shadows dressed in almost entirely black and white with everything, but their face, hidden from the sun. Even their hands were covered, clad in a smooth pair of silken gloves. One met Wicke's gaze, and she smiled, without moving her mouth or changing her face: a strange, reassuring look told to Wicke without expression. Wicke looked away, hiding closer to Jayce, only to look back and see the Sister had vanished.

Eventually the bridge ended, and they found themselves on the Isle of Sanctity. It was busy and the swarm of people were all flocking away from the shops towards the Holy Palace of the Church, allowing the pair to pass through the area unopposed. With the fear steadily fading, Wicke took the lead, letting go of Jayce's sleeve and wandering from shop to shop. They bought pastries from an especially fragrant bakery, the smell of fresh bread and cakes luring them in from the other end of the high street. Then they moved on, past rows upon rows of brightly coloured fruits and vegetables, most of which Jayce had never seen

before; Wicke had to drag him away from those, but eventually they settled in on a small clothes shop owned by a small old man.

He hobbled around after the pair, his head almost permanently looking down towards the floor, due to his hunched back, showing them fantastically crafted clothes of all kinds from all regions of the New World. After a lifetime of browsing, Wicke eventually settled on a long, brown and maroon duster coat that stopped at her knees, the inside contained a warm insulate layer whilst the outer layer was leather hide, decorated by various straps and pockets. To match the coat, Wicke bought a set of knee-high, laced boots of matching colour, as well as a wide brow maroon hat that she could easily use to obscure her face.

With her day-to-day outfit bought, Wicke filled her backpack and several other bags with socks, underwear, t-shirts, jumpers, trousers, shorts, and other garments she thought she might need for any kind of weather. The bill was unmentionable, but Jayce could tell, as she showed off her outfit, that just by being in clothes of her own, her anxiety had dropped, and for him that was worth every pearl - after haggling for a few minutes, of course.

Leaving the shop, the owner practically crying with joy from a good sale, with Jayce's money pouch drastically lighter from the hours of shopping, they made their way back towards the bridge, Wicke leading the way cheerfully with her coat flowing behind her. However, as they neared the main island crossroads, cheers and clamouring drew their attention. Wicke froze, her entire body tensing up like a cat ready to fight. "What is it?" Jayce asked, as he stepped next to her turning to look where she was facing. A huge crowd stood directly in front of the Holy Palace. She didn't answer, instead walking away from their destination and towards the mass.

As they walked down the main road, large rows of expensive houses, bathhouses, and shops lining the huge walkway, the clamouring became clearer and clearer. "Heretic! Heretic!" called the crowd in unison, followed by a cheer. The air felt heavy, and Jayce immediately sensed something was wrong, racing in front of Wicke and acting as a wall. She lowered her hat and tucked in close behind him as they approached the crowd, stepping cautiously into their midst until they could see what the mass was surrounding. Three people hung tied up to large wooden poles erected in the square before the Holy Palace, their hands tied to the beam and their feet suspended loosely above the ground. Piles of ash sat around them across the square, and stood high on the overlooking balcony was a slender man dressed in bright red robes with a matching hat. His mostly

hidden hair was brown, and he had a tightly cropped beard. In his left hand was a golden sceptre encrusted with red and green gems and floating slightly above his right hand sat a large, white, leatherbound book. Behind him stood a squad of Archbishops, dressed in golden robes with large intricate hats.

Beneath the Cardinal, tied to the left pole was an old man, his face swollen and bruised - a stone hit him across the forehead and a small trickle of blood flowed down his face. To the right was a large baned badger, he was naked - gouges, deep cuts, and brands all over his body - his black and white fur congealed and dark with splatters of, presumably, his own blood. Between them was a small child, no older than eight, they wriggled and writhed as they tried to escape, tears and terror covering their face.

"These Heretics," called out the Cardinal to the crowd, silencing them as his voice echoed from various directions. "Have committed the greatest of sin against our Gods! They have practiced dark arts and evil sorcery amongst us! They have endangered us all, and as such this baned has been cursed! To repent to our lords, our almighty Gods of Nine, we offer them a chance to bless and redeem these sinners by sending them onto their grace. By the Pope's divine will, and our great Gods' holy blessings, I free you!" he declared, raising his right arm high, the book floating before him as he began to chant, his voice now muted to the crowd but his lips moving softly. The book glowed as several moving rings appeared on its cover. The bound old man looked over towards the other two prisoners through his swollen eyes; the child still desperately trying to escape from their binds. He said something, inaudible to Jayce, but from his lips he got the gist. The child settled down, shutting their eyes before the baned and the old man copied them.

Wicke stepped in front of Jayce, moving forwards towards the trio. Jayce immediately dropped the bags he was holding and put his hand on her shoulder, pulling her backwards towards him and turning her around into his chest as a plume of blue fire roared down from a glowing sphere in front of the Cardinal. It burned through them, their screams muddled with the cheers of the crowd, their bodies disintegrating before Jayce's very eyes as he held Wicke tightly. Several others among the crowd had turned away, unable to look at the display, but Jayce seared the sight into his very mind. Alara was wrong, very wrong, and as Wicke stood weakly in his arms, he realised the price of failure.

The flames disappeared quickly, three more piles of ash littering the square. "May their souls find the grace of the Gods!" the Cardinal concluded. The crowd mirrored the prayer before starting to disperse. Jayce released Wicke and she

looked at him weakly, her skin grey and her eyes empty. "Now's not the time, let's get out of here," he told her, handing her some bags before picking up the rest in one hand and pulling her along with the other. Wicke shivered as she walked closely and silently behind him, whereas Jayce burned with rage, the blue flames unable to leave his vision as he stormed across the bridge.

Eventually, they returned to The Beast's Pen, the place still bustling, possibly even busier than before, as the sun settled comfortably into the horizon; Jayce ignored the other patrons and walked straight up to the bar. "Hey, Jayce. How was the shopping?" Tau asked, handing over the keys, faltering as he sensed something was wrong. He looked at the pair and he slowly nodded. "I'll bring you some dinner in a minute," he told them, pressing the keys into Jayce's hands. Jayce nodded, muttering a thanks before walking up the stairs to their room. As soon as the door opened, Wicke raced into the bathroom, dropping in front of the toilet and throwing up into it. After emptying her stomach, she collapsed backwards, tucking into a ball and sobbing horrifically loudly, an agonising cry of anguish and pain as screams and cheers tore through her mind.

Her hat lay discarded in the doorway, so Jayce picked it up along with her bags, carrying them over to her bed, taking out her pyjamas from her backpack and bringing them to her into the bathroom, where she now lay curled up on the floor. He placed them gently next to her as Tau appeared at their door. He handed them their dinner, a thick meat and vegetable stew with some bread. "Is there anything I can do?" he offered, but Jayce shook his head. "It's best not to think too heavily on it. Try to sleep it off," Tau advised, closing the door behind him as he left.

Eventually, Wicke emerged from the bathroom and, after eating a small portion of her dinner, she climbed into her bed and faced towards the wall. Jayce followed her example, and after cleaning himself up in the bath, he turned off the light and went to bed. The night was long, and it took a while for Jayce to get the blue glow of flames from his mind, but after a few hours of sleep he woke up to a writhing Wicke in the bed across the room. She was drenched in sweat and the bed smelled of urine, but she woke quickly as he gently shook her awake, her eyes full of fear before she calmed down. Embarrassed, she disappeared into the bathroom to clean herself up whilst Jayce stripped the bed and carried the bedding down the corridor to the washroom. He washed it and hung it up to dry, before taking a clean set and checking the mattress: it hadn't gotten past the sheets, so he replaced the bedding and got back in his own.

After a quick wash, and some muttering of an incantation, Wicke emerged from the bathroom in her clean pyjamas. She hovered next to Jayce's bed and looked down at him silently holding her pillow. "I changed your bed," Jayce told her quietly. She nodded but didn't move. "What's up?" he asked, rolling over and looking at her in the darkness. "Can I get in?" she asked, "I-I'm scared." Jayce nodded, budging over as close to the wall as possible as she climbed in. She tucked her head onto his chest, shaking softly as she shivered, despite being perfectly warm. "I know... it's okay," he said, comforting her as he rested an arm on her as she started to sob into his shirt. "They won't get you; I promise." It took a while, but eventually she settled, and eventually Jayce fell asleep too.

The morning came too quickly, and Jayce left her to rest, spending the morning exercising in the inn's backyard before recounting his money: a little over six hundred pearls remained. As he walked back into the main bar room, he spotted a panicked Wicke at the bar speaking to Tau, who quickly pointed him out. "Where did you go?" she asked, her face relaxing as she spotted him. Jayce stretched and sat down at the bar. "Needed to train a little. Sorry if I worried you. Are you feeling better?" Tau slid over a glass of water, as Wicke sat down next to Jayce. "It's okay... yeah, I think," she said quietly, clearly still perturbed. "It's okay not to be, if you want to stay here, I can go to arena myself," he offered, but she quickly shook her head. "Okay, we'll go after breakfast." On hearing the word breakfast, both their stomachs became beastly, roaring in competition.

Tau disappeared from behind the bar and reappeared shortly after with two plates of eggs, bacon, and toast. "So, the arena hey?" he asked, as they set upon their plates ravenously. "Yeah, I'm going to win the Champion's Run!" Jayce stated nonchalantly with egg on his chin, as if it were guaranteed. "I see... Good luck... you'll need it. Many have tried, many have failed," Tau warned. "I didn't realise you were a fighter, I'm shocked I didn't notice the sword. Have you done mercenary work before, or were you in the Navy?" he asked curiously, looking Jayce over. "No, and no. I've trained, I wouldn't say I'm a fighter." Tau laughed. "And you plan to win? Fair enough, I'll be betting on you, champ-to-be - so don't let me down or I'll up your rent!"

With food in their bellies, their teeth brushed, and their backpacks packed, the pair departed for the arena, following the roads to the south-east of the central island. It became obvious where to go as they neared the site; a circular colosseum extending slightly over the water was hard to miss. The arena was mostly wood, with golden trimmings and red paint splashed for colour, and even at this time in the morning, people were walking to and from the huge open doorway. Wicke,

as usual, stuck close behind Jayce, but as they walked, she moved up a little to walk next to him, her wide-brimmed hat tilted slightly on her head. The salty smell of the waters, the soft bustle of the people, mixed with the splash of the waves, and the gently breeze all merged to bring a sense of calm to Wicke as she carried herself.

Jayce, on the other hand, was bursting with a nervous energy. A loud cheer came from inside the arena as they neared the main doors, and almost subconsciously, Jayce turned around. "Where are you going?" Wicke asked, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm not a fighter, what if we just waste all our money?" he said nervously. She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow, her amber eyes glaring at him. "Look, I've got you. I'm not helpful at the moment otherwise, but it's your turn to trust me," she stated, walking up to him and physically dragging him back to the arena. "Come on. It'll be fine."

Reluctantly, he went with her inside. The entrance hall was luxurious: varnished wooden floorboards made up the main entrance with various tapestries and trophies hanging from the walls. Within the entrance hall were several bars for foods and drinks, as well as a station to place bets. A giant set of stairs led upwards to what looked like the main common area. With very little other options, they climbed the stairs, emerging in a large enclosed ring at the top of the building, where various high-end guests milled around on sofas attended by staff. People, Jayce assumed were other local fighters, stood talking to fans, signing various items of memorabilia. The ring itself had been cordoned off with large sliding doors, guarded by big burly warriors dressed in body armour, equipped with swords or staves, but in the main area an average-sized man drew their attention.

He was very brightly coloured, dressed in silken and cloth robes of cyans and pinks, accompanied by a hat that looked like an oven mitt. He had a thin curled moustache with another long strand of braided beard hanging from his chin. His eyebrows were very kept, and he held himself very tightly, almost nervously. "You there!" he called out, waving them over. The pair shrugged to each other and went up to him. "You look lost, are you meant to be here?" he asked.

"Uh," Jayce said dumbly, prompting Wicke to take the lead, pushing herself in front of him. "My friend here is looking to become a fighter and enter the Champion's Run," she stated, matching the man's tone and uptight mannerisms. He nodded and looked Jayce up and down. "I see, well it's good I called you over. I am Ming and I'm the fight promoter, dutifully charged with negotiating

with our challengers and guests, and also arranging the fights that occur here," he said, awfully quickly.

"What might your friend's name be?" he asked, clicking his fingers and looking at one of the guards stood by him. The guard looked at him and Ming pointed at the quill and clipboard resting on a table a mere few metres away. The guard sighed and walked the items over. "Jayce Exarga," Jayce said, regaining control of his vocal chords. "Perfect. Are you aware of how the Champion's Run operates?" Ming asked. They shook their heads and he sighed.

"Well, it's rather simple and I do wish more people conducted research before they came to me. There are four tiers, bronze, silver, gold, and platinum, but before all of that is a qualifying tier. Within each tier you will face three opponents, if you can defeat all three you progress to the next tier. The fights do not have to be on the same day, but you need to fight at least once every day. Should you lose, you lose the run and have to start over - it is a challenge after all, and one that is unbeaten. After progressing to the platinum tier, you will face our champion: Vexx. Should you defeat him, you win. Understood?" he asked. Jayce had long lost track of the conversation.

"So twelve fights then a champion, one each day – if not more; lose and you're out," Wicke clarified. Ming looked impressed, so much so that he extended a perfectly manicured hand to her to shake. "You should look for a job here." He faltered. "No, no do not do that!" he quickly said, taking it back. "But yes. Each fight has an entrance fee, but should you win, you'll earn more than double that fee – with each fight increasing in value. Please note that as an amateur fighter, I assume, you'll have to run through the qualifying tier first, against other wannabes."

"There is one running today, within the hour, should you wish; you need only win three bouts, and you can attempt this as many times as you like, provided you pay the fee each time," he offered. Jayce nodded and Wicke let him take the reins. "Perfect. Each fight has an entrance fee of fifty pearl," Ming stated casually. Jayce froze a little but slowly reached in and pulled out one hundred and fifty pearl. "This should cover three fights," he said, slightly broken at the sheer amount of money he'd spent over the last two days. Ming took it, checked it in a small bowl of water, before writing down on a small piece of paper and whistling over one of the guards.

"Take this, and add this fighter to the roster for the Champion's Run," he ordered, before relaxing and sitting down casually. He let out a long sigh.

"Finally, my quota is filled for the day. You have no idea how much of a pain this damned job is!" Ming said, much more casually to the pair. He pointed to the red sliding doors leading to the next section. "If you head through there, someone will explain the rest to you. Good luck champ-to-be, I have a good feeling about you!" he said, waving them away, pulling out a long cigarette holder and lighting the end. "Thank you," Jayce stated, before following his instructions and walking up to the guard by the door.

The doors opened for them, and they passed through into another lounge area with a various fighters clad in different types of armour, or none at all, all with various weapons. They looked at Jayce as he passed by them, all eyeing him up. He remained calm and kept going until eventually a large baned goat approached him. "I take it you're here for the qualifying rounds?" he asked, his horns curled round the sides of his head and a simple shirt and trousers upon him. Jayce nodded. "Good, follow me. I'll get you orientated," he said, leading them towards a set of stairs heading downwards. Jayce looked at Wicke, now standing closely behind him, before he followed the baned quickly, his nervousness now replaced with excitement.

Seize the Seas Tales: Friends in High Places

Alara followed the Vice Admiral through the headquarters; members of the Navy and the many civil staff on site all standing to the side to let them past unhindered. They watched her, stared at her, with idle curiosity, but she held her head high and ignored them, walking quickly, and carefully, behind Vice Admiral Barome, his shoulders rolling with a deliberate swagger as he took humongous steps. Every so often, he would glance behind him to ensure she hadn't fallen behind, often smiling to himself every time he spotted her glancing at the various rooms they passed. Eventually, they made it to a huge, dark grey, central ramp that spiralled all the way up, and also a few floors down, to the subterrain levels.

"Nearly there," he said reassuringly in his gruff voice, straightening his sunglasses as he picked up the pace. Alara borderline had to run to keep up with him as they went upwards, round and round along the spiral ramp. Several large, coloured, arched doorways indicated exits from the ramp, each marked with a floor number above. They stopped at floor six. Marcus then walked up to the orange doorway and held out a hand to the centre of the closed door. There was no handle to indicate a way through, in fact there no markings or indication of a door at all, only an archway. After a second, glowing orange lines spread out

from the Vice Admiral's hand across the dark grey wall. He took his hand away and the entire door liquified into the archway, allowing them through. Alara followed him quickly, and once she was through, he waved his hand across his body, the door reappearing and sealing behind them.

She found herself immediately confused. A large column stood in the middle of the circular room: it was made out of large white stone blocks, but that wasn't what was confusing. The doorway came out of this column, before it quickly disappeared, leaving the entire pillar blank. She walked around it; there were no markings, no indication of a passageway back to the large ramp. As she looked around, twelve wooden doors were placed symmetrically throughout the room each bearing a number from one to twelve. "It's a funny room," the Vice Admiral told her, walking over the door marked six and opening it. "Do not worry, it's to ensure we won't be disturbed," he continued, before stepping inside.

Alara followed him and she found herself in a warm and cosy room. The floors were carpeted grey, and the walls were a slightly lighter grey - the only thing in the room that wasn't grey was the large brown wooden desk, the chairs, and the items placed upon the desk. "Please, have a seat and place down your bags," he told her, pointing to the one in front of the desk before sitting down in the other chair. She nodded and sat down, immediate comfort spreading over her as she sank into the gentle padding. "Tea, coffee, water?" he asked, taking off his sunglasses and putting on a pair of silver spectacles, his grey eyes looking through her. "Tea, please," she answered, looking around the room.

Photos of the Vice Admiral when he was younger decorated the room, most of them containing several repeating members of the Navy. Awards too were hung up, decorations of his years in service and valour in battle. He scribbled down something on a slip of paper before slotting it into a small gap in the wall behind him. A few seconds later a small column in the corner of the room opened up like a flower to reveal an ornate tea set accompanied by biscuits and a jar of honey. He poured himself, and Alara, a cup before offering the honey to her. She nodded and he put a heap in before passing over the cup to her. The tea was fragrant, minty, and tasted very nice, but Alara sensed he was ready, so she set it back down and sat up straight.

"Well, you're here for a reason, so let's get down to business. Now, with your recommendations, as well as your heritage and familial ties to the service, there is no real need to even entertain the idea you're not a suitable candidate. So, informally, welcome to the Marines. However, your recommendations also came

with an additional request from my supervisor, Admiral Exarga. She wishes to know if you would be suitable for officer's training. Would this be of interest to you?" Alara was shocked, she faltered as she processed what he had said. "I'm in?" she asked. He nodded and reached under his desk to pull out a large form. "Very good," he said, deliberately misinterpreting her words. "Now, unfortunately I do still have to fill out this application for you, so please answer truthfully."

Alara quickly attempted to regain control of herself by pinching her thigh and she then nodded in agreement. "First of all, what are your religious beliefs?" he asked, throwing her off. "Agnostic," she stated. He nodded and ticked a box. "Have you ever been, or are you currently a member of the Church of Reclamation?" Alara shook her head. "Okay, have you ever been exposed to, been affected by, or witnessed the use of magic?" he asked. Alara's stomach sank, and he looked at her closely through his glasses. "Yes," she answered truthfully. He paused for a moment and then continued. "Have you been in contact with, or ever been affiliated with, a known Mage?" he asked, leaning forwards, and staring at her. Alara took a deep breath and held her head high. "No. I have not," she lied.

Chapter 10: Crowd Pleaser

They followed the fighter down the U-shaped stairs; each step was deep and Wicke found herself having to take it slowly to avoid falling. The second flight, fortunately for her, was more shallow, albeit considerably longer as it angled towards the centre of the arena. They emerged into a large room covered in sand, with several off-shooting rooms dug into the stone walls, full of beds pushed to the sides of each blank room - the fighters' quarters. Compared to up above, this area was quiet: there were fighters, about thirteen or fourteen of them - nowhere near the size of the flock upstairs. A small group of baned stood to the sides of the room, large, cleaver-like weapons resting at their feet as they stood and talked; all of them fell silent as they spotted Jayce and Wicke looking at them. In the middle of them was a baned polar bear - the one from the poster, he was huge and significantly taller than the other baned around him. He glared at Jayce and made an inaudible comment to the others, who laughed loudly. Jayce ignored them.

A few other fighters mingled around: regular-looking people, albeit mostly covered in scars and cuts, but towards the back two creatures drew their attention. One was a huge beast, an ogre: it was covered in orange and yellow fur, with a large black horn that lead from its forehead back across its skull, before splitting and curling off to the sides like a ram. It towered over everyone else, at least three metres in height, maybe more. Looking smaller, but still the height of a baned, was a creature Jayce didn't recognise. "An ocean crawler!" Wicke muttered in surprise, as she looked up at Jayce and then back at the creature.

It was strange, a creature clearly alien in this environment and one trying to keep to itself. It was bipedal, a humanoid, with a very large head-tail trailing behind from its head to the floor with a bony point at the end. A wet-looking carapace covered its chest, legs, and arms, like armour, with brief gaps exposing a scale-like skin underneath. Both its hands and feet were webbed and across its body were various hard-looking fins. It had one on each elbow and calf, and several on its face, pushing backwards like a headpiece. He was red, strongly so for a creature of the sea, but different shades flowed across his muscles, lending into lighter colours of white and yellow. His eyes were opaque, with no iris or pupil, instead only a flat green colour. A pair of beige shorts had clearly been forced upon him, instead of whatever clothing his kind must have normally worn. He looked at Jayce directly, before baring his sharp teeth, and it was then that Jayce spotted a metal collar around his neck, a large purple gem embedded in the side.

Finally, they arrived at a large rack of weapons ranging in all kinds of styles and variety from across the New World. "If you wish to choose any additional equipment, now is your chance. I'd advise you use weapons from here rather than your own, unless you're happy for an expensive sword like that to break," he told Jayce, pointing to the various weapons before stepping away. Jayce looked at the display: there were reach weapons like staves, glaives, and spears, but the majority was made up of shorter, closer-range weapons like axes and swords. Jayce pondered for a moment, debating as to which to choose, but eventually he made his choice. He grabbed another sabre, a simple, slightly curved blade, known as a nori. Its handle was covered with a thin knuckle guard to protect the users' hands, but other than that it was just a sword. The baned goat grunted a little. "Traditional, fair enough," he stated, turning to lead Jayce and Wicke back up top. Jayce stayed where he was. "Am I allowed to take another?" he asked. The baned shrugged and then nodded. "Why not, it's on the owner to pay for the equipment. Take it all for all I care." Jayce nodded and picked up a second nori before stepping away.

"Why two?" Wicke asked quietly, as they walked out of the fighters' pen. "I got some practice using two in my last fight. Besides, with your help it might be an extra edge we need," he told her quietly. She nodded and pulled down her sleeve before muttering her incantation very quietly. Jayce felt the world slow again as she tapped him and all of a sudden the stairs felt very strange to climb. He struggled to move at a normal pace as they walked upwards, and it was immediately clear why Wicke had cast it now. "So," asked the baned goat, guiding them and filling the silence. "Are you aware of how this works?"

"Yes," Jayce said, a little too quickly, his speech slurred. Wicke went to nudge him, but he simply dodged the slow-moving attack. "Sorry?" asked the baned. Jayce slowed himself, concentrating. "Yes," he said normally. "I've got to beat three amateurs to get out of the qualifying tier." The goat nodded. And he looked back at the pair with bemusement. "So are you two siblings? Dating?" he asked, clearly looking for anything to talk about for the remainder of the climb. "I'm his manager," Wicke somehow managed to interject. The baned laughed heartily. "Makes sense. If you follow me, I'll show you where we fighters watch the matches," he told them, leading them down a side path to a small den, that provided a head-height view of the arena. "If you want to watch the fight and be able to 'manage' during it, you should come here to watch, rather than up top or in the stands," he advised, before heading back the way they came. "Thanks for the tip," Wicke told him.

They returned up top before long, to find the room empty. "Ah, there you are!" called out a guard. "Oops," muttered their guide, quickly rushing off back the way they came. "Exarga, right?" she asked, coming over to them. "Your friend will have to wait here, but the other fighters have already gone down. Your first fight starts in a minute, follow me!" she told them, before heading back and opening the sliding doors. Wicke and Jayce looked at each other and she gave him a slow nod and a thumbs up. "Good luck!" she told him, before heading back down the stairs. Jayce ran slowly after the guard, trying his best not to look like an idiot as the guard ran down another set of stairs, slowly.

They came to a large ring underneath the stands, large pens full of various aggressive animals were dotted all around, snarling and roaring at them as they passed by. Large portcullis gates separated the sections, presumably for safe transport of the beasts for the arena. Jayce spotted a few pens containing humans in shackles, some looking extremely pale and deformed. Finally, they arrived at another portcullis where a few fighters were waiting their turn. "Here he is!" announced the guard to an armoured pen handler, with a whip on his belt and a clipboard and quill in his hand. "Good, I was worried he would miss the fight. You there, Exarga. Have you coated your weapons?" he asked, crossing his arms. "What do you mean?" Jayce asked, prompting large sighs from the handler. "That's a no. Use this and coat your blades, don't worry it'll wash off. It's sap from the numbing tree we have here, it'll blunt your blades and release - no don't touch it with your hands!" he warned quickly, as Jayce took hold of a large bowl full of green sap, his hands moving towards the gel.

The handler handed him a ladle and mimed a pouring action. "It is a strong neurotoxin; it'll numb anything it touches for a few minutes. Get hit in the arm you can't use that arm anymore, hit in the neck and you'll be paralysed for a bit. It's how we can legally get you to fight each other," he explained exasperatedly. After coating both nori carefully, as well as his own personal sword - now moved to a scabbard across his back - Jayce rounded on the metal gate. "Ready?" asked the handler holding onto a lever. "Yes," Jayce told him, before the gate lifted up and he walked through into the arena.

Ahead of him, his opponent moved slowly into the arena through another entrance. A shorter, but broader man dressed in full armour from his neck down, he had a large shield and a longsword in his right hand, the blade tinted slightly green from his own application of the numbing sap. As Jayce realised he had no such armour, he became increasingly grateful for Wicke's magic. He rolled his

shoulders, stretched his arms, and held his pair of swords defensively in front of him.

A voice called out, announcing their names before declaring the match to begin. Jayce's opponent charged at him, using the shield as a ram, but he simply sidestepped to the right, dodging away from his opponent and cleanly out of the reach of his weapon. His opponent's head was downwards, and with a powerful swing, he chopped with his right sword into the side of the man's exposed neck. It bounced off, leaving a green smear behind. Jayce's opponent went limp, and he collapsed to the ground in a pile of armour. The rather minor crowd of onlookers, previously cheering, stopped. A coin dropping could have been heard across the silence, but quickly loud boos of displeasure filled the arena. "Ahem, well that was quick!" boomed the announcer, from somewhere up above. "Fighter, if you're up for it, we'll send in another opponent?" the announcer asked Jayce. "Hopefully one a little more skilled than that loser," they added, their words accidentally picked up by their microphone. Jayce held up his right sword and extended a thumb upwards.

A few handlers ran over and dragged away Jayce's previous opponent before a much taller man, wearing a bronze breastplate and holding a greatsword, entered the arena. "I won't go down so easy!" warned his opponent from beneath his helmet. "We'll see," Jayce said, crossed his swords before him, entering a defensive stance. "Fight!" called out the announcer. Once again his opponent charged boldly at him, the crowd cheering as Jayce dodged under the large swing aimed at his chest, before crossing his blades and catching the direct swing downwards. Despite moving slowly to his eyes, the speed and weight of the attack tore through Jayce, pushing his own blades down towards him and burying his feet under the soft sand of the arena. They stood locked, his larger opponent using their weight to push their blade closer towards him. Jayce sidestepped, sliding the greatsword away from him into the sand as he moved to the right. He pulled back with his right hand, keeping his other blade pressing down on the heavy greatsword, sliding his blade out from underneath the now-pinned greatsword. Jayce had a chance, an opportunity to end it on his now exposed opponent.

Instead, Jayce chose to miss, prolonging the fight and allowing his opponent to press him away. Jayce flew backwards, catching his feet and stumbling a little. The warrior wasted no time, already rushing at Jayce once more with his blade. He swung wide, aiming for Jayce's midriff once again; Jayce easily stepped backwards as he watched the blade move somewhat slowly towards him,

judging the distance so it missed him closely. His opponent carried the momentum of the heavy sword, bringing it up again for another downwards attack. A foolish choice, Jayce wasn't one to repeat his errors. Rather than blocking, Jayce stepped forwards slashing with both weapons at his opponent's exposed arms, as the large sword pointed to the sky. The greatsword flew away into the sands behind his opponent as both of his arms went numb. Jayce stepped back: it was over.

Some of the crowd cheered for Jayce over his victory, with some more satisfied with the battle than others. A few small bags of coins flew across the arena, landing in the sands around him, a tip for a good fight. Jayce hesitated, unsure of whether or not to pick them up. His query was swiftly answered by several handlers who ran to collect the bonus. Satisfied, Jayce headed back through the gates into the pens. The handler looked at him, impressed, as he approached. "Well done! If you want a short breather, you could have another fight in a few minutes. That good for you?" he asked, sending in another fighter. Jayce nodded and leant back against the wall. He felt weird, his body had quickly adapted to the increased reflexes, yet he felt slow within his own enhanced body, as if there was a delay. Other people had also began to speed up when they spoke, yet their movements remained slow.

He watched a pair of fighters go back and forth, the small crowd cheering with each parry and deflection as they battled. Jayce couldn't help but get drawn in as he watched, but eventually a deciding blow occurred and that was it. More tips flew down from the stands, once again collected by the various arena handlers. As the loser was dragged away, Jayce recoated his blades before jogging back into the arena. "He's back!" called out the announcer. "Our young debut fighter is going for his third amateur bout today, put your hands together in appreciation of his efforts!" Jayce ignored the crowd's cheers and whoops, instead focusing on his opponent as they entered the arena.

It was a woman, a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned woman, with her hair and head under an ornate gold helmet. Her torso was covered with a sculpted breastplate, her hips holding a metal skirt. As Jayce analysed her, it was immediately clear from her equipment, as well as the many scars across her arms and legs, that she had fought before. Rather than a sword, she wielded a staff, taller than herself and made from dark, varnished, wood. Unlike with the bladed weapons used by other fighters, this weapon had no green tinge to it. If it was going to bring him down, it would do so through broken bones and bruises.

They met in the middle of the arena, and she leant on her weapon looking at Jayce. "I saw your other fights," she told him, her face hidden by the helmet. "Very impressive, for an amateur," she added blatantly, her head indicating she was looking him up and down. "Thank you. From your words, I take it you're not an amateur? Strange since you appear to be in the amateur tier," Jayce replied smugly, trying to meet her gaze underneath her helmet - its visor obscuring almost everything. He spotted the faintest smile underneath, through the small holes near her mouth. "Oops, I misspoke there. Pretend I said nothing. Go home kid, this is your best chance," she warned him, taking a stance - her staff leaning across her right shoulder for a quick strike from either end. Jayce rolled his neck and put up his guard. "No, I don't think I will," he told her, putting on a smile. "Fight!"

She wasted no time. Even with his enhanced reactions her strikes moved quickly; by the time Jayce had dodged one jab at his head, another three were coming at his shoulders and chest. Jayce stepped backwards rolling his shoulders to avoid the strikes before sidestepping the last. With her reach extended Jayce swung at her with both of his weapons, above and below her staff. The lower strike hit her chest plate, leaving a green mark behind, but she ducked under the overhead strike, diving, and rolling away to regain her distance. Her sandals kicking up sand as she moved. "I take it back," she yelled to him, over the cheers of the crowd. "You fight better than most amateurs, your reflexes are unnatural. Where did you train?" she asked, beginning to circle him.

"Nowhere special, an island near The Frontier. Had a real mean sparring partner," he told her, ready for the next round. Instead she raised her right leg placing her foot on her left thigh and holding her staff vertically behind her, using her free hand to beckon him forwards. Jayce rounded on her and as soon as he was in range she dropped her leg and lunged forwards, the staff shooting towards his face. Even with it slowed, Jayce struggled to avoid it, the smallest graze catching his cheek and drawing blood - the sheer force of the blow shattering his borrowed weapon as it caught the blade from the side. Jayce threw away the hilt, dropping low and drawing his spare sword, slashing downwards, whilst swinging quickly with his other blade upwards in a scissor strike. He hit the opposite ends of the staff with enough force that it slipped from her grip and flew off into the sand, spinning in the air. Jayce smiled at her smugly, expecting a surrender, instead she dove at him attempting to knock him prone with a fast-moving fist and elbow. It was over - he slashed at her arms and legs in a dual slash, and she landed flat on the sand unable to move.

The crowd cheered and she screamed in frustration, trying to blow the sand out from within her helmet as she lay face down, unable to move. Jayce dropped his blades and rolled her over, the helmet covering her face sliding upwards slightly, to reveal a green crescent moon tattoo on her jaw. She wriggled the helmet back down before looking up at him. "Well fought, Exarga. I hope the beating you should have got, isn't the best outcome for your days here," she told him, before laying back as handlers came to take her away. As she was taken away, Jayce looked upwards at the crowd, most of them standing and cheering, and as he turned to leave, his body refused.

He was stuck, frozen, unable to do anything but blink, look, and breathe; as he stood there counting the seconds - one, two, four, six, ten - it dawned on him the real danger of Wicke losing her concentration in the middle of a fight. A handler ran up to him. "Are you alright?" he asked. Jayce relaxed and turned to him, nodding as he regained the ability to move. "Yeah, just taking it in," Jayce told him, picking up his swords and leaving for the pens. Twelve seconds... that was the cost. Using the washcloth provided, Jayce cleaned his blades before discarding his now-empty spare sheath, moving both weapons to their scabbards before attaching them to his belt. He then made his way back up to the top floor.

Wicke was waiting for him, faint beads of sweat on her forehead. "Well done!" she said, smiling weakly. "Thank you," he answered, quickly grabbing her coat, and dragging her over to a sofa in the first room as she began to sway. They both collapsed onto it and laughed a little to each other. "I thought you said there wasn't a cost?" Jayce asked her, as his entire body softened from the continuous fatigue that had built up. "There isn't, I don't refuel as the cost, but otherwise I could hold it forever. My body however... not so much. You really pushed it today, please don't do that again," she asked him quietly, ensuring she couldn't be overheard and covering her face with her hat. Jayce lifted a fist up from his side and she mirrored it, tapping their knuckles together.

"Ahem!" came a familiar voice, as a man stood over them. "Well done! Congratulations!" Ming told them, dropping a decently large money bag between them. "Here is your reward for three winning bouts, plus the tips collected from your fights. Three hundred and fifty eight pearl." Jayce held the money bag hungrily, before he took back his own pouch from Wicke and combined the two together. "Thank you very much!" Jayce said, bouncing the pouch in his hand. "I do have to say, those were three impressive fights, albeit the first seemed to be against a complete novice. You aced your way through like

a demon unleashed! Now, onto business,” Ming declared, only for one of the various armed guards to walk up to the three of them.

“Apologies for the interruption, but the boss has asked the fighter to come and see them,” the guard told the trio. Ming opened his mouth to scold the interruption, but the guard held up a hand. “It wasn’t a request, and means now!” they stated. With little other choice, Jayce got to his feet with a groan, Wicke attempting to follow. “Sorry miss, just the young fighter,” the guard added gruffly. Jayce looked at her and nodded. “I’ll be back, wait here,” he told her, handing her the money pouch before following after the guard. Wicke crossed her arms and pouted, only to notice Ming doing the same and deliberately change to a different pose. “Don’t be long!”

Jayce followed the guard all the way around the ring to the furthest room. It was lavishly decorated with fine rugs, trophies, and ornaments, and had a direct overlooking view at the arena below, hovering over the main gate. A large bed-like sofa was posted near to the window for a relaxed viewing. Towards the back, a pair of jade green sliding doors lead to an office, with two extremely armoured men, holding big swords, stood guard. It was here that Jayce was dropped off. The guards opened the doors for him, and he walked inside, surprised his weapons hadn’t been taken from him.

The room was dimly lit by fire torches, spread evenly around the room. Artifacts, ancient vases, masks, scriptures, were displayed proudly in cases and a colossal wooden desk sat near the back. A large fur rug, made from some rare beast, lead up to it, and a single chair sat in front of the desk, tiny in comparison. Behind the desk, on a stand against the far wall, was a large wooden chest, painted a bright red colour with gold trimmings. “Well, I must first congratulate you,” said a well-spoken, low voice from behind the desk. “You fought very well,” the voice continued, before igniting a lamp on the desk.

“I take it you’re the owner?” Jayce asked, continuing forwards cautiously. She nodded, extending a plump, heavily-jewelled, and well-manicured hand to the chair before her. “I am indeed. Call me Delores. Would you like a drink of something?” she offered, extending an arm to a drinks cabinet in the corner. A skinny and short young man leant against the wall next to it, already with a drink in hand. “No thanks,” Jayce told her, sitting down. She waved over the young man and sat forwards in her throne-like chair, emerging more into the lamplight. She had dark skin, and short, curled hair. Her face was rather round, and she was a rather large woman. Jewellery adorned her large neck, and her lips shone

thanks to her bright red lipstick. A golden dress fit tightly to her body, but only her shoulders were really visible to Jayce.

"Do not hesitate to ask for one. I am very generous to those I like. Isn't that right, Vexx?" she asked; the young man walked slowly past Jayce and sat on the corner of the desk next to him. Vexx remained silent, his eyes mostly hidden beneath a mop of dirty blonde hair, a bottle of some strong smelling alcohol in one hand and a glass in the other. He poured out a drink and handed it to Jayce, before swigging from the bottle. The lighting made him look like a ghost and his skinny frame was not doing him any favours in his dirty clothes. Jayce took the glass from him, immediately noticing that Vexx's hands were both stained a reddish-orange colour, all the way up to his elbows. "Thanks," Jayce told him. Vexx smiled sinisterly at him before wandering away into the corner, the sound of clinking bottles quickly following.

"I suppose you're wondering why I summoned you. Well, as a winner of the amateur tier, and a clearly skilled one at that, it is on me to present potential fighters with the very best of options for their careers in this glorious arena. So - Jayce, was it? I am extending a once in a lifetime opportunity to become an official member of our team," she stated, sliding a small pile of documents across the desk to him, near enough to her that he would have to reach over the desk to get them. "You would be looked after, for as long as you wished to stay with us, naturally. As such you would also potentially have the chance to become a celebrity, as a star of our arena," she sold, with a cold smile.

Immediately, Ming's previous words rang out in his head. "No!" Jayce said, a little too abruptly. Her smile faltered. "Sorry?" she asked, offering him another chance. "I mean to say - no, thank you. I appreciate the offer, but the arena is only a temporary thing for me. I intend to win the Champion's Run and move on," Jayce stated, cunningly. Her façade evaporated immediately, a scowl rolling across her face. Jayce hadn't heard him approach, but in an instant, Vexx was over his shoulder, his head right next to Jayce's. "Say again?" Delores asked, a cold, steely look on her face. "I intend to beat your champion. And all your other fighters. So I appreciate the offer, but I intend to win," Jayce told her, sensing a very real danger coming from Vexx. She laughed, a sinister and malicious laugh that immediately caused Jayce to feel on edge. "Well Vexx, you heard him. He intends to defeat you. Provided he defeats the others, of course. Good luck, Jayce! It's a shame you didn't want to work together. Guards!"

After being evicted, and escorted out of the private viewing area, Jayce made his way back to Wicke. "How'd it go?" she asked, Ming sat comfortably next to her on the sofa. "Yes, how did it go?" he asked. Jayce extended a hand to Wicke and helped her to her feet. Ming then extended a hand of his own, expecting the same gesture, but Jayce ignored it. "She offered a contract, I declined it. She then wished me luck in the run, and I left," Jayce stated casually, rubbing his neck. "That was it?" Ming asked, getting to his feet unaided. "No threats, beatings, poisoning?" Both Jayce and Wicke looked at him with extreme concern. "I mean... uh, forget that. Regardless, you are now within the bronze tier, you will face three opponents selected randomly from the beasts kept here. These fights are very dangerous, and you will be expected to kill these creatures, or they will most likely kill you," Ming warned Jayce. "I'll arrange the fight for tomorrow evening. Six o'clock. And until you lose, I'll keep track of the fees, so you don't have to pay each time, provided you survive..." he stated boldly.

"Thanks Ming," Jayce said, extending a hand to shake. He took it and nodded to the pair. "It will take more than brawns to get to the top, and as much as I shouldn't say any of this, the other fighters may be willing to help. But any notion of such fixings is clearly a fallacy and certainly did not originate from me. Good luck!" Ming told them with a wink, before walking away. The pair looked at each other. "Well, let's get some food and make a plan. It gets real now!" Jayce told Wicke. She nodded and handed him back his money pouch. "You're getting us something a bit better than Tau's soup this evening!" she smirked.

Seize the Seas Tales: Welcome Aboard

"Well," concluded the Vice Admiral. "Quite frankly, the majority of these questions we can pull from your other forms and statements, so let's get out of here. Your father was never one to sit around and neither am I!" he told her, Alara immediately jolting to her feet. "You knew my father?" she asked urgently. He held up both hands. "Yes, and your mother. You'd be hard-pressed not to find any of the Marine heads who didn't know them. I knew them for a long time before... well... before they left. Good Marines, good people," he told her, standing up and pointing her gaze in the direction of a larger photo near the door. Her stomach knotted as she looked at the photo: there were around twenty or so people crowded around a table, with a formal looking document upon it. She searched for their faces, spotting the Vice Admiral to the right, next to Jayce's father and her own. Her mother was stood at Jayce's mother's shoulder, who in turn was sat next to a giant man with golden hair behind the table, the pair of them both holding quills and ink over the document.

"When was this? Where was this?" Alara asked urgently, rounding on the Vice Admiral. He faltered and looked at her sympathetically, before letting out a sigh. "This was the day the Marines were founded. Twenty-six years ago. We'll talk and walk, follow me," he told her, opening the door, and stepping out. Alara took one last look at the photo, before she regained her composure and picked up her bags, following after him. He held his hand out to the central pillar, tracing a symbol in the stone. A doorway appeared and they stepped through, emerging onto a large grass hill that Alara assumed was the rear side of the island's mountain. The wind took her by surprise as she shivered slightly.

Vice Admiral Barome started walking down the slope, heading in the direction of a large encampment reaching from the bottom of the mountain all the way to the shore, a huge stone wall encompassing the entire region. Alara questioned him on anything and everything she could think of related to her parents, but his answers provided no more information than she already knew. She arrived at the barracks, disappointed more than anything. "Alara, I understand you may be disappointed, but if you have any further questions that I can help with, don't hesitate to ask," he offered, turning to her in front of a large door. "Thank you, Vice Admiral," Alara said, regaining her composure and standing up alert. He patted her shoulder and opened the door.

The sound of bustling and rushing around inside immediately halted. "Vice Admiral in presence!" called out a Marine. Alara peeked her head around Marcus' huge frame to see about twelve or so Marines all stood at attention, dressed in exercise clothes, all performing the same upright position with both hands clasped behind them, heels together, and chin up. "Stand easy!" Marcus called out. "Where's your Instructor?" he asked the baned nearest to him, a giant black wolf, the only baned in the group. "Checking arms out front, Sir!" he said diligently. Marcus turned to face Alara. "Well, this is where I leave you. I wish you the best with your training, Instructor Gibbs and Zenobia will both work you hard. Marine, please take Ms Vanathur to the Senior Instructor, she should be expected."

The wolf gave a quick salute, by bring both his fists together with the knuckles interlocking and nodding once. He turned to Alara. "Please, follow me." She looked up at the Vice Admiral. "Thank you for everything," she told him, before following after the black wolf. Marcus gave a small wave after her, before turning and departing out of the door they came in.

Chapter 11: A Cunning Strategy

The morning came quickly; an evening of celebratory drinks for Jayce had put him into a deep sleep, and a belly full of decadent meats and cheeses had an almost identical effect on Wicke. "Never again," groaned Jayce, rolling out of bed just before midday and stumbling to the bathroom. He splashed his face and tidied up his hair as best as he could before looking around the bedroom. Wicke was gone. Jayce slammed on a shirt, slipped on his shoes, and ran out the door, racing down the stairs and immediately running up to the bar.

"Tau! Have you seen Wicke?" Jayce asked urgently. Tau looked at him quizzically, before he pointed over Jayce's shoulder at the young girl sat at an empty table with a bowl of stew and some bread. Wicke tried to smile at him with her cheeks full of food, only to opt instead to wave faintly at him as her food threatened to spray out of her mouth. Jayce stormed up to her. "Tell me when you're going somewhere. Please. You nearly gave me a heart attack," he scolded. She swallowed her mouthful, struggling to get it all down and resorting to using her cup of water to wash it away. "Sorry. I got hungry and you were still snoring," she said gently, leaning on her wrist. "Besides, you can't watch me when you're fighting. I'm a big girl, I can look after myself... mostly."

"Someone could have kidnapped you! Or, you know, worse things..." he told her, crossing his arms as she shovelled in another spoonful. "Ah yes, much risk to me, this place is!" she retorted sarcastically, gesturing to the almost empty room. "But I get your point. I'll tell you or leave a note, same with you. Deal?" she asked, smiling at him with food stuck in her teeth. Jayce nodded and sat down as Tau brought over a bowl and some bread for him. "So, the next fight is tonight at six, right? That's what you declared last night," Tau asked, with a slight chuckle as he handed over a spoon. "Yeah, you coming along to support me?" Jayce asked, dipping his bread in the stew and taking a bite. Tau shook his head. "Don't really have the stomach for it, but I'll spread word. I'll come for the final fight," he told him, before heading back over to the bar. "You better win, then we can say you stayed here!" Tau laughed. Jayce gave a thumbs up and dove into his food.

Jayce used the early afternoon to train with his new sword, finding a favoured grip for both his weapons, as well as getting familiar with their lengths to ensure no accidental injuries. Wicke took the afternoon to count their finances, as well as train her own body, practicing her sprints and trying to improve her stamina by running around the yard. Eventually, with less than two hours till Jayce's

match, the pair departed for the arena. This time, they followed a slightly out of the way route that Ming had told Wicke about during Jayce's meeting. Travelling down several alleyways, they came across a decently sized set of doors, slightly lower than the average baned in height. It was unlocked and Jayce found himself in one of the many corridors that lined the belly of the arena, connecting each section with multiple side passageways to get fighters to their destinations quickly and subtly.

They took a left and then a right and found themselves in the fighters' pens. "Give me the money pouch," Wicke ordered Jayce. He obliged and looked at her curiously. "I'll put some bets on you, see if we can increase our winnings to still be able to afford the ship, if you lose," she explained, tucking the pouch into a pocket in her coat. Jayce nodded. "Good idea, meet back here within the hour, or sooner if something goes wrong," he told her, presenting a fist. She bumped it and walked away to the stairway leading upwards. "I'll find out about the other fights!" she yelled back, spinning around and walking backwards, before righting herself and running upwards out of sight. Jayce almost felt proud.

The other fighters were milling around, most of them either resting from previous fights that had already occurred or otherwise being lazy. The cluster of baned, however, were all training, and training hard at that. Jayce couldn't help but watch them as they battled each other with nothing but their fists and bodies, each collision echoing with a dull thud. Their leader stood over them, watching and criticising every error and mistake. Jayce made his way over to them, ensuring to keep a distance so as to not get caught in the middle of the goliaths battling. "This isn't a zoo," growled their leader, as he circled a pair of fighters, his white fur more yellow up close. Jayce looked up at the polar bear, trying to meet his gaze, only to be rebuked at every chance as he turned away.

Another baned spoke up, the goat from the previous day. "Leave the kid be, Bjorn. He's here to train so let him. Fancy a bout, Jayce?" he offered. Jayce held his hands up and stepped back a little. "I'm okay, thank you. Maybe later," he told them, prompting laughter from the gang as they ended their training. The polar bear, Bjorn, scoffed and shook his head, irritated. "I saw your fights yesterday," the baned goat stated. "It was impressive. Since you're here, I take it you're fighting in the bronze tier?" he asked Jayce. Jayce nodded and stepped forwards a little, puffing up his chest. "I am, and I'm also going to win the Champion's Run!" he declared to the entire training room.

All of the other fighters froze, before laughter started to roll across the room. "Sure you are! A tiny pissant like you is going to get squashed," mocked one of the baned, wandering off with the rest of the group. Two remained behind, the goat, and a leopard that looked slightly older than most of the others, from his slightly more dishevelled fur. "That's some claim, do you know how many others have said the same thing?" asked the goat, folding his arms. Jayce shook his head. "I don't, can you tell me more about it?" Jayce asked. The leopard held up a hand to interrupt the conversation. "Why is it you wish to win?" he asked Jayce, curiously.

"I met the owner - not a fan of her," Jayce stated blatantly. They laughed. "She's terrible," the leopard told Jayce, the goat nodding in agreement. "Why do you work for her?" he asked, immediately sensing he had touched a nerve. "It's not by choice. Look around," the goat said, pointing at the barebones bedding, the collar on the ocean crawler. "Most of us have little else, the rest were sold here. All of us have non-negotiable contracts and even if we left what would we have? Our wages consist of food, bedding, and more fights." Jayce nodded, thinking carefully on what to say.

"I want to win, but now I want to win for an extra reason. Are you willing to help me?" Jayce asked them. They looked at each other and then back at Jayce. "How can we believe you won't just use us?" the baned goat asked. "Because I'm not doing this for myself. I need to take the girl I came with up north. When I get that deed, it's on you guys to decide what to do with it. If not, and I just take over this place as the new owner, I give you permission to take me down," Jayce said, extending a hand to shake.

"We'll hold you to that. What's your plan?" asked the goat, shaking it. "I need you guys to help me throw the fights. If we can fix the fights in your control, and sabotage the others that aren't, it'll just leave the champion," Jayce suggested. "What will you do about the champion?" asked the leopard. Jayce shrugged. "We'll face it when we get to it. For now, there's twelve fights to win. Do you think you can convince the others to help?" Jayce asked. The pair looked at each other and nodded. "Bjorn is stubborn, you might have to convince him the old fashioned way," stated the goat, a proud smile on his face as he looked back towards the other baned. "Bjorn is the polar bear, right? What are your names?" Jayce asked.

The goat stood tall. "Kiro. This is Lucas," he stated, before pointing at the various fighters around the room and naming them to Jayce. "Pleasure to meet you. What

about the ogre? And the ocean crawler?" he asked, looking at the pair sat quietly together in the corner. "The ogre is called Onyx; the ocean crawler doesn't speak our language, so we don't know. We call him Red. They'll be your opponents in the bronze tier," Kiro stated. Jayce's eyes widened as he looked at the non-humans. "I'll be fighting them?" Kiro nodded, not looking particularly hopeful. "Well, I guess I'll have to figure something out. Thanks for the tip."

They wandered away from Jayce to spread the word, leaving Jayce to try and figure out a plan. Unable to come up with a better idea, Jayce wandered over to the two beings sitting quietly. The ocean crawler leapt to its feet and bared its teeth at Jayce. "Hey, hey, I'm not here to fight. Just to talk," Jayce said, unclipping his scabbards and throwing his swords away. Red settled down, if only slightly, and the ogre looked at Jayce quizzically, its large yellow eyes blinking slowly. "Talk?" asked Onyx, still bigger than Jayce sat down. Jayce nodded, approaching cautiously. "Yes, talk. I want to free you two. And I think I'm going to be fighting you both soon."

Onyx sighed loudly and crossed his arms like an irritated child. "Me not want to fight. Me not like cutty cutty and stabby stabby." Jayce took a step closer and again Red hissed, but he made no moves against Jayce, instead observing with curiosity. "I'm not going to hurt you; in fact we can play a game instead. Do you like games?" Jayce asked. Onyx nodded. "When we are in the arena upstairs, you're going to fake sleep," Jayce said slowly. Onyx looked at him blankly, before he scratched his back with his huge hands. "We are going to do some acting," Jayce attempted. Onyx perked up. "Like a play?" he asked Jayce. Jayce nodded and the ogre clapped his hands together, the sound startling Jayce as well as the other fighters.

"Can you stand up for me?" Jayce asked. The ogre got to his feet, towering over Jayce, who came up to his waist. Jayce retrieved one of his swords and immediately the simple soul held up his hands and protected his face. "No hit, no hit," the ogre begged. Jayce put it down and took a step closer, the other fighters all staring at him. "I'm not going to, we're acting, right?" Jayce asked him. Onyx relaxed a little and nodded. Jayce reached for his weapon again, but this time Onyx didn't react. "When we are upstairs," Jayce explained. "We will have to fight, but that's okay, because we will be acting, like in a play. Copy me."

"Acting like play," the ogre repeated, nodding along. Jayce pointed at the huge club resting against the wall and mimed picking it up. Onyx repeated the action and Jayce took the chance to pick up his other sword, both blades safely sheaved.

The club was the size of a church pew and was basically just a pruned tree. Jayce mimed gripping the club and raising it high over his head before bringing it down. Sand flew everywhere as the club slammed into the floor; Jayce then mimed swinging the club wide in an easy to dodge fashion. Again, Onyx repeated the action, this time making several menacing faces as he got into the role. "After three swings," Jayce told him, demonstrating the first downwards slam, the second wide swing, and then a third and final downwards slam. "Pretend to be tired when I tap your head," Jayce told him, stepping back and running towards the ogre.

Jayce ran up the club, leaping off the ogre's forearm and bringing down the hilt of his right sword onto Onyx's horn right in the middle of his forehead. It connected and bounced off harmlessly allowing Jayce to drop easily to the floor below. Onyx took a moment to realise, not even feeling the tap, but he then blinked slowly before swaying a little and falling backwards with a large crash. Even snoring afterwards for emphasis. Jayce approached the hapless beast, clipping his swords back onto his belt and gently tapping Onyx's shoulder. "See, no hurty! We fake fight and show off your acting to the crowd," Jayce confirmed as Onyx opened up his eyes, nodding quickly. Jayce looked over at Red who was staring at the pair with much curiosity. "Me act well?" asked the ogre, sitting up. Jayce gave him a thumbs up. "Shall we practice again?" Jayce asked him, Onyx eagerly got into starting position, pulling all manner of faces and even roaring.

When Wicke returned to the fighters' pen, she had no idea what to think as she watched Jayce fell the ogre with a single strike. "Um," she said, drawing their attention as she approached. "What did I miss?" she asked, adjusting her hat and looking up at Onyx, who gave her a small wave. "Not much, but I have the next fight settled and some of the other fighters are in," Jayce told her. He then looked over at Red, who had yet to take his eyes off of them. "If I get that collar off during the fight, can you escape?" Jayce asked, miming the collar breaking and then running away. It took Red a few seconds, but he nodded, and Jayce took it as a plan. "Well, that sorts that. How did it go on your end?"

"Good, the next three fights are without sword coating and are against this guy, that guy, and then some monster they have in the pens apparently. I've put the majority of our money on your victory with each one, so hopefully we should get some good returns!" she stated positively. "Otherwise you'll be dead, and I'll have no money... so don't lose!" Jayce nodded and then turned to face his two new partners. "I'm going to go. I'll see you soon," he told them. Onyx nodded and waved wildly. Red remained expressionless. They made their way back

upstairs, Jayce explaining the plan to her as they walked; Wicke could only nod along, both surprised and impressed at Jayce's initiative. "Well, looks like if you can figure out the last fight, bronze tier should be a breeze!" Wicke stated with a large smile. "That ship is getting closer and closer!" she laughed.

They arrived upstairs to get in a little rest before Jayce's first fight, sitting in the one of the sofas and lounging for a while, but eventually Ming came over. "Well, I'm glad to see you're taking this seriously and coming early! I have a little bit of business to talk to you about before your first professional fight," he told Jayce, today dressed in a gold and red robe, embroidered with large craggy mountains and a large sun on his back, his hair kept in a box-like hat. "What's up?" Jayce asked, inviting him to sit. A look of confusion rolled across Ming's face, and he even blushed a little. "We need a stage name for you. I have some ideas. Unless you have one of your own?" Ming asked, refusing the seat and holding his hands together in front of him. Jayce shook his head and looked at Wicke to see if she had any thoughts. She too shook her head.

"Perfect, most fighters go for something sharp and memorable... like Raging Phoenix, Crimson Dragon, or Mysterious Stranger. Given your name, I thought that Rising Ace would be a good choice! I have others..." he suggested, reaching into his sleeve, and pulling out a horrifically long list of scribbled down and scratched out names. "Rising Ace. I like it, sounds like something to look out for," Jayce told him, ignoring the disgusted look on Wicke's face. "Sounds great!" Wicke forced, her face twisting into a smile as she received a nudge in the ribs from Jayce. Ming clapped his hands together. "Wonderful, I shall go tell the announcer. I'm so excited!" he declared, waddling off quickly. Wicke turned her head slowly towards Jayce. "The Rising Ace?" she asked him. "Really?" Jayce shook his head and smiled. "It's a good name. What would you have gone for?" he asked her, leaning into the sofa. "Bifold Blazer!" she declared with gusto. Jayce snorted and she blushed deeply. "Now that is a bad name!"

Eventually the time came - Wicke cast her spell, muttering it quietly behind Jayce's back to avoid attention. Once more the world seemed to slow for Jayce, but he quickly reverted to how he had been previously, the world speeding up and slowing down at his own behest. "Ready?" Wicke asked. Jayce nodded and set off for the pens, rolling his arms and stretching as he moved. The crowd thundered above him through the stands, significantly louder than the day before. He passed the many beasts in the pens and came to the main entrance. A different handler stood waiting for him. "So, you're the Rising Ace - best of luck! The ogre's a handful. If it gets out of your control, we'll attempt to rescue you if

you call out that you forfeit, but there is a chance we can't stop it from killing you. The fight ends if you can make it submit, knock it out, or kill it. Understand?" she asked, from beneath a mask. Jayce nodded and looked out towards the arena. Onyx stood in the middle, waiting with his club.

"Ladies and gentlemen, tonight, making his first official debut as he attempts the Champion's Run, we have a fighter who swept his way through the qualifiers! None held a candle to his speed, his accuracy, or his power, so today he faces the beast of Beranis! Put your hands together for our potential champion, THE RISING ACE!"

The gate raised and Jayce ran on in, drawing both his blades and standing before Onyx. The ogre glanced nervously at the crowd, his knees shaking. "Hey there, big guy! You ready for our play?" Jayce asked him. The ogre shook his head, prompting a little bit of unease within Jayce, and then roared loudly. "I kill you!" Onyx declared to crowd, before winking at Jayce. The uneasiness settled and Jayce put on his usual smirk. "Fight!" screamed the announcer. Jayce charged at Onyx, leaping to the side as he brought his club down into the sand. Following their plan, Onyx swung wildly, high enough for Jayce to duck under, but low enough to look impressive to the crowd. They cheered as Jayce leapt backwards into position.

Onyx met his gaze and Jayce nodded, the ogre pulling a menacing look, that cracked every now and again to reveal a cheeky smile. He roared, loud enough to shake the arena as he reared backwards and lifted his club. Jayce ran forwards, running up the club as it hit the floor, spraying sand in all directions. As he reached the ogre's forearm, Jayce leapt, bringing the hilts of his blades together and slamming down on the bony ridge of Onyx's iron skull - before pushing off backwards into the sand, landing with a crash. Onyx stood there dumbfounded for a moment, as Jayce looked up at him. He blinked and then remembered the next part of his performance. The ogre swayed on his feet, stumbling backwards and dropping his club in a dramatic manner - worthy of an award - as he went limp and fell into the sand.

The cheers stopped and Jayce got to his feet, putting his blades away and looking up at the crowd, looking past the audience towards Delores' box. "Surely everyone knows an ogre's forehead is its weakness!" Jayce proclaimed. "Everyone knows an ogre's head is hollow! I thought this was meant to be a challenge?" Jayce declared arrogantly, only imagining the rage currently exuding from the top. Laughs started to echo from the crowd, cheers following shortly

after. "Bring on the next fight! Give him a challenge!" came multiple voices from within the audience.

Jayce ignored them, instead he walked up to the 'unconscious' ogre. Jayce bent down and gently nudged the ogre in the shoulder. "Well done! They loved it," he told him. The ogre smiled and opened his eyes, dramatically roaring loudly as he stood up. The crowd fell silent, but cheering shortly followed as the ogre bowed and departed out of the gate, leaving Jayce alone in the arena. "Just a minute folks, we're just setting up his next opponent," called out the announcer over the audience, giving Jayce a chance to breathe and slow down his racing heart.

He looked around the arena, large stone walls encompassed the entire thing, too tall for even Onyx to climb. Rows of escalating benches rose higher and higher, allowing for at least a few thousand spectators, by Jayce's estimates. Most of these seats were empty, but a few large clusters of patrons were spread around. Above the entire arena was a large scaffold that Jayce hadn't noticed before, a few spectators could be seen walking across and looking down - VIPs he assumed. It looked like a few entrances connected directly to the upper ring, which had angled windows looking downwards to the arena; a tiny gold and red man stood leaping and waving from one of them. Jayce looked down, trying to spot the bunker that Wicke was watching from; there were a few, and as he glanced over one, he spotted the faintest trace of white, that quickly disappeared. Eventually, he spotted her, her face obscured mostly in shadow, but he could tell even from the middle of the arena that she was in deep concentration.

The gates opened, the rattling and creaking sound audible even over the crowd. From the shadows of the weakly lit pens emerged Red, a row of handlers with spears following loosely behind him. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, entering the ring is one of the strangest creatures within the menagerie! A beast from the deepest, darkest, depths of the abyss! A monster so foul, even the greatest of sea creatures flee from its gaze! An ocean crawler, a jiaoren, has entered our arena and it is hungry for the flesh of man!" Red continued walking forwards, his eyes down to the floor and his teeth bared in a snarl. "It is on our intrepid hero to face this creature!" Red continued walking, stopping when he was few metres away from Jayce. "Will he survive? Or will our Rising Ace be consumed by the endless wrath of the ocean?"

Red looked at Jayce, the snarl faltering slightly as he faced him. Jayce drew his swords and Red's eyes changed from anger, softening, almost looking fearful -

until a glow emanated from the crystal on his collar and his body seized up, pain tearing through him. Anger returned and Red growled, raising his hands up, the sharp claws on the ends of his four fingers shining in the arena light. "It's okay Red," Jayce told him softly. "Get ready!" The long head-tail whipped around in the sand behind him before it separated into eight thinner tails, each ended by a sharp bony point. Four of them stabbed into the sand around him and his body rose up off the floor as the other tails lifted up around him, pointing their ends at Jayce. "Fight!"

Seize the Seas Tales: An Unusual Tailor

Alara followed the black baned wolf through the barracks, the other Marines all wearing simple exercise clothes rather than their usual uniform. Most of them were male, but among the twelve Marines that she counted, three were women. They all looked at her with intrigue, now much more relaxed since the Vice Admiral was gone. Alara turned her gaze away from the onlookers, instead looking at the large wolf leading her. "Hi there," she said in a friendly manner. He looked back at her over his shoulder, his bushy tail swaying softly behind him. "Instructor Zenobia is this way, follow closely," he told her gruffly, clearing ignoring her attempt to talk.

He lead her through a set of doors in silence, swiftly emerging into a flat area of dry earth, any plant life long stomped out by the training Navy sailors and Marines. The Marine lead her along the path, past several storage facilities, towards an area full of training dummies, with a row of them lined up in front of a stone wall down the end of a shooting range. Navy sailors, easily recognisable by their uniforms, their colours a simple black as a substitute whilst they trained, roamed around the area in large groups.

Alara and her guide moved past them, one of the sailors spitting in the baned's direction - he ignored them and kept leading her onwards. They stepped into the weapon and equipment storage facility to find rows upon rows of metal racks, all containing various firearms locked behind shutters. Alara was lead through the labyrinth until eventually she came across another door. Her Marine guide knocked on it and stepped back. A woman, mid-thirties at most, dressed in a red tank top and grey waterproof trousers, opened the door. She had olive skin - slightly darker in tone than Alara's - black hair, and dark brown eyes; across her exposed neck was a deep scar that lead down to her chest. "Yes?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I have brought Ms Vanathur, as per Vice Admiral Barome's instruction, Senior Instructor," he stated, at attention. She looked Alara up and down, before nodding. "Very good, Wulf. Wait here. Alara was it? Come inside, I've been expecting you," she told them. Alara looked at her guide in mild bemusement. "Your name is Wulf?" she asked, before stepping through the doorway. He opened his mouth to reply, but the door was closed behind her before he could answer. "Yes, yes. It turns out parents lose a lot of their imagination when their child turns into a baned. So, you're the new candidate I was told to look out for," she stated, looking her over as Alara set down her bags. Alara opened her mouth to speak, only to be interrupted. "Ah ah aah, I haven't told you to speak. Just kidding, I'm not that strict one-on-one. Today you have permission to speak freely," she said, with a warm and mischievous smile. Her hands rested on her hips, one of them made of metal, with a small purple gemstone on the back of her hand.

"Thank you, and yes, my name is Alara. The Vice Admiral said you'd run me through the overview," Alara told her, relaxing. Instructor Zenobia crossed her arms. "Did he now? Well how generous of him! However, first things first." Zenobia whistled sharply and another door to the room opened. A large figure floated in, their feet quite literally not touching the floor. Their entire body was covered from head-to-toe in sealed plate armour, the armour intricately etched with strange rune-like markings that glowed faintly in the bright white light of the room. Alara's eyes widened as it came towards her. "Don't worry this is one of the djinn armourers, a sky knight, if you've heard of them."

The figure looked at Alara closely through the helmet, a single glowing line breaking through the visor. "Strip," it told her in a wet-sounding voice. Alara looked at Zenobia, who nodded. "Not entirely, it'll measure you so we can get you a well-fitted uniform," she reassured. Alara nodded and undressed down to her underwear, as the creature, the sky knight, ran a measuring tape across her body. It floated away into the neighbouring room and quickly returned carrying a black piece of clothing, that resembled a long-sleeved top with built-in gloves. It handed it to her before disappearing to grab more. Alara touched the strange fabric, it was thin, yet felt squishy, like it had padding; it was light, yet felt rugged. "Put it on." Alara was told. She did so, it stretched and contorted to her torso perfectly, like no top she had ever worn before. The neckline came all the way up to her jaw.

The sky knight returned with a pair of waterproof grey trousers; she put them on, and they too fit perfectly across her body, stopping just above her ankles.

“Try moving around in it.” Alara was advised. She did so, squatting down and stretching everyway she could: the clothing remained intact, and unrestrictive. “Good,” Zenobia confirmed. “This is your under-armour. Your basic clothing. Unless we are working out and are just doing fitness drills, always wear this. It is your new skin,” she told Alara. As Alara looked closely at the top in the mirror, she spotted little divots throughout, each marked with a number in white, in contrast to the black material.

The sky knight reapproached her, carrying a large tray of grey armour plates. “Put this on top,” it garbled at her, demonstrating by showing off the marked number on the back of a shoulder pauldron, before placing it on the under-armour, the pair locking together with a click. “Each piece clips on to the adjoining slot, every armour plate has a number on the back to indicate the slot, and a letter for the size, for different bodies. It’s best to put the plates on before you put on the under-armour, otherwise you won’t be able to fit it properly – use a mannequin, then put it on. Once the plates are in place, the under-armour retains its shape unless heated by body heat. If a plate gets damaged you can requisition a replacement through the quartermaster,” Zenobia informed her, clipping the plates to her back.

Once they were all on, a set of greaves were handed to her, accompanied with hinged boots that could move and roll in all directions. They easily slipped on over the trousers and again fit her comfortably - covering her legs and waist with armour that felt heavy, but not encumbering. Finally a smooth, grey jacket was handed to her, with a central zipper and a button flap to cover it. Grooves had been built into the jacket, for the addition of the outfit’s coloured highlights. A pair of breast pockets lay on the outside on either side, as well a large rear pocket on the lower back. A matching grey beret was then handed to her, completing the look. “How does it feel?” Zenobia asked Alara, stepping back and looking her over, the sky knight also observing. “It’s perfect,” Alara replied, with her head held high and a smile on her face.

Chapter 12: From the Depths

Within an instant, Red initiated the battle - stabbing rapidly with his spare headtails, the sharp bony tips heading straight for Jayce's chest, arms, and stomach. Jayce's eyes widened, even with Wicke's aide, the jabs required all of his concentration to avoid. He peddled backwards in the sand, desperate to keep out of Red's range as the onslaught began to overwhelm him. Jayce struck at one of Red's tails, parrying the bony tip away from his shoulder as it got too close for comfort, but another approached him from the side, narrowly avoiding Jayce's eye. Red hissed at Jayce, four of his headtails providing him a terrifyingly fast pace to pressure Jayce as they dug into the sand like extra legs. The walls of the arena were coming fast, and with each attempt to parry, without harming Red, an overwhelming sense of dread build up from within him. This wasn't a battle; this was going to be an execution... his.

Jayce hit the wall, his back pressed firmly against it as Red rounded on him. "You're cutting this a little tight, Red!" Jayce stated, as two of Red's bony tips embedded themselves in the wall either side of his head. Red only hissed, bringing himself even closer, towering over Jayce. All four of his free tails reared backwards, ready to strike. Jayce dove forwards, running underneath him as all four speared the wall where he had been. Once more, Jayce found himself desperately trying to avoid the spear-like tails, all of them striking repetitively, one after another in a clockwise rotation. Frustrated, Red roared at Jayce, his mouth opening wide to reveal two rows of sharp teeth, and he lunged.

His headtails switched, stabbing in a crossing pairs as he floated across the battlefield, chasing after a quickly retreating and increasingly terrified Jayce. He scoured the formation, looking for an opening, something, anything he could exploit to get in close without hurting the ocean crawler. Jayce stumbled over his feet backwards and in an instant all four spears struck towards him. There was nothing he could do: they were in the perfect position to pin him downwards as they came towards him. As Jayce fell, each point came closer and closer, nearing his exposed torso as he desperately tried to block with his blades. And then they missed.

All four killing blows narrowly moved around Jayce's chest before retracting. It had been subtle, but it was deliberate, Jayce realised. He kept himself upwards, flailing his arms to keep balance as he stumbled. Another pair came towards him and rather than strike to block them Jayce simply lifted up his swords in a weak attempt to block. Again, the two blows aimed at his neck narrowly missed,

altering their trajectory at the last minute. It was Red, he had been trying not to hit Jayce, making his strikes believable to buy time. Jayce leapt backwards, getting as much ground as he could. He looked at Red, glancing at the frustration in his face and then nodding. Red faltered, stopping his advance and readying his headtails for defence. "Sorry it took so long," Jayce told him, bringing up his blades in an offensive stance, the crowd cheering him onwards.

Jayce ran forwards, Red striking at him with all four tails in overreaching stabs. To the audience, it looked like Jayce had twisted at the last minute to avoid the blows, fitting perfectly between them. Jayce kept running getting closer and closer, Red now lowering himself and raising his hands to defend himself. "Ready!" Jayce told him, leaping forwards and slashing with both blades in a downwards crosscut from his right side, cutting straight through Red's guard, and bringing both blades cleanly across the crystal on his collar, the blades bouncing off harmlessly and allowing Jayce to retreat by pushing off of Red's body.

The pair stood there, looking at each other - Jayce breathing heavily and his body sweaty from the exercise. A moment passed, then another, then another, and surely, cracks appeared across the crystal before it shattered, the pieces falling away to the floor. Red roared, a yell of fury, frustration, and joy, as he reached onto the bracers on his arms and tore them free, before grabbing his collar and snapping it cleanly off his neck. He looked at Jayce and then glanced at the few openings around the arena, his eyes glancing at the one connected directly to the outside, the arena's private dock visible through the grating. All eight headtails snapped back together and Red bounded towards it, handlers rushing into the arena in a desperate attempt to recapture him. It was too late, Red dove forwards, his fingers tearing through the wire grate and his slimy body sliding through to freedom.

The crowd was stunned, and as they began to murmur between themselves, Jayce snatched at the chance. "What sort of fights are you running here?" Jayce yelled out, throwing his swords in a dramatic display of frustration. "This fight was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and your equipment failed! My opponent has run away, just as it was getting good!" Jayce protested loudly to the crowd, pointing up at the owner's box. "This was two easy fights! I thought this arena was meant to be professional! How could such a slip-up occur?" he yelled, erasing any doubts on the legitimacy of the match from the audience's mind. Protests and murmurs echoed across the arena, until the announcer chimed in. "Ladies and gentlemen, the owner humbly apologises for the faulty equipment.

Given the way the match was progressing, we feel it was going to result in the challenger's loss!"

Immediately boos rolled across the crowd. "He won!" yelled several voices. "That blow would have killed it without the collar!" yelled another. Jayce looked up at the owner's box and back at the crowd. "Does that sound fair to you all? That an error on the owner's part would cause my challenge to go unfulfilled?" he asked, spreading his arms wide and further inciting the crowd. "No!" they clamoured. "He won! He won!" they yelled, rattling the stands. Jayce retrieved his swords and put them back on his belt before putting his hands on his hips. "Ahem - on reconsideration, it has been decided that this match will count as a victory for the challenger," the announcer reddeclared, to the cheers of the audience. Jayce bowed and walked off to the pens, a large grin emerging on his face the moment he was out of sight.

He found Wicke upstairs and after sitting down on their usual sofa, the exhaustion set in, and the spell ended. "Well done," Wicke told him as she tilted her hat downwards and shut her eyes. "Thank you. I got a little worried there, but it worked out in the end," he admitted quietly, as feeling returned to his body. "We should probably leave sooner rather than later; I get the feeling I pissed off the owner," Jayce added, sensing an aura of pure hatred flowing from across the arena. Wicke nodded and got to her feet. "I'll get the winnings, you set up tomorrow's fight with Ming," she told him, wandering off.

Jayce got to his feet, his heart finally slowing back down, and wandered over to Ming. "There's the champ-to-be! Fantastic displays of skill, battle prowess, and audience control!" Ming declared, clapping his hands together and standing tall. "There's only one more fight left for you in the Bronze tier, but tomorrow is unfortunately rather busy in the evening, so your fight will have to be earlier," Ming stated, reaching into a small chest behind him and handing over a small cloth pouch. "I hope you don't mind, but I calculated the fees for your remaining fights and deducted them from today's winnings, so regardless of the owner's opinions, you're all squared up and each fight is prearranged. Should make it a little harder for her to try to ruin your run, through outside meddling," he told Jayce, with a cunning smile and a wink. "Thanks Ming. What time is the fight?" Jayce asked, stepping away. "Two o'clock in the afternoon, ensure you get here early, just in case," he warned, waving him off.

Jayce found Wicke downstairs, a rather small pouch in her hands. "I thought you bet all the money?" he asked, looking at her confused. She nodded and reached

inside, pulling out a single golden coin. Jayce immediately pushed it back inside the pouch. "Don't show it off, that's a lot of money!" he urged her quietly. "Come on, let's go," he told her, walking quickly out of the front doors with her on his heels. "How did you get such an increase?" he asked her, as they walked along the relatively quiet streets of the early night, fire lamps lighting the way. "I used the money earnt from the first one as soon as you won your first fight - a double-or-nothing sort of deal. We have enough for the basic boat, right?" she asked, causing Jayce to stop in his tracks.

"We do... don't we?" he answered, asking for clarification. Wicke nodded and raised her eyebrows. "We could just leave," she suggested. Jayce nodded, he then quickly shook his head. "I know we could, and the sooner we leave, the sooner we will get there, but what if we stayed? Help the fighters break their contracts and win the Champion's Run. Unless I die, we still have enough to leave if we're smart with our money. Is that okay with you?" he asked, looking at her, conflicted. Wicke faltered, but slowly she nodded. "Yeah, what harm is a few days? If the other fighters help, you could finish it within the week," she stated, her shoulders dropping as she fiddled with her pockets. "Thank you, Wicke. Today went well, tomorrow should as well."

A few sets of footprints echoed behind them, and it dawned on both of them how empty the streets around them were. "Well, well, well. If it isn't the Rising Ace?" came a mocking voice from one of the alleyways. It was a guard, one of the several within the arena, a large longsword in hand. "I do believe it is," chided another, a spear in her hands. "From the sounds of their conversation, it would appear there's some coercion occurring behind the scenes. Not that it matters. The boss has asked for your head on her desk, your pockets emptied, and your bodies in the ocean," stated a third, hefting a large axe over his shoulder. "You really pissed her off, Exarga. If Vexx hadn't refused to, well, let's just say we're glad for an easy bonus to our pay."

The three thugs had them trapped from all angles, all dressed in armour, with cloaks over their bodies to act as simple disguises. "Look, I'm sure we can come to some kind of arrangement," Jayce attempted. They laughed, taking a step forwards. "Jayce," Wicke said quietly, with her back to his. Jayce could feel her shaking slightly. "If we don't fight, it's over..." she stated blankly, rolling up her sleeves and raising her hands, ready to fight as she glanced around at the lamps lighting the streets, muttering quietly under her breath. "What are you suggesting? We kill them?" he asked her, drawing his swords and watching the two in front of him. "I'm not a killer!" he stated nervously.

One of the guards laughed. "I am!" she said, lunging at Jayce with her spear. It came fast, but Jayce managed to deflect it away with his swords. He pushed forwards as she reeled away and kicked her hard in the chest, knocking her backwards. The other one in front of him brought down his axe, the monstrous blade narrowly avoiding Jayce as it cracked the cobblestone between them. Jayce leapt backwards focusing on Wicke as he went to protect her from the third. Wicke didn't need it. The two lamps nearest to them glowed brightly and their flames flew out from inside, twisting and get larger as they flowed across the air onto the third guard. He screamed as his cloak ignited and a ball of flame enveloped him.

All three of them looked at the sight in horror as the flames of the screaming guard shone brightly in Wicke's blazing eyes. His very body turning to a blackened husk as his armour melted beneath the heat, the flames entering his open mouth and cooking him from the inside out. She ended the spell and he collapsed to the floor, barely anything other than a charred shell of a skeleton, vaguely human. She turned on the other two who rushed forwards with their weapons towards her. "Jayce!" she called out.

He charged forwards, slamming into the man with his body and sending him crashing down the alley. As the female guard leapt at Wicke, Jayce slashed at her spear, his blades running along the handle and across her fingers. She yelled out in pain, clutching her damaged hands and dropping the spear as her fingers fell away to the floor. She backed up and Wicke recast the spell, screaming as flames wrapped around her body before she too was consumed. The final guard slammed into Jayce, throwing him hard to the floor and knocking the wind out him, scattering his weapons across the stones. "You bastards!" he yelled, raising a fist, and smashing it hard into Jayce's cheek. He tasted blood and another fist quickly followed catching Jayce near his left eye as the last guard knelt on top of him. Jayce's entire vision went dark, and he lay there stunned. He came back to reality, only able to refocus on the sound of gurgling above him. A splash of blood landed on the stone next to him and, as Jayce looked up, he stared at a spear tip emerging from the final assailant's neck. He gargled on his own blood, before he fell off Jayce to the side, landing onto the stones with a thud.

Jayce rolled over and spat out blood, his stomach twisting from the sight. "I'm not a killer..." he muttered quietly to himself, the soft crackling of the still-burning female guard to his left. Wicke stood over him, shaking her head with her arms folded. "You're not, but if you want to survive out here, you'll need to be. Tomorrow you'll be fighting something that you probably won't be able to

negotiate with. Morals are good, but don't think there is always a choice. Today, I saved our lives, and you saved two lives. They would have killed two lives, so next time don't hesitate, or I might not be able to save you!" she scolded, searching through the uncharred guard's remains for anything salvageable, before walking forwards down the street and looking back at a still-mortified Jayce. "Come on, you want someone to see you? I don't plan on dying today, do you?" she berated, her orange eyes burning in the streetlight as the lamps reignited. Jayce took a deep breath and got to his feet, his fingers slick with blood as he pressed his hands into the growing pool next to the corpse to get up. He wiped them on the guard's cloak before he retrieved his swords, quickly following after Wicke and leaving the scene behind them.

Wicke stormed on ahead, her eyes blazing with hot fury, as she glanced at every alley and every path they passed, as they snaked their way through the labyrinth of back-alleys back to the inn. Jayce followed, struggling to keep up with her pace, with his hands in his pockets and eyes on her heels. They walked in silence, neither willing to make the first move, even as they walked through the doors of The Beast's Pen. Wicke went straight up to the bar and sat down, reaching over the side and grabbing their key and handing it Jayce silently, before turning away from him. "How did it go?" Tau asked, looking towards Jayce as he cleaned a glass with a rag. Jayce ignored him and walked away upstairs.

Jayce ran a bath; he didn't grab a towel, he didn't even grab a change of clothes. He unclipped his belt, took off his shoes, stripped off everything he could, trying not to look at the bloodstains on his clothes. It was no use: his shirt was soaked, a cocktail of his own and other's blood. He heard the door to his room open and close softly, as he stepped inside the huge wooden tub. The fire lamp flickered gently in the otherwise dim room, a stream of cold air flowing in from the ajar window. As he lay down, a small trickle of water ran over the edge, splashing loudly onto the floor, but he didn't mind as his clothes soaked it up. The water was hot, not hot enough to redden the skin, but enough to feel like it was burning his cold body. He rubbed his hands under the water, before wiping his face and neck, small blots of red floating in the water before dissolving away.

There was a soft knock at the door and Jayce looked over his shoulder at the handle, he hadn't locked it, to his annoyance. "Yes?" he asked, leaning back and shutting his eyes. "I wanted to apologise..." Wicke said gently, as she opened the door slightly, ensuring she couldn't see in. Jayce didn't reply. "I was... disrespectful to your feelings, and I shouldn't have ignored that you were clearly... shocked. I'm sorry," she said, in an extremely mature manner.

"Did Tau tell you to say that?" Jayce asked, with a snarky tone. Wicke blushed heavily from behind the door and tried to hold her tongue. "No... well, partially. I'll leave you to rest. Sorry," she said, moving to shut the door.

Jayce sighed loudly and shook his head. "Why were you so calm about killing them?" he asked her, splashing his face with water, and sinking further down till his chin touched the surface of the water. Wicke opened the door fully and leant in the doorway, her eyes averted. "They would have killed us Jayce, with no hesitation for who would miss us. That would have been it, end of story, adventure over! Why should I feel sorry they died so we could live?" she asked, moving around the wall and turning to face him directly, whilst keeping her eyes away from his body. "That wasn't the question I asked. Have you killed people before?" he asked her softly. Wicke bit her lip and looked away. "Who and how many?"

"Enough. Fools who tried to capture me and idiots out on the seas. If a ship sinks in the middle of nowhere, the chances of survival are next to none. I've sunk enough ships. I'm not proud of it, but without it, I wouldn't be here. So again, why should I feel sorry for three more idiots who tried to kill me?" she asked him, waving her arms around as she paced back and forth. "Why not? You were horrified just a few days by that Cardinal killing those people," he asked, almost immediately regretting the statement as her face dropped in colour before flashing crimson.

"They were murdered, Jayce! A kid was murdered! It is not the same!" she yelled. "Those thugs died in battle. When you pick up a sword, or an axe, or a spear, and you point it at someone, you accept that someone may die, and that someone may be you. There's a difference," she argued, her face flushed and body tense. Jayce shook his head. "People still died..." he muttered. Wicke just sighed, exasperated by the conversation. "Whatever. I'm not going to lose any sleep over it, and they wouldn't have either. By the coldest depths of hell, they would have celebrated. So, well done on winning today's fights, I'm getting ice cream. I'll see you in the morning!" she told him, walking out of the door and slamming it behind her, leaving Jayce to wallow in his slightly bloody bath.

Wicke enjoyed her chocolate ice cream, settling off to sleep without any difficulty that night. Jayce tossed and turned, waking up and drifting off repeatedly until the early hours, but eventually he found some semblance of peace... at least until Wicke poked him awake. "Morning, the fight is in a few hours. You can stay in bed for a little longer if you need, but I'm going for some food downstairs... if

you want to come along," she offered, already dressed, her hands behind her as she rocked slightly on her feet. Jayce nodded and let out a large yawn as he stood up, his body stiff from the day before and his face a little bit sore. "Ow, ow, ow!" he complained, reaching for the clothes. Wicke pulled a face as she looked him over. "You've got a little mark on your face," she muttered, Jayce wincing as she poked it.

They headed downstairs and Tau was behind the bar as usual. "Good morning you two! Feeling any better, Jayce?" he asked, walking to the end of the bar and heading briefly round the corner before returning with two bowls of steaming porridge. Jayce nodded. "I'm sorry for ignoring you last night." Tau shook his head. "Don't think anything of it. You had a hard day, all is forgiven!" he reassured Jayce, handing over the bowls before reaching into his work apron and pulling out three spoons and a jar of raspberry jam. "Enjoy!" he told them cheerfully, as they took their breakfast and went to sit down.

They ate in silence, the food delicious as always and especially filling, but eventually Jayce broke the silence. "I can't see your side; I won't be able to see your side. It's not who I am to not feel bad for someone who dies, even if they deserved it. However, what you said about the weapons... that anytime someone draws a sword, they should expect that someone may die. I think you were right, and it was something I had been naïve about. I will always try to prevent it from escalating to that point, but I won't hesitate again if it comes to it," he told her. Wicke sat quietly, listening carefully to him as she chewed her food, but after he finished speaking, she nodded, and they put it behind them.

The few remaining hours of the morning came and went, with Jayce stretching and limbering up in preparation for the day. Wicke took to reading a fiction book that Tau had loaned her, a collection of various fables from across the New World. And eventually, with an early lunch consumed - simple sandwiches that were easy to eat and digest - the pair departed once more for the arena. They took the direct route, away from the site of their previous encounter; all along the streets were quite a lot of everyday travellers. A few recognised Jayce, some wealthy enough to afford a camera purchased from the Guild - its purple crystal prominently displayed along the front next to the lens. Jayce accepted the few requests he got for signatures and photos, a little perplexed by the very notion, but otherwise they made their way smoothly to the arena, once again darkening its huge entrance hall. "Once more?" Jayce asked, looking over at Wicke. She nodded. "Until we pry this place out of that bitch of an owner's hands and leave as champions!" she declared.

Seize the Seas Tales: Important Choices

Alara loved the uniform: the armour plates locked together tightly, offering near perfect protection across her torso, all tightly hidden away behind the neat and professional coat; her trousers were snug, perfectly cut, and also safely protected by a visible and easy-to-spot set of armour, and the boots were the best fit she had ever had. It was perfect. It was heroic. And it made her feel happy beyond belief. Senior Instructor Zenobia smiled at her, glad to see such a positive attitude towards her new uniform. The sky knight, its face hidden behind its helmet, remained expressionless as Alara tested out her manoeuvrability.

"Please note," it garbled from within the floating armour. "The mesh weave provides strong anti-penetration properties to your armour, that, paired with the composite plates, should render your body resistant to projectiles; however despite the internal padding, it will still hurt," it told her, as Alara admired her look in the mirror. Zenobia stepped up to a desk by the edge of the room and took hold of the pistol stationed upon it, dismissing the sky knight armourer with a nod. "If you would like a demonstration, I will teach you exactly what to expect," Zenobia offered Alara, who immediately shook her head and put her hands in front of her. Zenobia laughed and put it back down, now appreciative of Alara's full attention. "The armour is weak to slashing attacks, the weave catches bullets, but it can be cut easily, so ensuring your weapon skills are at their highest standard is important. The insulative padding, and the buoyancy aides within your boots and greaves, should protect you from drowning in cold waters as well. This armour is everything, make sure you treat it well. You'll find spare plates in your locker as well as four other sets of trousers, weaves, and jackets. You need to ensure these are cleaned and washed on a two weekly rotation. Understood?"

"Yes Ma'am!" Alara stated. Zenobia nodded and indicated that she should follow. The door opened on a relaxed Wulf leaning against the doorway. He immediately bolted upright. "Stand easy, I have her from here, head back to your barracks," Zenobia ordered. He nodded and quickly headed off through the weapon racks. With the black wolf gone, Zenobia turned to Alara, offering to take one of her bags. Alara shook her head and the Instructor turned and lead on. "Basic Marine training runs over a thirteen-week period, after which you'll be assigned to your ship and complete a further length of on-shift training, as you adjust to life at sea. Wulf, who you have just met, and his squad have just completed their first week. You're a few days behind so you'll have to catch up on everything quickly - fortunately the first week is mostly paperwork and

evaluations, which the Vice Admiral said he'd handle for you. I'll assign a guide for you to run you through things and catch you up."

"May I request Wulf be my guide?" Alara asked, prompting surprise from Zenobia. "You hold no prejudices to his kind?" she asked. Alara shook her head statedly. "Very well, granted. Unfortunately for you, since you're also partaking in officers' training, and for some reason they wish you to be streamlined into it, you'll have a much higher workload. During the day you'll train hard and every few evenings you'll study harder under my tutelage. Fall behind and you'll be dropped from the officers' training for re-evaluation, understood?" Again Alara nodded, standing tall. "I will try my best!" she stated boldly. Zenobia smiled slightly and nodded in acceptance. "Good, that's all I ask of you."

She ran Alara through the specifics of the programme as she led her outside into the training grounds: a large section of Marines were training hard just outside. Rows of Marines stood holding large rifles as they aimed at dummies down the range. "Disarm!" called out their Instructor. The Marines all fired, their shots hitting the range dummies clearly in non-vital areas. They then simultaneously pulled back on the bolt of their rifle releasing the empty shell of their bullet. "Disarm!" came the command again. The group repeated their shots, once more hitting non-vital areas. Finally, another order came as they neared the final bullet in their weapon's ammo cartridge. "Execute!" The twelfth bullet was let loose down the range, passing neatly through each dummies head in an appropriate manner.

"You'll get plenty of practice of your own with the riptides, you can request a carbine if you wish for a smaller rifle. Anyway, here's a lesson for you, Alara. One of the most important that you'll ever hear as an officer," she stated, walking directly up to a large group of Marines practicing against dummies with their swords, a two-handed weapon with a straight blade, roughly a metre in length, known as a dromon. A beautiful blade Alara was more than familiar with, intricately made with a composite coral core to give it a lighter weight in water than in air, with a flat rear edge that could be rested on the user's shoulder for additional reinforcement when blocking. It was a heavy weapon, for deep cuts designed to eliminate foes with a single strike, and stood as the signature weapon, alongside the riptide, of the Marines.

"Marines, fall in! Present blades!" Zenobia called out, their Instructor nodding and stepping backwards to let her take over. The many Marines ran quickly and formed up in a long line, all holding their blades horizontally in front of them

with the handle resting on their left palm. Zenobia looked them over briefly then stepped back to Alara, nodding to their Instructor who took back control. "What is it you see?" asked Senior Instructor Zenobia, indicating that Alara place her bags down. She thought for a little bit, looking over the Marines as they listened to their Instructor. "Unity, reliability, order, discipline," Alara stated, as she ran her eyes across each face and body.

"What else do you see?" Zenobia asked curiously, folding her arms, and looking at Alara. After pondering for a moment, Alara realised what was being asked. "Predictability." A smile crept across Zenobia's face as she nodded in agreement. "Good answer. As an officer, it is your role to lead. To not only command your subordinates, but also to take control in situations where they are unable to perform their duties. This is something our older brothers in the Navy struggle with. As an officer, if your troops find an enemy too skilled, or too capable at exploiting our weaknesses, you must step up," Zenobia told her.

"Understood, Ma'am," Alara stated, nodding in understanding. Zenobia picked up Alara's bags, against her protests, and walked her to a large weapons rack full of a variety of different melee weapons. "Good, now how will you counter this predictability? Will you train harder than anyone else in the Marines? Become the best swordsman in the Empire? Or will you break the mould? Throw a curve at your enemies?" she asked, pointing at a dromon sat in the rack, easily lifting Alara's heavy bag in the process with her hand to do so. Alara looked at it, but her eyes drifted away as she pondered the question. She stepped forwards, grabbing her weapon of choice by its handle and grasping it firmly as she lifted it upwards. Zenobia nodded in approval. "Good choice," she told Alara, as she lifted the blade of her chosen glaive to the sky.

Chapter 13: Judge

They split up once more; with only an hour left till showtime, Jayce headed downstairs, making his way quickly to the training pit. Upon entrance, the other fighters halted what they were doing and looked over in his direction; most nodded a simple greeting to him, Onyx waved wildly from across the room - surrounded by new friends willing to talk and entertain him. The air felt different, and a simple sense of ease passed over Jayce as he stepped inside. As usual, the baned stood clustered together, this time eating a simple lunch that had been provided for them: meat, bread, and - what looked like - milk to drink. Kiro and Lucas waved him over, despite the clear look of annoyance from Bjorn, as he stood watching over the group as they ate.

"Heya Jayce!" called Kiro as he approached. "You did well yesterday, I think you showed a lot of the others that Onyx wasn't as terrifying as he looks! And wherever Red has gone, well, I'm sure he's grateful for your actions!" he told Jayce, offering a slice of meat on a piece of dry-looking bread. Jayce refused it politely and looked over the gang. "I mentioned this before, and I hope my actions have shown you that I meant my words. I want to win this thing, but I need your help... all of you," Jayce announced, looking over each of them and concluding as he gazed towards Bjorn. "I need your help to ensure I reach the top, to ensure I face Vexx, so I can beat him and take this place away from that hag. Are you up for it?" Jayce asked.

Bjorn scoffed and walked away, shaking his head. After walking a few metres, he faltered and looked back at the others. The other baned looked at each other, before looking towards Onyx, as he choreographed fight sequences with the other fighters. They then looked towards Red's old bed, untouched since the day before. They made their choice and looked towards Jayce. "I stand with you!" said one, getting to his feet. "Me too!" called another, walking over to him and resting a heavy hand on Jayce's shoulder. "And me!" said another, leaving just Kiro and Lucas who simply nodded. Bjorn just glared at them and kept walking. "Don't mind him," said Lucas, inviting Jayce to sit down.

"Thank you," Jayce said, accepting the offer and sitting with them on the rather uncomfortable benches they had claimed as their own. "Why does he hate me so much?" Jayce asked, watching Bjorn head to the bedrooms. Lucas shook his head. "He is a stubborn man; a decade in the Navy made it hard for him to trust and well... We don't have much here and significantly less so outside, especially

him," Lucas explained. "He's from far up north, came from the Nomads. Have you heard of them?" he asked, stroking his whiskers. Jayce shook his head.

"They travel the Ice Floes, never settling for long, a strange earthly people. They passed through a town one day and the Navy picked him up as he was an adult and didn't have an employer. He served on several ships acting as a quartermaster's aide and he liked it, I think. Ten years passed and they threw him away, no longer their problem and without anything to call his own, hardly any money, hardly anything. He's been stuck here longer than all of us. So you can understand why he's not willing to throw himself out there and risk what little he has."

Jayce nodded. "I'm heading north soon actually, to the Ice Floes, well, once we've beaten this place for all it's worth," Jayce told them quietly. Immediately, Kiro perked up. "I didn't realise you are going that far north. Would you take him with you? He may be a grumpy bear, but he's a good man and has plenty of experience on the oceans. I'm sure he'd be happy to help you if he knew you were going that way!" he asked Jayce. Jayce shook his head. "Please, we all owe him." "I would if I could, but it is his decision to make. If he wants to come, I'll take him," Jayce told them adamantly. "But don't tell him just yet. I'll ask him when he's ready to talk." The baned nodded in agreement before one of them pointed to the stairs leading upwards. Jayce turned and spotted Vexx leaning in the shadows. "Are you sure you can beat him?" asked Kiro.

"As long as you guys are in my corner, then no doubt about it!" Jayce declared, standing up. "Then we'll get you through the silver tier! Isn't that right boys?" Kiro asked merrily. "Damn straight!" they cheered, as Jayce headed for the stairs. As Jayce got closer, Vexx perked up a little, standing more upright as he leant against the wall with his hands behind him and blowing his blonde hair out of his red eyes. "Hey," he said casually to Jayce, looking him up and down as he approached. "Hi," Jayce returned, leaning against the wall opposite and looking down. He was considerably shorter than Jayce, and his frame looked unhealthily thin, but faint muscles stood out clearly underneath his pale skin. "I'm sorry," Vexx said abruptly. "Sorry for?" Jayce asked, keeping his hands next to him defensively. Vexx slid a hand out from behind him and reached gently for Jayce's face, aiming for the bruise under his eye. Instinctively, Jayce slapped it away.

Vexx rubbed his hand but got the point, putting it back behind him. "I should have stopped her from sending them. It won't happen again. I don't like outside interferences," he said calmly, fidgeting as he stood there. Jayce crossed his arms,

nodding. "It better not... But why do you care? If you don't mind me asking?" "It's been a long time since I've seen the old cow so angry. Why do you so desperately want to win? For your friend? For them?" he asked, pointing at the baned clustered together. "I'm going north and need a ship to take me and my friend there, but if I can do something good, if I can help these guys get better lives for themselves, then how can I just leave without trying?"

Vexx shrugged. "It's the role of the strong to either lead the weak, or to create more strong out of them, normally at the cost of a few of them. Are you sure you'd actually be helping them?" Vexx asked curiously. Jayce shook his head and stood up tall. "I'm not leading them, or making them stronger, I'm trying to let them chose for themselves, to not have a contract dictating their lives. If that means I have to take you down to get there, then I will," Jayce warned boldly. Vexx smiled, listening closely to each word. "Then Jayce, fight hard! I will be waiting," he answered, standing up and looking up at Jayce before walking into the fighting pit. "Oi! Bjorn, you big teddy bear! Where are you?" he yelled, leaving Jayce alone at the foot of the stairs. Jayce smirked and shook his head to himself, only more curious about the strange young man called Vexx, as he went to climb the stairs.

Jayce found Wicke waiting for him on their usual sofa: she got up and walked to him as soon as she saw him. "I was getting worried, you ready?" she asked, getting close. Jayce shook his head and stepped back. "Not today, I'm going this one alone. I think I'm good enough," he stated confidently. Her mouth dropped and she looked at him, irritated. "Don't be stupid! Don't pull an Orzlov Radner," she told him, crossing her arms. "Who?" Jayce asked curiously. "I'm good enough to handle myself, I can't always rely on you," he added, stepping around her. "Orzlov Radner. The fable. I'll admit you're good at fighting, but it won't be your strengths that are the end of you, it'll be your weaknesses. Come on, don't risk it!" she stated, glancing cautiously at the few people around. Jayce shook his head, and she stomped her foot. He put his hands on her shoulders, smiling widely. "I'll be fine, see you afterwards!" Jayce left her and quickly headed down the stairs to the pens.

A handler waved him over by the main entrance gate. "You're up next! Are you ready?" he asked. Jayce nodded and pulled out his swords. "Where's the sap?" Jayce asked, looking around for it. "Oh, you won't need it, and for a fight like this, that's a good thing. Anyway, good luck... you'll need it," he told Jayce, as the gates opened and he ran into the arena, the crowd cheering as he entered. "Ladies and gentlemen, making his third debut in the Bronze tier we have the

Rising Ace! His opponent today is a monster from the deepest and darkest streets of the east! A foul, ravenous fiend that would not hesitate to devour any one of you!" called the announcer, as the gates opened again.

Slowly but surely, a small, round creature wobbled in - its skin pale and sweaty, its thin, and few, strands of long black hair greasy and slick against its bulbous body. It had a hunchback and virtually no neck, completely offset by its small and thin arms and legs. Compared to its boulder-shaped head, its eyes were disproportionately huge, almost bulging out of its skull. It continued forwards, the nails on its hands dirty and long, the clothes on its body ragged and too small, the teeth in its huge mouth misshapen, broken, and sharp. "Welcome ladies and gentlemen, to the final match of the Bronze tier, will the Rising Ace vanquish a cannibal of the east?"

Jayce looked at the creature: he couldn't tell if it was male or female, it hardly looked human at all, but its eyes looked sad, and lost, like a small infant in a new place. "Hey," Jayce called out to it, as it wobbled closer. "Go down when I swing at you, we can both leave without- ". It leaped at him with a gargling roar before he could finish. Hitting into his chest like a cannonball and knocking him down onto his back, the wind rushing out of him as the creature pinned him down. Jayce gasped for air only to scream in pain as it reared up and raked its claws across his chest, drawing blood and tearing his skin. It came back down, biting hard into his collar. Adrenaline and pain rushed through him as Jayce did everything he could to throw the monster off him. He rolled and bucked, flipping it over his head, the foul, rotting stench of the creature flooding his lungs as he breathed in, free from its clutches.

Jayce scrambled to his feet and lifted his swords up, between him and the cannibal. "Please, don't make me do this," Jayce begged, it ignored him and charged at him on all fours, leaping at him, directly onto the tips of his blades. It hung there, desperately reaching towards him as it lay pinned on his swords. Slowly, it went limp, and he lowered it to the floor, pulling the blades free. He felt relieved as the crowd cheered, and pain seared through him from his open wounds. He turned to face the gates as they opened, only for his face to fall in horror as seven more rushed towards him. The cheers of the audience faded from his mind, replaced by his own quickly beating heart, as Jayce frantically searched around for a way out.

The fastest one charged him, and a cold calm came over Jayce, followed by a fiery rage as it leaped through the air towards him. Jayce slashed twice in a crosscut,

the blades passing cleanly through the beast, quartering it, as its blood splashed everywhere. Another leapt towards him, and Jayce dodged to the side, looking down at the pathetic creature prone in front of him. He lifted both swords up as it began to push its body off the ground, before slamming both swords through the back of its thick neck like a guillotine. A third charged him and Jayce swung at it with his right sword, embedding the blade deep between its eyebrows.

It squealed and gargled its roar, as it reached at his hand, still alive, trying to pull the blade free. Jayce let go in horror, watching it struggle to pull its new horn out of its face. A fourth stuck at him from the side raking its claws up Jayce's left arm and across his neck, Jayce pressed his boot against its face kicking it away desperately. The wounds burnt as his warm blood began to cover him, his vision turning red and blurry as he dropped his remaining sword. Jayce blinked quickly, sidestepping another lunging cannibal. In a moment of clarity, he reached for the sword stuck in the nearby panicked creature. He grasped the hilt with his right hand and the guard with his left, trying to pull it out. It didn't budge, so with all his might, he twisted instead, the boulder of a head cracking open with a horrific sound. It dropped down dead, and Jayce backed up away from the remaining four, exhaustion causing him to hobble slowly, trying to keep them at bay. One picked up his sword with both of its small, shrivelled hands and the other three approached him in a wide arc.

Jayce looked around frantically, barely spotting the tiny fingers poking through the mesh wire of a bunker, the skin covered in dark tattoos. With every bit of remaining energy, Jayce rushed for it – one of the cannibals moving to intercept. With both hands on his sword, Jayce struck downwards with all his might, cleaving the beast in two. The crowd was cheering for him, and as he got closer, he spotted something small drop from the stands, thrown by a cloaked patron. A red liquid sloshed around inside the small corked flask as it landed in the sands next to Wicke's bunker. Something he had only seen once before, when Damian had badly injured his leg whilst climbing: a healing potion.

Jayce backed up to the wall, pinned against it by the three encroaching creatures. "I told you!" yelled a voice, as he felt something tap his leg. They ran at him, but now they were moving much slower. Jayce grabbed the bottle with his left hand pulling out the cork and pouring it over himself, his wounds sealing instantly as new flesh filled the tears in his skin with rough and fresh scars. His own sword came at him, thrust by the nearest cannibal. Jayce easily stepped to the side slashing downwards across its thin wrists, its hands letting go as they fell from its body. Jayce grabbed his sword before it hit the ground, twisting and slashing

with two horizontal strikes - it parted into three slabs of meat as he turned to face the other two rushing at him together. He crossed his arms, both blades touching behind his head before he sliced in a wide sweep through both of them. They wriggled behind him, missing the lower halves of their bodies, but he ignored them, not that he was able to hear them or see anything in his peripheral vision.

It was over: guards and handlers rushing in too-late to help, but early enough to be seen. Jayce walked past them, unable to put his blades away and too exhausted and pained to stop moving. He ignored the crowd, the announcer trying to regain control through the chaos, and he ignored the other fighters. He just walked, emerging before long through the fighters' entrance into the back alleys of the Imperial Capital. He was covered in hot, sticky blood, and it was impossible to tell if it was his own or theirs. He passed no one, saw no one, and he didn't even notice when his blades fell out of his slippery grip. Eventually, he stopped, but only as the contents of his stomach forced its way out of him. Too weak to continue walking, he leant against the wall and slid down, holding his head between his knees.

Three sets of footsteps forced Jayce to tilt his head back, his vision still blurry and slightly red-coloured. A very large man looked down at him, short white hair peeking out from beneath a red skullcap. His skin was pinkish, and his cheeks flushed as he looked down at Jayce. His robes were red, with slight gold and black trimmings patterned throughout. A Cardinal, although Jayce couldn't recognise it. To his sides were two more men, both dressed in golden, cream coloured robes with large mitre hats on their heads. They were both significantly skinnier, but still relatively old. One had dark skin with dark facial hair on his chin, the other was fair-skinned without any hair at all.

The three of them looked down at him and the two Archbishops looked at the Cardinal. "What do we do?" asked the dark-skinned one to the left, using a cane to prod Jayce. "Is he alive?" asked the other archbishop, bending over Jayce. The Cardinal reached inside his cloak, pulling out a rather small, white, leather-bound book. "It matters not if he's dead or alive, I do not wish this sight to remain staining my city. We shall give our blessings and send him onwards to the Lords. Whatever life he is living, he won't be missed," the Cardinal stated, with a very posh accent. The other two nodded and stepped away, also pulling out their own books, these ones slightly smaller in width than the Cardinal's, but otherwise identical. "May you find peace with whatever sins you held within this life, and may the Gods above take you into their care and grant you their eternal

blessings," the Cardinal preached, reaching into his robe, and sprinkling a clear vial over Jayce. "May the Gods bless you!" the two Archbishops added.

With nothing else to say, the Cardinal raised a palm to Jayce, glowing rings appearing on his book as he began to cast. Jayce looked at them weakly, unable to move, unable to speak, and completely at their mercy. The Cardinal began to chant in words Jayce had heard before, over at the Isle of Sanctity. "Jayce!" yelled a female voice, startling the three. A small fizzle could be heard from the glowing book and the light disappeared. The Cardinal put the book back inside his robe and looked over down the street. "Ah, child, is this young man with you? We were attempting to heal him. Do you know what happened?" he asked, looking over at her, Wicke's face hidden almost entirely by her tilted hat. "He was injured in a fight, we have him, thank you!" she answered quickly. A large figure towered over her and the three quickly backed up as Bjorn stared them down.

"Young lady! You should be wary of the company you keep! It is unbefitting," one of the Archbishops spoke up. "I think I'm fine. Thank you for your concern. Good day!" The trio looked at each other and turned around, departing quickly and turning down an alleyway just up the road. "Jayce!" Wicke called, running up to him and looking him over. "Jayce, can you hear me?" she asked with panic. He shut his eyes and tried to open them again, but couldn't. Wicke stepped aside and Bjorn slotted Jayce's swords back into their scabbard before he checked Jayce over. "That potion he was given likely saved him, a lucky break - those aren't cheap. They heal immediately in exchange for nasty looking scars, but he should be fine. Let's get him back to your place!" Bjorn suggested, scooping Jayce up like a child and rolling him onto his shoulder.

Wicke led Bjorn forwards, but as they passed the alleyway that the Priests had gone down, they paused. The three were stood there, a smaller figure on the other side of them. "Come on!" Bjorn said with urgency, grabbing Wicke's arm and walking forwards quickly. She took the lead, curious by his urgency, but otherwise more occupied with Jayce. "I warned him, I told him! How could he be so... so fucking stupid!" she complained, as they walked together. Bjorn shook his head. "He would have been fine, the bite and scratch would have needed treating, but otherwise he killed the first one. The lies the announcer told were too obvious. It was a set-up, not an accident. The arena is built to ensure break-outs can be easily halted, it was no mistake - it was an assassination. We should be careful," Bjorn stated. They remained vigilant all the way back to The Beast's Pen, giving a terrifying shock to Tau and the other patrons as they walked in. Tau handed over the key and they took Jayce upstairs to his room.

Jayce woke up the following morning, birds calling loudly through his window and a heavy weight on his legs. His body was in agony, screaming at him as he moved, but otherwise, he felt only hungry. He sat up, careful not to wake the sleeping Wicke, leaning across his knees near the end of his bed. "Good morning," Bjorn said, leaning against the door, clearly exhausted. "Morning! What happened?" Jayce asked, looking at the bear, faint traces of red on the fur of his shoulder. "Well, after the fight, you collapsed in an alleyway and this one came and got me. She stayed up till about an hour ago, keeping an eye on you. How are you feeling?" he asked.

Jayce nodded, taking the glass of water Bjorn offered him. "Sore, but alive," he said, stretching and sliding his legs softly out from beneath Wicke. "Good, your next fight is at two, so rest up. It's not over yet!" he told Jayce, opening the door and going leave. "Bjorn!" Jayce called after him, causing the baned to stop. "Thank you! I really appreciate it," Jayce told him, getting to his feet. Bjorn nodded and looked over at Wicke. "I didn't do it for you, but for what it's worth this makes us even... For Red and for Onyx."

The polar bear departed, leaving Jayce in his room to look over the fresh scars along his chest, left arm, and neck, a fair price for his foolishness, he admitted to himself. With little else to do, he gently stirred Wicke, the young girl bursting into angry tears immediately as she insulted him in all manner of ways. "You... You stupid, arrogant moron!" she concluded, banging her fists into his chest. "You're not fighting again without me! I forbid it," she ordered, stepping back and wiping her eyes. He nodded, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again, I promise," he told her gently. She sighed and crossed her arms. "You better mean it! Stay here!" she added angrily, storming off out of the room.

Jayce reached for his clothes and then remembered how bloody they had been, but to his surprise he found them clean and neatly folded by the end of his bed, albeit slightly more holey than the day before. Jayce slipped on his trousers, socks and shoes and opted for a less damaged shirt from his bag. Wicke returned shortly, carrying a bowl of meat and vegetable soup, Tau carrying another two bowls with him, as well as cutlery and bread. "Hey there, how you feeling?" he asked Jayce, setting down the food on the small table in the room. "Been better, but okay. Thanks," Jayce said, digging into the food quickly. Tau shook his head. "Don't mention it - gave us a real shock when you got back yesterday. Hopefully the sleep fixed you up good, eat well. You're no doubt starving!" Tau told him. Jayce had already progressed onto his second bowl. "Call me if you want any more," Tau laughed, stepping out of the room and shutting the door behind him.

"How did you clean my clothes?" Jayce eventually asked. Wicke smirked and waved her hands. "Magic!" she said mockingly. "But genuinely, yeah, magic. I can make them dirty if you want?" she offered, rolling up her sleeves and pointing at the torn shirt on Jayce's bed. "No, no, no! Can you teach me it?" he asked. Wicke shrugged. "If I learn how to open your Spirit Font, sure. I'll try to figure it out when we get on the seas. But anyway, congratulations, you killed many monsters yesterday! How do you feel?" she asked curiously, as she slurped her soup.

Jayce faltered and thought for a moment. "I feel fine. I think," he answered honestly, surprised by his own admission as flashes of the previous battle flickered through his mind. Wicke raised an eyebrow and then shrugged. "Well regardless, can you now admit I was right?" Jayce sighed. "I nearly died yesterday, Wicke. Can't you give me a little break? Come on." "Doesn't matter - come on, you know you want to!" she grinned, before sticking her tongue out at him. "You were right, Wicke," Jayce sighed, rolling his eyes. "And don't you forget it!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Vexx's Vengeance

Vexx didn't quite know what to think. He was impressed, mortified, and disgusted by the display occurring before him. It had been a scummy choice, and one he again had no control over, but somehow, Jayce had come out on top. A strange sense of relief built up inside him and, as Jayce stumbled out of the arena, Vexx felt his body move on its own. He ran quickly down the stairs, heading to the pens and into the corridors of the arena's underbelly. Jayce had already got outside and Vexx burst out of the doors after him. Blood trails stretched far behind Jayce so he was easy to track, but Vexx couldn't help but feel out of place, following behind him.

He looked up at the buildings lining the street, most had gutters or ledges, so without hesitation he leapt upwards, vaulting from foothold to foothold until he clambered onto the roofs. The winds ripped past him as he ran silently after Jayce, eventually spotting his blades abandoned in the street. Vexx stopped, looked down at them, but decided against it as he spotted a familiar baned and a small girl with a big hat running down the street. He continued onwards eventually spotting three robed figures hunched over a very bloody body. It was Jayce, without a doubt.

Vexx looked down at the four of them, watching curiously as the three men spoke to each other. Eventually they stepped back and Vexx spotted the Cardinal

preparing a spell. Vexx put his toes across the edge of the roof ready to drop, when the small girl beat him to it. She deescalated the situation and the trio wandered away leaving the girl and Bjorn to look after Jayce. Another strange sense of relief came through Vexx, and he stepped back, once more rushing silently across the roofs. He spotted an alleyway up ahead and leapt neatly down from the roof into it, dropping silently onto the street in front of the three Priests. "Holy shit!" proclaimed the Cardinal as he jolted backwards.

"What do you think you're doing, running and jumping from roofs like a maniac!" called out the fair-skinned Archbishop. Vexx ignored them, spotting Bjorn carrying Jayce, with the small girl beside him, the trio quickly passing by the end of the street. Vexx looked around: there was no-one in sight. He pointed a finger to himself, looking confused. "Yes, you!" wheezed the Archbishop. The Cardinal gasped, pointing shakily at Vexx. "That's impossible!" he stammered, backing up and quickly pulling out his book. The book began to glow, but instantly, within the blink of an eye, Vexx appeared in front of him, his right fist pulled back and ready to strike.

Vexx struck mercilessly, his fist colliding straight with the Cardinal's upper lip. Without resistance, his fist carried forwards through the Cardinal in a smooth and dull thud. His skull shattered and everything that was once his head liquified, splattering all down the alleyway as if someone had thrown a bucket of paint. His body dropped and the two Archbishops leapt backwards in terror. The fair-skinned one reached quickly into his robe but, before he could even begin the incantation, Vexx had already eviscerated his head with an uppercut through his jaw, the insides of his head splattering up the wall of the alley and his body dropping to the floor. He turned on the third, the Archbishop's hands up and his back against the wall. "Please don't kill me, I beg of you! I can give you money, power, anything! Please! Plea- ". Vexx obliterated the head, splattering his remains against the wall like an egg thrown at a window.

Vexx let out a sigh, his hands stained with blood and dripping from the faint remains of their heads. "Well, that's enough public service for today!" he told himself, leaping rapidly from wall to wall, back onto the roof, before running off after Wicke, Bjorn, and Jayce.

Chapter 14: Jury

Jayce took the extra time to rest, slowly limbering up and numbing out the pain that sparked across his body whilst Wicke caught up on sleep. However, once more, the time ran away from them, and they headed back to the arena. More and more people stopped them along the way, all new fans of the Rising Ace. They praised for him for his bouts, asked if he was okay after the previous incident, and requested autographs in a variety of forms. "Sorry, sorry. I've got some business to attend to at the arena, so I've got to get a move on!" Jayce told the small crowd forming around them. "Thank you for your support, I hope today has some good, entertaining fights for you all!" Jayce added, slipping between two young women with Wicke hot on his heels as they ran away.

Now fully aware of the real benefits of the side entrance, they made their way back through the maze of back alleys, but it wasn't long before Wicke buried herself tightly into Jayce's back. There were members of the Navy, Paladins, and Priests, everywhere. They looked at Jayce curiously as he passed, but otherwise ignored the pair as they stood guard. As they passed the street where Wicke had seen the Cardinal and his lackeys the day before, they found it completely cordoned off, a wall of Paladins blocking the entrance as they passed and sheets covering the alley behind them from prying eyes. "Move along!" warned one of the Paladins, a large greatsword positioned in front of him. They didn't need to be told twice and hurried away. "What do you think happened?" Jayce asked as the door to the arena came into view. "I don't know, but something bad, clearly. Keep on your toes today!"

They entered through the side entrance quickly - time running low, thanks to all their distractions - both heading up the stairs, only for Wicke to falter and turn around. "I'll go place the bets! Meet back by Ming in five!" Wicke told him, dashing off quickly and leave Jayce to continue onwards alone. "Ah Jayce, my Rising Ace, there you are! Thank goodness you're alright, I could barely sleep with concern!" Ming told him, as Jayce approached. "I'm guessing you wish to know about today's fight?" he asked, today wearing an interesting blend of purple and green, decorated with a floral pattern. Jayce nodded, warming up as he listened. "Right, well, the Silver tier is against the local baned of the arena. One-on-one until one party is incapacitated. Numbing sap is a requirement, the baned are expensive and bring in large viewings, otherwise nothing out of the usual," Ming told him, beckoning Jayce closer at the end. "They have agreed to help, but apparently Bjorn is still refusing - so I've heard."

"Thanks Ming! One last thing, I have a request: send in the next fighter immediately if I win. I'm hoping to clear the Silver tier today," Jayce asked him. Ming pouted, but then nodded. "Make sure you don't eat those words," he warned. "Please, I'll be fine!" Jayce said with a smile, backing away and waiting for Wicke. She tapped him and wished him luck and once more Jayce descended down into the pits. To his surprise he found that he wasn't alone in the entrance area, the baned, excluding Bjorn, were waiting for him.

"Hey Jayce!" greeted Kiro as he approached, the others offering slightly more muted greetings. "Hey Kiro, why are you all here?" Jayce asked, coating his blades as he got ready. "Well, firstly, we weren't sure if you'd make it. Secondly," he said, all of them glaring at the heavily sweating handler by the gate. "We wanted to ensure no 'accidents' occurred today! Are you ready? I'm your first opponent," said Kiro, the large goat rolling his shoulders and stretching. "You? Yeah, I'm ready!" Jayce said confidently, looking at the handler who then opened the gate.

The pair walked in side by side, Kiro wielding a ridiculously large battle-axe, slick with sap, but still looking deadly, even with it on. "That's going to take me out if you hit me!" Jayce warned, looking nervously at giant weapon as they walked together into the arena. "Well don't get hit by it. Despite the less dangerous situation, these fights are normally harder. It's a scam, most baned have fur that renders us resistant to the sap. Don't worry, I shaved the back of my knees and the insides of my elbows. Get me in both and I'll surrender, the same with Adonis who's next. Bjorn, you'll have to figure something out," Kiro advised.

"Wait, I'm fighting Bjorn?" Jayce asked, but Kiro had already split off to take his starting position. Kiro simply winked at him, and Jayce decided to worry about it later. "Welcome back ladies and gentlemen, today our Rising Ace returns after a grisly battle for survival just yesterday! Give it up for him folks, for his impressive display against all odds!" yelled the announcer. The crowd cheered and applauded, Jayce giving a slight bow to them for their amusement. "Today, he takes his first step into the Silver tier! Today, he faces our local boys! He has faced the untrained, he has faced the unruly, but how will he fare against the trained and the unruly? Well, let's see... Fight!"

Kiro wasted no time and ran straight at Jayce, his feet kicking up sand strongly as he moved terrifyingly quickly. Even with Wicke's boost, it felt like a challenge to dodge the massive swings from Kiro. It came from the left, he then almost

immediately switched his grip and swung back from the right before he swung downwards in a similar routine to what Jayce had seen before. As the axe landed in the sand Kiro's remained there, stationary, and exposed, allowing Jayce to leap around to the back and hit his exposed skin on his left leg. Kiro twisted his body, swinging the weapon back at Jayce, who had already retreated.

With his leg disabled, Kiro hobbled towards Jayce, the crowd cheering both sides on, but with his movement hindered Kiro was forced to leap at Jayce, once more bringing his weapon down in an overhead strike. Jayce side-stepped, slicing both blades across Kiro's arms until he found the tiny patch of exposed skin, a large green smear coating his forearms. Immediately, the battle-axe dropped from his grip and Kiro fell to his knees. "I yield! I cannot continue!" he yelled to the crowd; his hands visibly limp. Loud cheers immediately followed afterwards as the audience yelled out: "Rising Ace! Rising Ace!". Jayce nodded and stepped away, as two of the other baned ran in and helped Kiro out of the arena.

"Well ladies and gentlemen, it's not over yet! It appears our young fighter has put in a special request: he is attempting the entire Silver tier today! We'll have a brief break to set-up, so place your bets!" Jayce left the arena and recoated his blades to ensure no accidents. A large baned badger approached him who Jayce assumed was Adonis. He nodded to Jayce and quickly brushed up the fur near his elbow to reveal a brief gap exposing his skin. "Thanks," Jayce told him as the gates opened. Adonis nodded, as he tightly gripped a large sword and a shield. "Make it count, we're trusting you!" he told Jayce, as they ran in together. They took their positions and the announcer got to work. "Fight!"

Rather than charging Jayce, Adonis lifted his shield before him, forcing Jayce to start the attack. Jayce ran towards him, and Adonis bent his knees, lifting his large cleaver-like blade into the air. He brought it down and lunged forwards as Jayce neared, deliberately too early and allowing Jayce to easily vault over his shoulder. The large baned stood up straight, as Jayce landed behind him, exposing the back of his knees for Jayce to quickly slash at twice. Adonis fell to the ground, his legs no longer responding. He could still continue, so he turned on his knees to face Jayce.

Jayce rushed forwards once more, this time running alongside Adonis's right side, where his shield was. He couldn't turn quick enough and desperately swung at Jayce, only to fall over forwards, dropping his sword out of reach in a clumsy display. The crowd laughed and cheered, and Jayce seized the chance, paralysing both of his arms with a pair of slashes. "I yield!" yelled Adonis, rolling

over to keep the sand out of his face and feigning, or possibly not, extreme frustration as he swore loudly, wriggling like an upside-down tortoise. "Incredible!" screamed the announcer. "He's done it! Bring on the next fighter, can he possibly clear all three rounds?"

Kiro, now free from the disabling effects, came back into the arena with another baned and helped Adonis to leave - Jayce following them out. Bjorn stood waiting for him with his arms crossed. "I don't suppose you're going to make this easy on me?" Jayce asked, as he recoated his blades again. Bjorn scoffed. "No way. I may not have much, but this is better than nothing and I'm sorry Jayce, I'm not risking it for you," he warned, standing up to his full height, an easy seven-and-a-half foot, and looking down at the tiny Jayce. "I don't suppose they've told you where Wicke and I are heading next, have they?" Jayce asked. Bjorn rolled his arms and picked up the weapons lying at his feet: a large axe and cleaver-like sword, both tinged green.

"Let me guess, you'll spend your money to go somewhere fancy. Something luxurious, The Rose? Or somewhere warm, The Palmed Oasis? Go on, tell me," he said, towering over Jayce. Jayce met his gaze, a smug smile beaming on his face. "No, we're going north. To the Ice Floes. Do you want to come with us?" Jayce asked, the angry look fading instantly from Bjorn's face. His small round ears flapped a little and he stepped back, almost stumbling as he leant against the wall. "Who told you?" he asked, sounding defeated. Jayce turned away and faced the arena. "Lucas."

"That old fool..." Bjorn said softly, before shaking his head and readying himself. "Make me believe in you, give me a reason to believe you can do it," Bjorn told Jayce, standing next to him, and looking towards the arena as the gates opened. "I will beat you Bjorn, and then I will beat Vexx. I promise. We will sail north together, even if I have to drag you there myself!" Jayce declared, stepping quickly into the arena with Bjorn following after him. "Of all the baned in our menagerie, none are as fearsome as our White Bear! None as skilled, none as ferocious. He is the cream of the crop, the beast of our arena, and today he is the last obstacle in the Rising Ace's journey to the Gold tier, a task yet unachieved by all other challengers! Can he do it? Or will Bjorn tell him: 'no'? Fight!"

Neither of them moved, both standing ready for the other, Jayce with both of his swords facing outwards to his sides and Bjorn with his sword and axe facing inwards in front of him. The cheers from the crowd quietened and both of them stared each other down. Finally, Bjorn roared, an ear-shattering yell that rumbled

the stadium, before he charged at Jayce, the sheer volume stunning Jayce temporarily. Bjorn swung down hard with his sword aiming directly for Jayce's left shoulder. Jayce crossed his blades bracing himself as he caught the blow. The power of swing caused Jayce to buckle under the weight and his still-pained body screamed out for him as he fell; Bjorn was already swinging at him with his axe to catch him before he hit the floor.

Jayce dropped his defense on the pressing sword, punching Bjorn's wrist quickly with his guard, in an attempt to knock the giant baned's hand into the path of his other attack. Bjorn's arms crossed, slowing his strike just enough for Jayce to dive through Bjorn's legs, slashing as he passed. "It'll take more than that!" Jayce yelled, scrambling to his feet. Bjorn turned around, looking down at the sap on his calves. "I hope that wasn't it, surely you've realised the handicap you have?" Bjorn warned, through the restarted cheers of the crowd, stabbing his sword into the sand, and using the back of his hand to wipe the sap off into the sand. Jayce looked at him, glancing at Bjorn's hands and spotting the paw pads on the underside.

Bjorn spotted his gaze and quickly grabbed his sword, rushing forwards once again. He threw another overhead blow, this time with his axe, only to feint and jab at Jayce with his sword instead, the blade passing narrowly next to his neck. Jayce got in close, surprising Bjorn and causing him to peddle backwards. Jayce slashed him across the arm with his right sword, once more leaving a green stain, he then leapt up and went to smack Bjorn's nose with the flat edge of his sword. The baned retaliated, dropping his sword and pushing Jayce, hard in his stomach with his open hand to force him away.

Jayce tensed as a breath of air flew out of him, but as he was pushed backwards, he swung, using the extra speed from Wicke's magic to land a clean blow against Bjorn's open palm. Jayce landed on his feet, the ground sweeping out from underneath him as he stumbled away, trying to keep his footing. "Nice try Jayce!" Bjorn told him, going to pick up his sword only for it to slip out of his hand as he was unable to grip it. Jayce smiled smugly. "Thank you very much. One more to go!"

Bjorn roared in frustration, leaping at Jayce and swinging wildly and quickly. They came quicker and quicker, each one stronger than the last as Bjorn pushed Jayce backwards. The wall came quickly and as Jayce went to block another overhead strike, Bjorn caught him cleanly in his side with his leg, in a monstrous kick. Jayce flew off his feet, hitting the wall hard and painfully. He could taste

blood and his vision blurred as he landed on his feet, barely able to duck the powerful swing from Bjorn's axe. The weapon cracked the stone above him, getting caught in the process and briefly exposing Bjorn's palm. Jayce snatched at the chance, scooping sand up with the tip of his right sword and flinging it Bjorn's face. He yelled as sand got in his eye, causing him to rear backwards and release his axe, exactly as Jayce had hoped. As Bjorn raised his palm, Jayce struck slicing neatly across it and leaving a green smear, before running past Bjorn's back towards the centre. It was over. Bjorn keeled backwards and rubbed his eyes, blinking wildly as he looked at Jayce, unable to close either hand. "Well," wheezed Jayce, "looks like I win!" he yelled.

Bjorn thought otherwise and he raised both hands before charging at Jayce like a bull. "Wait, no I-", Jayce protested, just before Bjorn threw him across the arena like a ball, both swords flying out of Jayce's hands as he tumbled across the soft sands. The crowd cheered at the spectacle and Jayce spat out sand as he got to his feet, raising his fists defensively as Bjorn charged him again. "Oh, come on!" Jayce protested, desperately diving to the side as Bjorn ran at him, head down. As Bjorn neared the wall, he pushed off it in an attempt to maintain his speed, once again charging at Jayce.

Jayce leapt to the side again, and again, and again, each time hoping Bjorn would run out of steam as he tried to get to his swords. The stubborn bear refused to quit, each time pushing Jayce closer and closer to the edge of the wall, until finally he sprung his trap. As Jayce looked where to leap, he realised he only had one direction he could, directly into the path of the approaching baned - Bjorn stretched out his arm, catching Jayce in the nook of his arm and carrying him towards the wall. Jayce was stuck, the wall getting closer and closer, as well as the impending painful smack he'd get against it.

He pushed hard against the momentum carrying him, barely slipping out from Bjorn's arm, but as he fell, Jayce swung himself onto Bjorn's back clambering up quickly and putting his hands over the bear's eyes as the wall got closer and closer. Bjorn couldn't stop, and he couldn't see, and just before they collided, Jayce planted his boots on the back of Bjorn's head, pushing off into the sands as the bear ran headfirst into the wall with a loud smack. He bounced off, stumbling around dazed until his head lifted up and he stood up straight before toppling over backwards onto Jayce.

Jayce struggled to breathe, fur on one side and sand on the other, but he managed to crawl his way out and, after picking up his swords, he returned to the dazed

baned on his back. Jayce looked down at him and stepped over his head, crossing his swords either side of Bjorn's neck. "Well?" Jayce asked him, exhausted. Bjorn spat out a little bit of blood and blinked to regain his focus as he looked up at Jayce. "You got me. You win... I don't suppose you have any use for a quartermaster?" he asked, over the cheers of the crowd. Jayce smiled and stepped off of him, putting his swords away and offering a hand to Bjorn. Bjorn took it, pulling Jayce down to the floor and standing up, before pulling Jayce to his feet. "I need a ship first, but before that, I need to beat Vexx!" Bjorn grabbed Jayce by his waist and hoisted him into the air in victory. "Then I will count down the days until we sail!"

They departed the arena, both stumbling slowly out of it, thanks to each other's inflicted injuries. Wicke was waiting for them with her arms crossed. "Who's there?" Bjorn asked, and it was only then that Jayce noticed the polar bear's eyes were unfocused. Jayce opened his mouth to answer only to wheeze and cough a trickle of blood. "You two look like shit! Did you have to hurt each other that badly?" Wicke scolded, folding her arms and dropping her spell. "Ah, yes... probably not," Bjorn said, rubbing his eyes and trying to focus on the real Wicke, among the four he saw. "I know someone who can help, not too far away from here. Wicke, I don't suppose you can help guide us out of here?" Bjorn asked, with the gentlest and most charming of smiles.

With much grumbling and aching the trio left the arena through the side entrance, travelling once more through the back alleys of the Imperial Heart. The many members of the Church and Navy sailors had long disappeared, except from a few Paladins wandering around. They looked at the trio curiously as they passed. "Are you alright?" one asked kindly, but Wicke waved them away, following Bjorn's directions and escorting the wounded idiots to their destination.

"Here we go!" Bjorn stated, vaguely recognising the outside of a rather dilapidated building near the edge of the city. "This is the place?" Wicke asked, pulling a face. "What a dump!" Jayce wheezed, groaning loudly as Bjorn smacked the back of his head. "Not everyone is as lucky as you, remember that... Captain," he said, stumbling up to the large central doors of the disintegrating church. He knocked loudly and then stepped through. "Hello! Sister Meredea, are you here?" Bjorn called out. Wicke and Jayce looked at each other and then followed him in, Wicke holding the door open for Jayce.

From the outside, the building was quite simply a ruined old church: the walls were crumbling, the doors splintering and chipping paint, and it didn't even have a roof. The inside, however, was a rather quaint cottage covered in moss, grass, and other plant life, built inside the old nave. A young woman stood dressed in black and white, a Sister. Immediately, Wicke leapt behind Jayce. "Oh, Bjorn, hello," she said, approaching the trio. "And others. Hello to you too!" she added, bowing her head to them. She couldn't have been much older than Jayce, he figured. She had soft, fair skin, with her hair hidden in her clothes, bright blue eyes, and a scar running from her lip to her chin. "Hello," Jayce said cautiously.

She sensed some tension so stepped back, inviting them closer into the ruined church. "Sister, I apologise for disturbing you, but we could use some more of your healing," Bjorn told her, holding his hands before him and vaguely reaching out in her direction. "Ah, you should come and visit sometime when you aren't injured. Come and sit, I'll get to work," she told them, gesturing to the pews located around. "The Sister helps a lot of us out with our more serious injuries. She's a Cleric and a master at it!" Bjorn boasted, as he sat down. Meredea turned a bright shade of red and waved the compliments off with her gloved hands. "Wait here, I'll get some components."

"Components?" Wicke asked curiously, as she bobbed her head around behind Jayce as he sat down. The Sister entered the house and then came back out carrying two thumb-sized diamonds. "The magic blessed upon me, and by that, I mean healing magic, comes with a cost. Material components are required to replace the lost blood, minerals, and nutrients caused by the wounds. Diamonds have a lot of resources available to use and alter, other gemstones work too. I apologise, I may have lost you there. It's not an everyday science," she added, as she snapped out of her own thoughts. Wicke shook her head. "I understand, thank you for the lesson!" Once more, Meredea blushed and she got to work, standing in front of Bjorn with one of the gems between both hands. She began to chant, and three glowing white rings formed around her wrists, before she blew on the diamond, the entire item disintegrating into sparkling dust across Bjorn's head.

His eyes focused and the blood on him disappeared, his hidden wounds sealing. She then repeated the action on Jayce and almost immediately his breathing eased and the dark bruising on his chest faded. "There we go, do tell me if anything else is wrong," she requested. Both Bjorn and Jayce stood up and looked at each before turning back to her and thanking her voraciously. "It is no problem, I only ask that, if you can, you put a little towards repairing this old

building for the orphans we care for," she told Jayce, who only then spotted the small cluster of kids watching them through the cottage windows. Jayce turned to Wicke and asked for their money bag; reluctantly Wicke handed over the large rattling bag allowing for Jayce to fish around inside it.

"Here, you were very helpful. I hope this goes a long way," Jayce told her, presenting a small gold coin. Her mouth hung open a little and her fingers hovered over the highly valuable coin. "Thank you, this is far too generous! It will go towards the new roof, as well as the insulation for this winter, may I ask your names?" she requested, taking his hands gently and looking at him intently. "Jayce. This is..." he said turning to Wicke, faltering as he thought on what to say. "Wicke," she said thoughtlessly, only realising what Jayce had done after she had ruined the chance. "Wonderful to meet you both!" said the Sister, not expressing any sense of recognition.

Wicke breathed a sigh of relief, only to jump as the doors opened behind them with a creak. "Hello?" asked a voice, rattling slightly beneath a metal helmet. A Paladin stepped through, taking a brief look at the four clustered before her. "Oh, Sister, I didn't realise you had company – hey, wait a minute, I recognise you!" she said from beneath her helmet, lifting her hands up to take it off. Wicke assumed a defensive stance and Jayce quickly stepped in front of her. The Paladin took off the hood beneath her helmet releasing a crown of golden blonde hair, tucked neatly into a braided bun. She looked at the trio, her golden-yellow eyes sparkling with curiosity and her right eyebrow raised quizzically. "The tourists, right?" she asked, pointing at Jayce and Wicke.

"Oh..." they both said, simultaneously recognising the Paladin who previously gave them directions. "You know these two, Arthuria?" asked Sister Meredea curiously, as she stepped back to open up the group. "We met briefly," Jayce interceded. "Anyway, we must be going. Thank you very much, Sister!" Jayce added, nodding to her, and heading past Arthuria towards the door with Wicke on his heels. "Be seeing you!" Arthuria told them. Jayce again nodded curtly, but otherwise stepped out quickly. Bjorn looked at the Paladin, she smiled at him without a single essence of animosity. "Be seeing you! Thank you, Sister," he told them, following after the pair and closing the door behind them.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Mother's Touch

A few days had come and gone within the Capital, and the novelty had long worn off for Damian. It had been business meeting after business meeting, none of which he actually got to see; instead, he had become very familiar with the

cobblestone roads around him. Corina stepped out from a rather high-end establishment, vague music could be heard from within, and the entrance was decorated with translucent purple cloth with signs written in gold. "Well?" Damian asked, his arms crossed and a dull look on his face. "Not the next one either, these people wouldn't take kindly to your presence," Corina stated unsympathetically, walking forwards with Ottar behind her. "Oh come on! Please, I'm getting so fed up here. Jayce and Wicke are having a grand adventure, Alara's in the Marines by now and I'm looking at mice and birds and roads," he whined.

Corina sighed, fed up herself, but it came to her. A brilliant idea she should have thought of sooner. "Right, I've got an idea! Follow me and I'll show you something interesting," Corina told him, heading back to their yacht. Within the hour, Damian found himself stood in the entrance to the Navy headquarters. Corina's personal guest pass took them straight through the many doors of the headquarters, allowing Damian to stare at everything he could that looked interesting. "Come on Damian! Don't dilly dally!" she told him, once again nearly leaving him behind. They came to a large spiral ramp leading upwards and she took him all the way up to the second last floor.

Corina held her hand up to the door and it opened for her, creating an entrance out of nothing to the delight and surprise of Damian. They found themselves in a long corridor, four large doors placed in alternating positions on either side, each one coloured either: red, blue, green, or yellow. The faint sound of typewriting and the scratching of pen on paper could be heard all the way down the corridor from beyond the doors. Corina strolled up confidently to the red door on the left side, not too far away from the yellow door on the same side, and beckoned Damian over. A sign was on the door stating the room occupant: Admiral Cassandra Exarga. Damian's eyes widened and Corina smiled at him. "Have fun, I'll pick you up later!" she said whimsically, before disappearing through the wall, the entrance closing behind her.

Damian gulped as he hovered his knuckles over the door to knock, only for a loud crack to send him sprawling backwards as the blade of an axe pierced through the red wood. The door opened and young man in his mid-twenties came running out of the door, sweating profusely, his eyes wide with fear, and a giant pile of papers in his hands. The door stayed open behind him as he fled, so Damian stepped inside. "You could have at least closed the damned door behind you!" yelled a red-headed woman with long flowing hair.

A huge pile of folders sat on her desk, and she had her head down flat on her massive desk. An elegant and smart red uniform adorned her body, a red version of the typical Marine uniform Damian had seen around the base. Her boots lay in the corner of the room, black and knee-high. A red and black cape was hung up on the wall behind her, alongside a red, black and gold peaked cap bearing the Marine emblem – a bird on top of an anchor with its wings spread. She glanced up briefly as Damian pushed open the door to get in. “Yes? What do you... Damian?” she asked, sitting up and leaning back in her chair. She looked ageless, no older than late twenties or early thirties, despite being his mother. To anyone who didn’t know her, she looked beautiful and elegant. She smiled briefly, her blue eyes brightening up before they turned stormy as her bright red lips pursed together.

“How are you here?” she demanded, stretching out her right arm. The huge axe embedded in the door flew backwards past Damian’s head landing into her hand. She stabbed it into a notch in her desk, before getting up to her feet - the door slammed closed behind him - and she stepped slowly towards him, her hair flowing like fire. Damian backed into the door, and she looked down at him. “Most importantly... if you’re here... Damian, where’s Jayce?” she asked menacingly.

Chapter 15: Executioner

With their wounds healed, the three of them headed back to the arena, this time straight along the main path for the sake of ease. People parted for them as they walked, and by them, they parted for Bjorn, as he led the way with Wicke and Jayce in tow. "So, what's the plan?" Wicke finally asked, as the arena came into sight. "The plan? Tear our way through anyone standing in our path for the Gold tier and then beat Vexx within the next two days!" Jayce declared boldly, standing tall with both hands on his hips. "Anything more specific, Captain?" Bjorn asked. Wicke snorted as she saw Jayce's expression. "You shouldn't call him Captain; we don't have a ship, nor should you want to make his head any bigger!" Wicke warned, taking the lead and walking backwards with a wide grin on her face. "Rude... My head's not that big, is it?" Jayce asked, patting his grimy and sandy hair. Neither Bjorn nor Wicke said anything. "Anyway, there's no need to call me Captain," Jayce affirmed. "Call me by my name: Jayce," he ordered. Bjorn nodded in acceptance, "Right, Jayce."

Together, they made their way down the stairs to the fighter's pits, several cheers erupting as they waltzed into the room. "You actually beat him!" Kiro cheered as he approached the group, patting Jayce hard on the shoulder before grinning at Bjorn. "Of course, surely none of you doubted me?" Jayce stated, folding his arms. The others waved his question away before heading over to the benches. "We had our hopes, and - given you beat this big brute - surely, with our help, you can make it to Vexx!" Lucas stated, inviting Jayce and Wicke to sit. They did so and the other fighters gathered around them. "So," Jayce asked. "What does the Gold tier consist of?"

The group looked up at Kiro who, at first, looked back at them confused. "Ah!" he said eventually, reaching into his pockets to pull out a very neatly written letter, handing it to Bjorn to read out aloud. "Please inform Jayce of what is to come. With tensions continuing to rise with each victory, I'm afraid I will be unable to aide our Rising Ace directly, for fear of my own wellbeing. Regardless, I hope this helps. The Gold tier is the final run before the champion, naturally this consists of three bouts, so from today he has four days remaining unless he once more sweeps the tier consecutively," Bjorn read out, before passing it over to Wicke.

"Heinous prisoners sentenced to death are to be brought in for their final days; Jayce will be fighting three death-row inmates. These matches will be to the death, or until incapacitation, sap cannot be used for the challenger's own safety,

as well as by the decree of the Exalted Arbiter. Each prisoner is to be shown no mercy, and they shall be offering none either, for this is their last chance to leave a mark behind, be it only another kill to their tallies. The prisoners will be armed and will be defending themselves from the executioner," Wicke read out, handing the letter to Jayce.

"Dear Jayce, you have shown kindness and mercy before, but I must insist you hold no faith within these monsters you will be facing. They are irredeemable. I believe you will likely ignore these words, so I have included the vague details of their crimes. Do not, for all of our sakes, hesitate or attempt to play up to the crowd. Good luck! May you help us all! Sincerely, Ming the Promoter," Jayce concluded, turning it over to see three extracts cut out from bounty sheets, his stomach twisting as he read through their crimes. "Is Ming still here?" Jayce asked, looking at Kiro. The baned nodded. "Yes, but now he has guards around him at all times. It is likely Delores thought he was the cause of your good luck," Kiro confirmed, to Jayce's relief.

"So you have to kill three condemned convicts? That sounds rather simple," Wicke stated. "It is more complex than you may initially think. As ring fighters we fight for a crowd, we fight not to kill but to injure, if even that. These death-row inmates will hold nothing back for they have nothing to lose; a mistake will be an instant, or painful, death," Lucas said softly, rubbing his chin. The several baned looked at each other and then back at Jayce. "How do you plan to react?" Bjorn asked curiously. Jayce thought for a second and then stood up. "Quickly and without hesitation. The issue is, all of them have killed into the double digits, I doubt they'll go down easily," Jayce stated.

"Poison?" Wicke asked unsubtly. Jayce glared at her, and she simply shrugged. "Enough to slow or weaken them, not kill them," she added. The baned nodded. "Could be done, the handlers owe us a few favours. We'll get on it!" Lucas stated. "How do you intend to take down Vexx?" he then asked. A sarcastic laugh rang out and all of them jumped out of their skins as Vexx leant against the wall next to them, his approach entirely silent and invisible. He shook his head, wagged a finger, and tutted loudly. "Poison, really? You'd take this last chance for a real fight away from them? Disgraceful! I'm sure all of you will change your minds and be honourable about it," he threatened casually, before using both hands to shoo the group away whilst keeping his red eyes on Jayce, Wicke, and Bjorn.

Uneasily, they dispersed, leaving the four of them alone together. "Well- ", Vexx began, only for Wicke to interrupt him. "Why were you watching us the other

day?" she asked curiously, as she folded her arms and glared at him. "I... do not know what you're talking about," he stated, clearly lying, but regarding her with an equal sense of curiosity. He then looked over at Jayce. "I have done as much as I can so far, but things are being set in motion outside of my control. I will face you in the arena after tomorrow. Bring your all," Vexx told him, turning his body to face him directly as they stood before each other. Jayce smiled and extended a hand. "I will, be prepared to lose," he stated boldly. Vexx looked down at the hand and nodded slightly, before walking away without accepting it. Once he was out of earshot, Wicke let out a long sigh of relief.

"When did he appear?" she asked Bjorn, he simply shrugged and shook his head, looking towards Jayce's vacant face. "Jayce?" he asked, receiving no response. "You'll need more than hopes and a smart mouth to beat him. He's dangerous and the champion of this place for a reason. Do you have a plan?" Jayce blinked a little, before looking over at Bjorn. "Yeah... of course. It's going to be more than just a fight if I want to win, don't worry. Trust me, I've got this!" he said with a large, yet nervous, smile. "For now, we need to focus on the Gold tier," he stated. Bjorn stepped forwards and placed a hand on Jayce's shoulder. "I'll see what can be done. It might be best to take this one slowly," he advised Jayce. Jayce shook his head. "Two days. That's how long we have," Jayce told him, extending a fist to bump. "Then I will get my things ready. Be careful," Bjorn told him, tapping his own knuckles against Jayce's and walking away. "You too!" Jayce called after him.

The pair left the fighter pits, and climbed up the all too familiar stairs to the top floor. The area was much quieter than usual, there were less guests, but significantly more guards - at least two by each door. Ming stood in his usual spot, today's robes a muted black and white compared to his usual colourful outfits. Wicke stood close to Jayce's side as the guards watched them approach Ming. "Heya Ming! How are you?" Jayce asked, ignoring the two large men either side of him. "I've been better Ace. How may I help you?" he asked, turning his face to the right, the faint shine of makeup unable to hide the bruise on his cheek. "I came to retrieve my payment for the last few matches," Jayce stated simply. Ming nodded and turned around to pick out a small money bag from the chest behind him.

He passed it slowly over to Jayce, his hands shaking, and the entire movement being watched from around the room. "There you go. Anything else?" Ming asked aptly, putting on a nervous smile. "Yes, actually. Could you set up the next three fights consecutively for tomorrow at noon, and another the day after?"

Jayce asked politely. Ming nodded. "That can be done, you've already paid for the entire run, so just come here tomorrow and it will be set up," he answered. Jayce nodded and turned around without a further word, leaving through the main doors with Wicke, stopping briefly by the betting stands so that she could collect her own earnings.

The walk home was silent, neither of them willing to break the mood that unnerving sight had put them in, but as The Beast's Pen came into view, Wicke spoke up. "That... was uncomfortable. Why such a strong reaction, you haven't done anything to them, right?" she queried. Jayce shook his head, but he then paused and nodded in acceptance. "We're winning something that's not meant to be winnable; if Vexx loses like all of the fighters before him, she loses the entire place. All her fighters - gone. The entire building - gone. I'm not surprised she's trying everything she can to stop us," he told her, as they stepped inside, once again heading up to the bar and retrieving the key from Tau before heading to their room. "I see what you mean, but still. Anyway, are you sure you can handle being the executioner?" she asked, kicking off her boots and jumping backwards onto her bed. Jayce shook his head. "No, but I'll get it done. If not me, then someone else will. I can at least make it quick. Just give me a little bit of space in the morning... to prepare," he requested, taking off his shoes and stepping into the bathroom to clean himself. "Okay, I need a wash too, so don't be too long!" she warned him, as he shut the door and locked it.

The night came and went, and it wasn't long until Jayce got himself ready for another day, another set of fights. The world felt heavy on his shoulders as he ate breakfast, the letter - Ming had written him - long memorised, and the faces of his opponents seared into his mind. Wicke sat quietly as he checked his blades for any nicks or scratches, fortunately they remained strong, but Jayce sharpened them regardless until he was satisfied. With a light meal in him, his weapons prepared, and his body warmed up, they departed. The streets were unusually quiet today as they took the main path, but as they travelled a faint rumble could be heard in the distance. It got louder and louder, turning into cheers and yells as the arena came into view. A massive crowd swarmed the entrance, a seething mass of bodies as they piled on in through the doors.

Someone spotted Jayce and immediately a mob came for him, all asking for autographs and photos. It became impossible to move, and it was only then that he noticed the giant posters of him displayed outside the arena. "Oh..." Jayce muttered to himself. He felt a small tap against his shoulder and the world once more slowed down for him, as he spotted Wicke's large hat manoeuvre itself

through the crowd towards the doors. "Hey there, I'd love to stop and chat, but I've got to get inside for the match! Thanks for all your support, see you in there!" Jayce called out, as he slipped quickly backwards between people, before he sprinted for the rear entrance.

The path was clear, but the detour left Jayce with little to no time to prepare, so he made his way immediately to the arena gates. The handler looked relieved when Jayce arrived, immediately opening the gates, and rushing him through. The crowd cheered, a colossal swarm of bodies encompassing the entire arena. The bunkers were also full of the other fighters, a familiar splash of white was easily visible, partially blocked by a splash of orange. Onyx's big head entirely obscured the grate nearest to the entrance, the faint sound of grumbling from behind him as the other occupants tried to see. Regardless, certainly pleased by the turnout, Jayce made his way to the centre of the ring.

"Hello! Welcome one and all to today's exhibition!" boomed the announcer. "Today we have a very special collection of fights for you all! Our local champion-to-be, the Rising Ace, is attempting to clear the Gold tier fights within our Champion's Run. He has fought amateurs, ogres, ocean crawlers, cannibals, and baned to get here; are you going to stop today, Ace?" they asked over the crowd, the entire arena falling quiet to give him his moment. Jayce reached into his scabbards and in one smooth movement he drew both blades, spreading his arms wide. "No!" Jayce declared bravely, the entire crowd cheering and whooping.

"That's right folks, he's not here to quit! But today is a different day from one he may be expecting, today he fights amateurs for your entertainment. These opponents fight not for sport, but for their very survival! Dragged all the way here from the high courts, we have prisoners charged with the greatest of crimes, all destined for the gallows or the chopping block! All of them, killers, and all of them looking to leave one last impression on you all, as they are exiled from this world!" screamed the announcer.

"Our mighty warrior is charged with delivering the world's will on to them, and he personally will send them to the abyss for your entertainment! Cover the children's eyes, swallow your food and drink, and be sure to stay away from the edges!" warned the announcer as the gates opened and a lone figure walked in, dressed in a pair of orange, baggy trousers with a loose and modified straitjacket over their top. "Our first fighter, the Butcher of Flower Buds, Peter Shipman, enters the ring! A young man who grew up abandoned in an orphanage, he

returned as an adult to personally ensure no others followed his path! Twenty-two children, including three babes, along with the three matrons tending to them, as well as the eight sailors sent to capture him, were brutally slaughtered by this monster!"

Peter the Butcher looked at Jayce as he walked in, a pair of meat cleavers in his hands. He had a shaved head, dark skin, and bright blue eyes. He was a large man, with a distended stomach, but otherwise he wasn't particularly tall. He winked at Jayce as he rolled his neck and span around showing off a hastily painted thirty-three on his back, a morbid reminder. "Today he seeks to add one more to his tally before he meets his end! Will he succeed or will the Rising Ace put the Butcher to market?" the announcer continued. Jayce put one leg behind him, preparing himself. "So, another for my list, ay? Will you go quietly, or will you squeal and weep like the others?" the Butcher asked, pointing a cleaver at Jayce. "Doesn't matter, as long as-".

"Fight!" screamed the announcer. Jayce didn't hesitate this time, his entire body cold and his mind perfectly calm. He rushed forwards like lightning, the arrogant butcher still smiling midsentence as his head flew away from his body whilst Jayce leapt, span, and delivered a swift execution with a pair of slashes: the first, opening his windpipe, the second, taking his head clean off. Jayce landed and stepped forwards to avoid the fountain that briefly sprayed from his corpse as it fell backwards into the sand. The crowd fell silent, before a stupendous cheer rang out as Jayce wiped his blades on Peter's straitjacket.

"Well that was quick!" laughed the announcer. "Without hesitation, the Butcher has been delivered to the cold abyss of hell! Bring on the next fight, hurry now!" called out the announcer, as handlers quickly rushed in with a coffin, hastily stuffing his body in before dropping the head in afterwards. They left equally as quickly, the only evidence of the Butcher's presence being the stained splatter of red sand and the pair of discarded cleavers. "Well, once again we have another criminal. This one, however, is from our very own city, a slow killer and a serial one at that! Some of you may remember the Love Taker, for the rest of you, let me introduce you."

The gates opened once more, and this time a similarly dressed woman casually walked in, her feet bare and hair braided into long pigtails. She was blonde, with very pale light skin and a set of bright green eyes. Smeared makeup covered her face, likely applied herself, from the slight marks along her forearms where she had tried different colours and hues. She had smeared lipstick across her nose

and cheeks giving a sinister and messy sense of colour to her. "A young woman, only twenty-eight, she had spent several years with failed relationship after failed relationship. Unfortunately for the men she was 'dating', they never knew they were, nor did their partners. So lovely Alice here ensured they knew: following them and bewitching them with a cocktail of pheromones and drugs. After the relationship inevitably failed, she cut them up and melted them in her bathtub, taking and pickling a trophy for herself."

Alice curtsied to Jayce and blew him a kiss, as she put on a rather bulky gas mask over her makeup, before using a lighter on the large flail she had been dragging behind her. It burned for a second as the dried plants on the outside caught fire, before settling down to leave a smoky plume rising from the spiky, metal, incense ball on the end. A faint whiff reached Jayce and immediately gave him a mild headache and caused his lungs to feel strained. He leapt back, putting his swords away and picking up the leftover cleavers. "Take a guess what she took from them gentlemen! Regardless, from what was discovered from her residence, the longest 'relationship' she had, lasted over a year before the poor soul joined the sixteen others. Hopefully our young Ace isn't feeling a flame between them! Begin!"

She immediately gripped the handle of her large flail and swung it around her in a large circle, a cloud of the purplish grey smoke obscuring her from Jayce's vision, which swiftly began to move closer to him. Jayce backed up, desperately keeping himself away from the incapacitating fumes. She kept moving closer to him, a faint glow appearing every now and again from the flail when it emerged from the smoke. It passed round again, and Jayce began to count in his head watching it as it disappeared again into the smoke.

On the fifth second it reappeared, and Jayce began to count once more, this time readying himself. The glow emerged into the air and Jayce threw one of the cleavers into the smoke where it had appeared. "Ow, what the?" yelled a voice from within. "Oh no," it followed, before she ran out of the smoke clutching the cracked glass lens of her mask, her weapon abandoned. She stopped and looked over at Jayce as she ripped off the mask. "Don't suppose you'd fancy being my boyfriend?" she asked, just before the blade of the other cleaver sunk itself into her forehead. "Sorry, I'm taken," Jayce muttered quietly, backing up away from the weapon as handlers rushed in with buckets of water and gas masks to put out the source.

The smoke settled quickly, and her body was retrieved, the crowd booing her corpse just as they had with the Butcher. Jayce looked down, but quickly shook himself off as the gates once more opened. "Give it up for our fighter! Another fine display of skill! Well ladies and gentlemen, here is the conclusion to his attempt for today, may this one go equally as smoothly, for his sake! Now this opponent is slightly different from the others. His crimes are not as great as the others, but his skill is far beyond them!"

A tall, slender, man strolled in with a rapier, his face wearing a pair of spectacles covering a set of mismatched eyes, and his short hair almost white. He was significantly older than the previous two, but likely only in his early-to-mid fifties. He wore a white shirt, with clean-cut black trousers and black leather shoes. "A pirate from before the dawn of our great Marines, Galen Bourne sailed across the seas of the New World. His magic allowing his crew of bandits and raiders to escape all who pursued them. He was only stopped recently by the Paladins of the Church, personally captured by their Elder. He has yet to fall within this arena, but today may be his end. Regardless, fight!"

Galen extended his left arm towards Jayce, black tattoos appearing in an all-too-familiar fashion along his finger before spreading across his hand and arm. He began to chant. Jayce eyes widened, he had heard those words before, Wicke said them every day before he fought. Jayce rushed forwards, desperate to interrupt it, but Galen raised his sword and began to thrust with it, keeping Jayce at bay even whilst chanting. He finished and, in a flash, began his onslaught with a cold, unsympathetic and blank look on his face as he stepped quickly towards Jayce, jabbing and stabbing terrifyingly quickly in his direction. Every time Jayce took a step backwards, Galen took two more forwards, pressing closer and closer into Jayce's guard with each passing second.

It took all Jayce had to deflect each strike, but his opponents moves remained constant and simple. Jayce rounded backwards, twisting away from the wall by excessively slashing at Galen's blade in a deflecting strike. Galen stepped away, buying him just a moment to move back away from the wall. The flurry continued, and it became more and more obvious what Galen's tactics were as Jayce began to slow. It was a battle of attrition and one he was losing. Another finishing strike came towards Jayce's heart, and this time it grazed Jayce's shirt before he could deflect it. As Galen pulled back his arm, Jayce attempted to swing at him, only for Galen to have already moved for another strike by the time Jayce had reangled his swords. This time it nicked him; it was painful, and enough to

snap Jayce into a deep focus. The crowd disappeared and only the strikes and footwork of the swordsman before him appeared in his mind.

He watched each strike, each thrust, with increasing concentration, and as pain interrupted his thought once more as another scratch marked his ribs, Jayce found the answer. Jayce deflected widely, this time striking hard with his hilt on the old pirate's wrist. Galen grunted, his face contorting in pain briefly before his eyes widened and he froze in place. Jayce let out a sigh of relief, counting down from twelve in his head as he looked at the older man. "You're beaten," Jayce told him, stepping around Galen and tapping his sword on the man's shoulder before walking back to the centre of the ring. Galen unfroze and looked down, his face confused, before he dropped to his knees and ran his own blade through his chest. "Well fought!" the gentleman pirate wheezed, before slumping forwards.

The crowd burst into cheers and applause as Jayce put his blades away. He held up a hand and the crowd quietened for him. Jayce cleared his throat and took a deep breath, turning himself to face the owner's box. "Vexx! Tomorrow at noon! Me versus you! Tomorrow I take your title, and Delores, tomorrow I take your arena!" Jayce declared with a cold glare, the crowd erupting with excited energy at his challenge. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, you heard him! Tomorrow at noon, the tickets go live in five minutes! Tomorrow the Champion's Run reaches its conclusion!" yelled the announcer excitedly, as Jayce walked out of the arena.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Family Reunion

Damian didn't know what to think. Should he be angry? Should he be upset? Or should he be grateful to Corina for dropping him off with his mother? He was unsure. After verbally vomiting as many details as he could about his journey to the Capital, his mother interrupted him. "Hang on, hang on!" she told him, gently grabbing his shoulders. He stopped, and she let go, shaking her head before turning away towards her desk and rubbing her forehead. "You know what, we'll discuss this properly over some lunch. You hungry, kiddo?" she asked him, grabbing a small money bag from her drawer and hovering her hand over her axe, before deciding against taking it. Damian nodded, waiting for a catch.

"Come on then, let's go. We'll meet your father there," she told him, Damian immediately perking up as she took him back into the hallway. "Stay close," she advised, smiling softly at him as she walked off. Passing through a series of – presumed – shortcuts and special doorways, they found themselves outside the Navy headquarters. Every sailor and Marine they passed saluted to them as they

walked, with Damian hiding in his mother's shadow. Once outside, she stepped back, walking next to him, rather than in front of him, and wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "Hey, hey!" she protested, as he slipped away from her grip. "Come on, you haven't seen your mother in weeks and you're going to run away?" she asked, pouting.

Damian sighed and extended an arm instead, which she gladly accepted as she led him down one of the main streets of the island, the entire area full of small cafés and restaurants for members to relax in. She probed him about his life and what she had missed, asking for gossip, if he had met anyone of note, and otherwise general chat that she had missed. Every time he mentioned Jayce, or the journey up north, she interrupted him, telling him to tell her later. "For now, let me be a doting mother, please. I get too many serious things at work and every time I see either of you, you're both so much bigger," she said, with a genuine look of sadness. Damian nodded and he then made sure to avoid particular topics before asking about her and what she had been up to.

After passing the same café multiple times, Damian realised she was stalling. "Where are we eating?" he interrupted. Her face fell a little, the smile disappearing, and her usual resting serious face returned. "Oh, here seems good," she told him, pulling up a chair outside and inviting him to sit opposite her. A waiter came over, handing them menus. He came back carrying a cup of coffee for Damian's mother, clearly familiar with what she liked, before he asked Damian what he wanted. Damian asked for a lemonade, and his mother smiled to herself. "Just like Jayce," she muttered softly, a small smile returning as she looked at her son. "Sorry?" Damian asked. She shook her head and ordered some food for them: some simple toasted sandwiches and a plate of chips to share.

Eventually, with most of the food finished, a tall, gaunt man approached them. He had a pair of glasses on his face, over his green eyes, and he was clean shaven, with neatly cut black hair on his head. He smiled at Damian, unbuttoning the top button of his white shirt, and taking off his black tie before opening his arms. "Hello Damian, how have you been son?" he asked, as he embraced him. They separated and he sat down next to Cassandra, kissing her on the cheek before snatching a chip. "Hi honey," he told her, before looking over at Damian for an answer.

"Damian has been on a bit of an adventure, Philip," she said, interrupting Damian before he could speak. "Well, speak freely son. What have I missed?" Philip asked, waving inside the café and quickly being brought a rather unusual-

smelling cup of tea, as well as a sandwich of his own. Damian fidgeted a little, waiting until the waiter in the otherwise quiet café had wandered off. He began with the attack on the island and Valentine's escape, before leading into their adventure north to the Capital. The waiter returned just as he got to their retrieval of Wicke, pausing cautiously. "Is there anything more I can get you?" he asked them. Without missing a beat, Philip spoke up. "I'm sure we'll get some dessert in a few minutes; do you mind giving us a little privacy for ten or so minutes?" he asked. The waiter nodded quickly. "Yes Vice Admiral, sorry for disturbing you," he said, slightly flustered. Philip smiled at him, nudging his glaring wife gently. "It's no problem. The food was lovely, thank you," she said with a slight smile.

The waiter bowed gently and quickly hurried off, directing a few incoming officers to the seating away from them. "Go on," Cassandra ordered. Damian continued, swiftly talking about Wicke's rescue, her illness, and then her recovery. He then spoke of her bounty and her magic, his mother shaking her head and rubbing her face, whilst Philip leant closer, listening intently. Damian concluded with Alara leaving for the Marines and Jayce looking for transport north. "Well..." Philip said, thinking deeply. "It's good to hear that Jayce is forming his own path. And I will keep an eye out on Alara's progress as well," he stated, easing Damian's nerves considerably. "Anyway, enough about that. He's a man now, he can make his own choices. Tell me everything I missed," Philip asked, Damian leaning forwards.

They spoke for a while, until eventually Corina came to meet them. After Damian had left, and Corina had promised to keep him out of trouble, the pair of Admirals sat back in their chairs. "Fuck!" Cassandra muttered angrily to herself. "What does he think he's doing?" she asked, tilting her head back and letting her red hair hang down as she covered her eyes with her cap. "I'll do my best to mitigate the damage, but if he's here still, he could have had a hand in that incident, if she was discovered," Philip stated, scratching his chin. Cassandra shook her head. "You mean the executions of the Church officials? That wasn't magic, and as much as I love and believe in Jayce, he couldn't have done that." She looked over at her husband with a worried look. "The other three corpses in that district, maybe. I just hope, if he is taking the rebellion route, he causes enough trouble so I can intervene before the Church target him," Cassandra added, before finishing her coffee. "I'll do some meddling, buy him some time. He's a smart boy, a kind one too," Philip told her. She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder, taking his hand and squeezing it tightly. "It's too soon."

Chapter 16: A Battle of Champions

Bjorn and Wicke both stood waiting for him, as Jayce entered the pens. "Well done, Jayce! I wasn't sure you could do it," Wicke stated, giving him a thumbs up, the faintest of black lines visible through the gap between her sleeve and her gloves. "Yes, well done. Congratulations! There is but one more fight left for you," Bjorn added. They walked together, heading for the one of the alcoves. Jayce leant against the wall and Wicke dropped the spell. Bjorn looked at them both curiously and then it clicked.

"Oh..." he said quietly. "That explains how you so tactically defeated Bourne." "Can we trust you?" Wicke asked him. The giant polar bear scoffed in bemusement by the foolish question. "It only makes me trust you more. The voyage north has just become significantly easier in my eyes." Jayce regained control again, wincing slightly as his adrenaline faded and the small cuts on his chest began to pain him. "Thanks, you two. Let's finalise the details upstairs and get out of here," he told them, walking out of the alcove only to bump into a rather flustered guard. "Ah, Rising Ace, there you are! I was worried I had missed you; you've been requested to go to the manager's office. Please follow me, oh, and bring your companions, just in case," she told him with a slight smile, readjusting her armour and helmet before looking at him for assurance. "Lead on," Jayce told her, giving a glancing look at the other two.

They followed her through the pens and up the stairs, once more arriving on the top floor. The guards all eyed them nervously as they passed through the several sliding doors along the ring. As they reached the owner's box, they found Vexx waiting for them, as he lay down on the sofa looking down at the arena. He gave them a thumbs up as they entered the room, the guard stepping out and closing the doors behind her. "Hey Jayce! Good fights, very good fights! I unofficially accept your challenge, let's make it a good one!" he grinned, sweeping his hair backwards off his face. Jayce raised an eyebrow and smirked to himself. "Thanks man, I look forward to it! No need to go hard on me though," Jayce said casually, making his way towards the office doors.

Vexx gripped the back of the sofa with one hand, and, with terrifying ease, he vaulted over it from a prone position, then very quickly stepped in front. "Please, allow me!" he told them, opening the doors for them. Jayce stepped in first, Wicke and Bjorn following behind him on either side, with Vexx following in after them, closing the doors behind him. The room was still dimly lit, but the desk light was already on, illuminating all they needed to see. A sharply dressed, light-skinned

man, with very short, black hair and a goatee, stood over the owner, a large green cape adorning the back of his outfit and a pair of taloned, golden gauntlets on his hands. He stood confidently, speaking to her slowly and softly, too quietly for Jayce to hear, but whatever he was saying, was clearly ruffling Delores. She couldn't meet his gaze, a nervous sweat had coalesced on her forehead, and she was physically trembling.

As they stepped in, her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open slightly as she stepped backwards away from the man. "I apologise for the interruption, sir! What are you doing here? Who let you in?" she demanded, turning to the face the three of them, Vexx slinking off to the drinks cabinet to help himself. The strange man casually raised a hand and stepped forwards in front of her. "I invited them," he told her, with a silky smooth voice. "I wanted to meet the challenger personally, after all, we all have skin in this game," he added.

"Who are you?" Jayce asked, stepping forwards till he was within an arm's reach, with Bjorn and Wicke stood behind, a few metres away. "Jayce, was it? You may call me Phoenix. I stand with the Guild, and we have oh-so-heavily invested in this place, that I couldn't resist coming personally to meet you," he told Jayce, answering the majority of his prepared questions with a gentle and stern look. "What do you want?" Jayce asked coldly, crossing his arms and looking up at Phoenix. "My, my, straight to the point, I appreciate a person willing to act. You've done so well to reach this milestone that I must be curt with you. We like this place how it is currently run. There are certainly some faults here and there," he stated, glancing back with a sinister smile at Delores. "But otherwise this place is a great success. I have an offer for you, would you be interested?" he asked, stepping back and walking to the large chest behind the desk.

"What offer?" Jayce asked curiously, glancing briefly to Vexx as he shook a glass in his direction, offering a drink. Jayce shook his head and looked back, just as the large chest opened. Phoenix reached inside and pulled out a small wooden case, about the length of a finger. He walked back around and opened it, showing it off to Jayce, Wicke, and Bjorn. "This here is ten thousand pearl; I would like to buy your loss tomorrow," he offered, presenting the fortune to Jayce. All three of them were stunned, Jayce looked at it, unable to think properly, his mind coming up blank as he tried to find the words. "Well?" Phoenix asked, placing the case open on the desk behind him.

Jayce turned to look at the other two; Bjorn's face blank as he looked down at the floor; Wicke eyeing the prize hungrily. Jayce then looked at Vexx, his rival

watching the spectacle curiously with a bottle of expensive liqueur in hand. "I'm sorry, I appreciate the offer, but I'm seeking to win for more than monetary gain. I intend to head north and I'm taking these two with me," he told Phoenix. He stroked his goatee curiously. "What if I annul Bjorn's contract in exchange for a thousand off the prize," he countered. Bjorn's ears flicked and he looked at Jayce, his eyes betraying him as they met each other's gaze. Jayce shook his head at Bjorn, and the bear slapped himself with both of his hands, scolding himself for even thinking it.

"I'm sorry, I have to refuse. I have come too far to quit now. I came to win and that's what I will do!" Jayce stated confidently. A brief fury emanated from Phoenix, as his smile faltered. "I see, shame. I respect principles, they are the foundation of good business, after all. Very well, expect a packed crowd tomorrow, I look forward to a good fight," he told Jayce, clasp his gauntlets behind him. Jayce nodded and turned to leave. "One more thing, often actions have unforeseen consequences; are you certain you won't reconsider?" he warned coldly, with a fake smile. The tension was palpable, and a cold, sinking feeling ran through Jayce as doubt flooded him. Vexx slurped loudly and the tension shattered, the feeling running away, replaced by a stern reassurance as he looked at Bjorn and Wicke, and even Vexx. "I understand, but I'm sure we are more than capable at handling whatever is thrown at us," Jayce told him, opening the door, and walking out. Vexx set down his bottle and went to follow. "One moment Vexx," Phoenix stated, pointing at the doors behind them and shutting them with a wave of his hand, closing the room off from the trio.

"I'm going to escort you home, just in case," Bjorn told them. "Remain vigilant at all times. I also must apologise, I briefly doubted you Jayce. I'm sorry, Captain. I wanted you to take his offer," Bjorn told him, looking down at the floor as they stood outside the manager's office. "I also considered it," Wicke added, sharing his shame. Jayce patted Wicke's shoulder before punching Bjorn gently in the stomach. "Don't worry about it, I don't think I'd have handled that anywhere near as well without the both of you. Let's get out of here, quickly!" Jayce told them with a smile, leading the way through the many doors, as they were opened for him by the numerous guards.

They made their way through the city back to the Beast's Pen. Bjorn stood outside briefly with them, before leaving them to head back to the arena. "Good luck tomorrow! You'll need it. Stay safe until then," Bjorn told them, Wicke hugging him before he left, something Jayce hadn't seen before. "And you, tomorrow you leave a free man!" Jayce told him, waving after him. They made their way inside,

posters of the upcoming match decorating the entire place. "There he is!" called out Tau. "Give it up for the Rising Ace!" The many patrons raised their mugs and cheered as they entered, unwittingly bringing a smile to Jayce's face. Compliments flew past him as they made their way to the bar. "I don't suppose you'd sign a few things for me?" Tau asked, handing over a small pile of posters to sign. Jayce rolled his eyes. "You'll get free food and drinks every time you stay with us from here on out!" Tau bargained.

"I get that anyway!" Jayce protested, taking their key and handing it to Wicke before signing neatly across the many posters for him. "You owe me one!" Jayce warned him. "Hey, hey, the entire bar is coming to your fight tomorrow! I'll make sure dinner is especially good tonight, deal?" he stated, offering a fist to Jayce. He bumped it and walked away, heading to his room. The food that night was indeed especially good, as promised. And the evening passed quickly. Jayce initially struggled to sleep, as he ran through the many potential scenarios that could happen the following day, but eventually he drifted off, waking up early for a quick morning warm-up and an energy-rich breakfast.

Once ready, the pair made their way to the arena through the backstreets, to avoid the colossal crowd audible in the distance. No one stopped them, no one spoke to them, but regardless they both jumped at every cat, bird, or rat they saw along the way. Once inside, Jayce made his way down to the fighter's pen as Wicke went to bet their fortune. The fighters were waiting for him, cheering as he stepped in and mobbing him as they wished him luck. Eventually, after they left him alone, Lucas came up to him with a nervous look on his face. "Everything okay, Lucas?" Jayce asked with a large smile, as he warmed up his body. "I don't suppose you've seen Bjorn? He hasn't been seen since he left with you," he asked. Jayce's stomach sank. "I'm sorry, I haven't," Jayce told him, immediately running off up the stairs to the top floor.

The guards upstairs were next to none, a distinct decrease from the day before, but many patrons were lounging around, all cheering as he raced past them to grab Wicke. "Hey, what's up?" she asked, as he grabbed her sleeve and pulled her along to the stairs to the pens. "Bjorn is missing!" Jayce told her urgently, as she ran quickly after him. "What?" she asked, panic filling her face. "He hasn't been seen since he left with us. Fuck! They must have snatched him on the way back!" he yelled in frustration, as they ran through the pens, desperately looking inside each cell for any trace. They arrived at the main gates, the crowd thundering above them, the handler perking up as they approached. "Ah, Rising-" he began.

"Not now!" Jayce yelled at him, heading onwards and rushing blindly forwards. "Jayce!" Wicke yelled at him, causing him to skid to a stop. "We won't find him here! You have to do this fight; we'll worry about him afterwards, otherwise none of this has mattered," she told him, as he looked at her. He took a deep breath and growled with frustration. "Dammit! You're right," he stated furiously, heading back to the rather upset handler, clearly not used to being yelled at. "Sorry," Jayce apologised, walking with Wicke to an alcove. She cast her spell and tapped him, its effects taking control immediately. A curious-looking guard pulled a strange face as he spotted them a little ways away. The guard quickly wandered off and Jayce figured it was a problem for later.

"Are you ready?" Wicke asked. Jayce nodded and started walking to the main gate. "Kick his ass!" she yelled after him, before heading back to the other fighters. Jayce fidgeted as he stood waiting, a cold fury running through him as he scolded himself. Eventually, the time came, and Jayce went to coat his blades. "Sorry, for this fight, sap is not allowed," the handler stated, putting it away to Jayce's confusion. "Why not?" Jayce demanded, as he put his blades away in their scabbards. "For the challenger's safety, champion fights must occur with their full capabilities at their disposal. Sorry."

Jayce shrugged it off, going back to pacing, as the crowd chanted either his stage name, or Vexx. The handler grew more and more nervous as he looked around for Jayce's competitor, who remained nowhere in sight. Without a choice, the gates opened for Jayce as he was told to go in alone. "Wait!" called a voice from behind Jayce, as he went to walk in. Vexx stumbled over, with Bjorn leaning on his shoulders as he limped towards him. "Bjorn!" Jayce called out, running towards them. The big bear looked a little bit beat-up, but most worrying were the splashes and splattering of blood across his body. "Are you hurt? You're bleeding!" Jayce asked, searching him over for any serious injuries only to step back, realising the blood wasn't his. "Only my ego, they jumped me and dragged me to a warehouse. I didn't think I was going to get out of there until Vexx got me," Bjorn told him, patting the champion's head a few too many times, inciting Vexx's wrath as he slapped away Bjorn's giant hand.

Jayce looked at Vexx, spotting the blood dripping from both of his stained hands. "Thank you," he told him sincerely, as Bjorn leant against the wall. Vexx shook his head, turning away bashfully. "It was nothing. I only just found out," he stated. "No, you saved Bjorn. For that, you have my thanks," Jayce reinforced, placing his hand on Vexx's shoulder, ignoring the cries of the crowd. "You know, you could do a lot more than this place. Do some good rather than waste away

in here," Jayce told him, before turning away and walking into the arena, the crowd erupting as he stepped into view. Vexx looked down, thinking to himself. "You know he's right," Bjorn told him, getting off the wall and heading towards the viewing bunkers. "Piss off," Vexx said weakly, flicking his hands and splattering blood onto the floor before walking in after Jayce.

"This is it, ladies and gentlemen, the fight we have all been waiting for! Hundreds have dreamed of just standing before our champion in this capacity, yet none have gotten this far! This is an unprecedented fight, of true unpredictability; feast your eyes upon this sight and tell it to your descendants, for this may never happen again. Standing up to face our champion, is our Rising Ace, a man who needs no introductions after his incredible displays this last week. And our champion, a man of mystery, a being of underestimated skill and power, has been brought out of his hovel to face our lowly challenger. None have met his approval, and few have ever landed a blow upon him, all bowing out in shame. Let me introduce you to VEXX!"

The pair looked at each other as they stood in the centre of the arena. Jayce with sword in hands and Vexx barefisted. "Where's your weapon?" Jayce asked curiously, as the announcer spoke. "Jayce, I am a weapon," he warned, forming a fist and raising his arms. "Then so am I," Jayce said, putting his swords back in their scabbards and matching his form. "Your funeral..." Vexx muttered, looking up towards the stands and nodding. "The fighters are doing this bare-knuckle, and are ready. So, ladies and gentlemen, ARE YOU READY?" the announcer screamed, the thousands in the stands cheering in a cacophonic roar. "Then, fight!"

Jayce rushed forwards, keeping both arms high, with his fists in front of his face; Vexx kept his lower, extending his elbows forwards and keeping his hands in line with his chest. Jayce lunged forwards with his right leg, throwing a left hook that Vexx ducked under in a blur. Even with Wicke's magic, Jayce struggled to keep up with Vexx's movements. He followed up with a pair of quick jabs, both, once again, dodged by Vexx. Vexx countered, squeezing his elbow hard with his bicep before thrusting with invisible speed. It hit Jayce in his right forearm, but Jayce couldn't feel it. An impact had occurred, but it felt like the touch of a feather. "Ten," Vexx stated, clear enough for Jayce to hear over the screams of the crowd, before backing up.

Jayce was confused, but he didn't hesitate to counter, throwing a right jab - feinting to land a clean left hook into Vexx's ribs. It hit hard enough to hurt his

hand, but Vexx looked unfazed, retaliating by pulling his fist back and striking squarely in a half-uppercut. Once more, the force behind the attack was unbelievable, from the sound it made as it pushed through the air, but when the attack landed through Jayce's guard on his sternum, it bounced off softly like he had only been prodded with a finger. "Nine," Vexx stated, meeting Jayce's gaze with a cold, dead look behind his eyes.

The pair circled each other, Vexx dropping his guard, whilst Jayce attempted to strengthen his, by finding a comfortable position to react to any attack with. "What's with the counting?" Jayce asked, finally pushing forwards, and throwing a jab at Vexx's nose. "Figure it out. Eight," Vexx retorted, slipping through and uppercutting Jayce's jaw, his head knocking up gently from the nudge. Jayce's teeth clicked together loudly, and his eyes widened as he realised each attack was hitting with more force. It was a countdown - he thought to himself. "I see, why the warning? Why give me a chance?" Jayce asked, stepping in and throwing a hook. Vexx twisted his body to absorb the blow, before pushing Jayce away to regain some distance. "I don't know."

"It's that kindness in you, the same reason you helped Bjorn! You want to do some good," Jayce stated, once more stepping in close. Vexx blushed and weaved through Jayce's barrage of strikes before jabbing him in the stomach as retaliation. "No... I... Seven," he told Jayce, his face twisting. The blow, for the first time, was felt, truly; it was like a slap and a brief sense of fear flashed through Jayce, his eyes widening as he realised this was only seven. He wouldn't win through brawn, he had to fight a different battle, he surmised, rushing in for another flurry of blows.

"Wicke said you were watching us, watching me, after the Bronze final. Why?" Jayce asked, as he threw a punch aimed at Vexx's jaw. He ducked and jabbed Jayce in his defending arm, the forearm moving backwards and a bruise forming immediately. "I don't know, alright? What's with the questions? Six," he asked, his eyes flickering around, trying to avoid Jayce's eyeline, whilst looking away from the crowd, the sound of their cheers and his own heartbeat drumming the inside of his skull. "You were curious, right? Or envious - you like us, you like me, and you wanted to help us! That's why you warned me, and that's why you rescued Bjorn!" Jayce told him.

Vexx yelled in frustration, his otherwise condensed form descending into a primal rage as he leapt forwards, twisting and delivering another blow, this time into Jayce's shoulder. The entire area went numb, and a slight trickle of blood

flowed from where Jayce had been hit. "Five!" yelled Vexx, his guard low as he swayed a little. Jayce threw a punch, cleanly cracking against Vexx's jaw; it felt like he'd punched metal and he hissed through his teeth loudly in pain as he shook his injured hand. "You care about us, Vexx. You want to do more than rot in this place, there is good inside you! Why do you work for her? Why are you here?" Jayce demanded.

The entire arena fell silent in Vexx's head as he shut off his hearing, staring only at Jayce and reading his lips. "I came here to die, okay? Is that what you want?" he retaliated, pain rearing through his heart as he finally admitted it. "I had enough. Now draw your fucking swords or the next hit will fracture something! The one after that will break it cleanly, the next will shatter it, and you won't live to see the last!" Vexx warned. Jayce looked at him with nothing but pity. "Don't look at me like that!" Vexx screamed, moving in a blur to appear before Jayce in less than a blink of the eye. He threw a jab clashing with Jayce's bruised forearm. Jayce screamed in pain as the bone fractured, but he quickly threw it off. "Four!" Vexx yelled, stepping backwards to avoid Jayce's returning strikes, only for none to come.

"I'm not going to kill you Vexx. I don't know where you ever got that idea!" Jayce told him, walking calmly towards him with his hands by his side. For the first time in the fight, Vexx truly raised his guard to protect his head. "You helped me; I wouldn't be here without you," Jayce said softly, stepping into Vexx's range. Vexx pulled back an arm, ready to strike. "Come with us," Jayce offered, as Vexx threw his fist, the strike stopping an inch from Jayce's chest. His eyes widened and conflict surged through him. "No, I, uh, what, why?" Vexx stammered, unable to move as he began to panic. Jayce smiled at him sincerely. "You're strong, come with me. Come with us. Together, we will leave this place behind and travel the world," Jayce offered. Vexx met his gaze, the cold look gone, replaced by a lonely longing as he slowly went to withdraw his arm.

Jayce snapped at the chance, grabbing Vexx's arm, turning his body and throwing him over his shoulder to the ground, before pouncing on him and pinning both his arms with each knee, sitting on Vexx's chest. Jayce drew one sword and held it to Vexx's throat. "So, champion, are you coming with us? Are you willing to live?" Jayce asked with a smirk. Vexx looked up at the strange man on top of him; he could escape, easily, he rationalised, but as he tried to move, an anchor in his chest pulled him further and further down, rendering him immobile. He met Jayce's gaze, staring at him through his mop of blonde hair, and the weight disappeared. He nodded. "Yes, yes I am."

The crowd screamed Jayce's stage name as he got off Vexx and helped him to his feet, the other man looking down at his feet, completely and utterly defeated. "He's done it, we have a new champion! Give it your all folks, for our new champion, the victor of the Champion's Run: the Rising Ace!" yelled the announcer. The crowd applauded and cheered as Jayce waved towards them, he then grabbed Vexx's arm with his uninjured one and raised his hand high as well. "You owe me big for cracking my arm!" Jayce warned him. Vexx laughed a little and raised his head, putting on a smile and waving. "Next time I'll go for that fat head of yours!" he retorted. "Captain," he added afterwards.

Seize the Seas Tales: Orzlov Radner

Many years ago, in the early years after the dungeons opened, a young man rose to prominence. A criminal, a scoundrel, a warrior, and a master of the blade - Orzlov Radner was his name. He raided and pillaged to his heart's content; the budding empire powerless to stop his quest for glory. Across the lands, from island to island he sailed with his band of pillagers, fighting any who dared to draw a sword against him. A thousand tried and a thousand failed, his very sword turning red, stained permanently with the blood of those he had slain.

One day, he came across an island, with a simple village of no more than thirty. It grew sunflowers, and hence the island was known as Sunflower Isle. There was little to pillage from this village, so Radner, bored and disappointed, rounded up all the able-bodied men, handing them swords and telling them to fight him. As always he wore his armour, but that especially hot day was cooking his already-hot head. He threw away his helmet, and only his helmet, and he faced the men. All but one of the men threw down their swords, refusing to fight: they were but simple farmers after all.

One remained, he gripped the blade tightly, the sword much heavier than the local hunter was used to. He swung at Orzlov, but inevitably he fell to the greatest swordsman the world had ever seen. In his last fleeting moments, he expressed his love for his only daughter, a young maiden known as Artemis. Orzlov Radner laughed at the man, expressing his disdain for him as he looked at the young child clutching her father's bow. "Your father was weak! And once again, I grow bored. Is there none who shall best me?" he proclaimed, turning away from her and looking towards the men and boys of the island.

Young Artemis shook as tears flooded her face; her father long gone from this world. Radner ignored her, as she screamed with sorrow and rage, the girl had no sword and was no threat to him... or so he thought. She drew back the string

of her father's bow, letting loose a single arrow, that sailed true across the air. The last thing Radner saw was the tip of the arrow as it passed between his eyes. And so ended the tale of Orzlov Radner, the greatest swordsman of the New World. Killed not by a sword of a brave and fearsome warrior to rival himself, but by the piercing arrow of his own hubris.

Chapter 17: A Voyage Begins

Jayce and Vexx left the arena together and found the majority of the fighters, alongside Bjorn and Wicke, all waiting for them. They cheered Jayce's name as he approached, lifting him into the air, Wicke strategically dropping her spell to force it upon him as they threw him. When Jayce could move and speak again, he yelled out. "Ow, ow, mind the arm. Please put me down," he asked. They obliged, setting him back down with a bit more care. One of the fighters rushed over and handed him a healing potion, the red liquid sloshing around inside the glass bottle. "Thanks," Jayce told him before swallowing the spicy and sweet tasting liquid, his bruises disappearing and the pain in his shoulder and forearm fading as the fractures healed. "Well," Jayce proclaimed, the others all silencing and looking towards him. "I guess there's only one thing left to do!" he said with a broad smile, as they cheered.

Together, they all headed off upstairs to the owner's office. The majority of the guards were gone, and those that did remain seemed equally as happy as the fighters. Ming stood shyly to the corner, dressed today in a simple teal and yellow robe, a small, poorly hidden, smile across his face. "Come on Ming, to the owner's office!" Jayce told him, beckoning him over. He immediately perked up and nodded, rushing over to join the small mob as they charged across the ring, Jayce eventually stopping as they reached the final doors. "Right, you lot! Wait here for me," he told them. A few grumbles echoed around, but otherwise they accepted. Jayce opened the doors using the lever on the wall and pointed at Wicke, Bjorn, Vexx, Ming, Lucas, and Kiro to follow him.

The office door was open and inside it was empty. Delores was nowhere to be seen, but sat on her desk was a document and a small coin pouch. "Where is she?" Ming asked curiously, as they looked around. "She's gone," called out a voice from by the drinks cabinet; Phoenix raised a glass to them. Bjorn roared and Wicke raised her hands defensively, but Jayce held a hand out to tell them to stand down. "Unfortunately, as soon as your victory was declared, she raided the chest, took a sizeable fortune, and left before anyone could stop her. I humbly apologise, her actions have been more than questionable," Phoenix stated, pouring another drink, and walking over to Jayce, handing it to him. "Regardless, congratulations champion! I took the liberty of placing the deed and the prize over there," Phoenix told Jayce, pointing to it as he tapped their glasses together.

Jayce drank it quickly, watching in bemusement as Vexx wandered quietly over to the cabinet on his own. "Thank you. What now?" Jayce asked, as he went over

to it and counted out the five gold nacre coins inside. "Well, that is up to you. The other Guild heads were certain you wouldn't win, so I am in a very good mood that I bet on you against them. We would be more than happy to purchase this establishment and all current contracts from you. I believe the value should be at least five hundred thousand pearl, give or take," he offered.

The room fell silent and all of them winced. "Five..." Wicke stated in shock. "Hundred..." followed Bjorn, his defensively raised arms dropping to his sides. "Thousand?" squealed Ming. Jayce shook his head, immediately causing Ming to faint. "Sorry, I promised to end the contracts," Jayce told him. Phoenix nodded and pointed to a well-concealed door at the back end of the wall. "The vault is through there. It is unlocked for you," he told Jayce, stepping to the side and resting on the edge of the desk. Lucas and Kiro attempted to stir the collapsed Ming whilst the others headed over, Bjorn pulling open the door to reveal a large room with a giant open vault. Money flooded the vault from the floor to the ceiling, a preposterous amount of colourful coins. In the middle, neatly stacked on a small pedestal at the front, was a large pile of papers, each one signed and stamped by the previous owner.

Jayce held them eagerly and walked out with them. "We did it?" he asked, looking at Bjorn. "You did it," Bjorn confirmed, before they started to rush to the door. Phoenix cleared his throat and Jayce turned to him, on his way towards the door. "Well, regardless I'm happy to purchase this place without the contracts," he offered. Jayce thought for a moment, but as he looked at Bjorn and then at Ming he shook his head, unwilling to risk the same events occurring. "Sorry, no deal. The new owner might be willing to," Jayce offered, grabbing the deed off of the desk and walking up to Ming. "I owe this to you, and quite frankly I think you'd run this place better than I would - provided I wanted to, which I don't," Jayce said, handing it to him. Ming looked at it in shock before once again keeling over backwards, this time into the arms of Kiro. "I'm also going to give each employee an end of contract cancellation fee, one thousand pearl seems fair. Take it from the vault, we don't need it," Jayce stated to Lucas and Kiro, who both nodded in agreement.

Jayce then headed quickly out of the door to the group of fighters, handlers, and guards collected nearby, Bjorn followed and stood by him. "Attention," Jayce stated, trying to speak over the cacophony. "Shut it!" Bjorn roared, silencing the mass as they turned to look. "Thanks. I have your contracts here. From today they end. As an early exit fee, all of you will receive a thousand pearl; go home, or do something else with it. Those of you who wish to stay can do so, I'm leaving

the place in the hands of Ming. He will create new contracts for you all as the new owner, should you so desire to stay! Bjorn,” Jayce said, handing the stack to the large baned by his side. Bjorn gripped the stack with both hands before tearing it in half with ease, quickly shredding it again with a few more tears, before throwing it into the air. The fighters cheered and the pair returned to the room.

“Well, that was surprising. I should have expected it from an Exarga,” Phoenix stated, stroking his goatee as he looked over at Ming. “We will discuss further sponsorship from the Guild another time,” he stated. Ming gulped and nodded nervously.

“Jayce, are you sure?” Ming asked. Jayce nodded. “Then I will do my best to meet your expectations, by starting off with ensuring each ex-employee receives their prize. Thank you, Jayce,” he stated, doing an impromptu salute before walking out of the room with the two baned by his side.

“Well, I guess with that sorted, there is, but one thing left to conclude,” Phoenix stated, standing up and walking up to Bjorn. He bowed his head low with his hands clasped before him. “I must sincerely apologise for the actions of Delores towards you. She, and her surviving accomplices, will be hunted down and punished, for this you have the word of the World Guild,” Phoenix said, apologising. Bjorn’s eyes widened a little and he took a step back, confused. “I thought you... Never mind.” Phoenix raised his head and looked at him curiously.

“She acted of her own accord and without any ties to the Guild, however we wish to ensure a positive relationship from this point onwards. As such,” he stated, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a large, palm-sized, flat, jade token, one side bearing the Guild emblem, a crescent mask, and the other a flat line through the centre. “We will provide you with a permanent ten percent discount at any Guild-affiliated shop,” Phoenix offered. Bjorn crossed his arms and looked down at the man. “Ninety percent,” Bjorn countered. Phoenix smiled and met the polar bear’s gaze, his eyes flaring with excitement as he got a chance to negotiate.

“Twenty,” he countered.

“Ninety,” stated Bjorn adamantly, his teeth baring in a proud look of confidence.

“Thirty.”

“Eighty.”

“Forty.”

“Seventy.”

“Fifty.”

"Sixty."

"Fifty," Phoenix finalised, crossing his arms and looking away in defeat. "Fifty," Bjorn agreed. They shook on it and Phoenix walked over to the desk, placing the token down on it.

Using the talon on his gauntlet, he carved a fraction for a half into the bottom portion of the token, before pressing the signet on his gauntlet hard into the jade above the line. His gauntlet hummed a little and, when he pulled it away, a phoenix was marked into the jade. He picked it up and carried it over to Bjorn. "Present this at any Guild-affiliated location and you shall receive the discount. Once more, you have our sincerest apologies," he concluded. He finally turned to Jayce. "You have impressed me, and my colleagues. I doubt we will meet again, but I look forward to seeing what more you have to offer this world. Farewell, Jayce," Phoenix concluded, walking out of the room.

Jayce turned to the three left within the room. "Vexx, Bjorn, get your things and meet me by the side door. Wicke, get your winnings and meet me there. We head to The Beast's Pen and then we go get our ship," Jayce ordered. The three of them nodded, Vexx following them out, before quickly returning with a tablecloth and placing all of the liquor from the cabinet within it, walking away with the clinking bundle out of the room. Jayce headed around the desk and approached the large chest by the back of the wall. It had been left open, presumably by Delores, and had clearly been ransacked.

Inside were a few rough documents, as well as a few loose gold coins which Jayce took. Outside of that, there was little else. He took them all out and laid them out on the desk, spotting, as he looked at the empty chest, a small keyhole in the bottom. He rummaged through the large desk, the drawers full of random documents, but the key was nowhere to be found. Jayce dropped to his knees and looked underneath the desk; he found the key stashed in a little nook. He opened the panel in the chest, the entire bottom lifting up. Inside was a plain, red, ceramic face mask, with black markings along the edges and around the eyes. A pair of black, taloned gauntlets accompanied the mask, alongside a few sealed envelopes and a black curved knife held in a simple scabbard. Jayce looked at it curiously and decided to take the items with him for later analysis, placing them deep inside his backpack.

With little else in the room, Jayce left, shutting the doors behind him, and heading over to a waiting Ming. He already looked exhausted as he sat down on the sofa. "Everything okay?" Jayce asked curiously. Ming nodded and got to his feet,

brushing his robes before reaching down and passing over a rather large bag to Jayce. "Your winnings champ, including the bonuses thrown from the final fight."

"Thanks Ming," Jayce told him, putting the bag inside his backpack. Ming shook his head and opened his arms, hugging Jayce tightly. "No, thank you," he told Jayce, before stepping back. "I don't know what this place will be like the next time you come by, but I will strive to make it as great as it can be. A majority wish to continue working here, so hopefully I can live up to your expectations," Ming stated, bowing his head humbly to Jayce. "I wish you and your crew the best of luck with your travels!" he concluded, slight tears in his eyes as he stepped back, clapping his hands before him. "Thank you, my friend," Jayce told him. "Good luck, and goodbye!"

Jayce found the others waiting for him: Vexx carrying a large, rolled-up bag, full of weapons from the training pits, as well as his bundle of booze, Bjorn with an already-prepared backpack of his few belongings, and Wicke with a huge bag of money and a big grin. "Well. Let's go!" Jayce said with a smile, as they left the arena for the last time. Together, they wandered through the streets back to The Beast's Pen, a massive party awaiting for them as they walked through the doors. "Drinks are on Jayce!" yelled Tau, to the cheers of the numerous patrons. After filling their stomachs with food and drinks, Jayce headed up to the bar to talk to Tau.

"Heya Jayce, congrats on becoming the champion. What are you going to do with your earnings?" he asked, sliding over another beer to the slightly tipsy Jayce. "I'm good, you drink it. We're heading north, and I think we're going to leave after we've grabbed our things," Jayce said with a smile, sliding it back to Tau who downed the drink in a blur. "Oh, you're leaving?" he asked, looking over at Jayce.

"Afraid so. On behalf of Wicke and I, thank you for everything you did for us. Here's a tip and to also cover the tab for today," Jayce said with a smile, sliding over one of the gold coins he had obtained. Tau's mouth dropped as he looked at it, immediately turning and checking if it was real. "I don't know what to say! If you're ever in the city again, your accommodation is paid for. You'll always have a place to stay at The Beast's Pen!" Tau said, smiling at him and extending an arm. Jayce gripped the baned's forearm tightly. "Safe travels Jayce!" Tau concluded, stepping back and getting quickly back to work. "Thanks, farewell friend!" Jayce told him, before heading upstairs.

They collected their things and met outside with Bjorn and Vexx, Wicke briefly going back in to say her goodbyes before they made their way towards the city centre. "Right, are we clear on the plan?" Jayce asked, as they walked through the city streets.

"Wicke and I will get the supplies for the voyage. Vexx and Jayce will get the ship," Bjorn stated in confirmation. "Then, we sail!" Wicke cheered, finally on her way to her people. "Then, let's do this!" Jayce cheered, as they separated.

The pair walked together in quiet for a while, but eventually Jayce spoke up. "So," he said. "So..." replied Vexx, looking over at him. Jayce smirked to himself as he thought of what to say. "Did they not have showers at the arena?" he joked. "Very funny, dumbass. You stink as well!" Vexx retorted, nudging Jayce, a smile even appearing on his face. Eventually it disappeared and the silence returned. "So, why did you want me to kill you?" Jayce asked, a little more seriously; immediately the mood soured, and Jayce felt Vexx close off a little as he stepped away. After a moment, or two, where Jayce felt he had pushed something he shouldn't have, Vexx relaxed. "I would tell you my past, but then I'd have to kill you," he joked - at least Jayce thought he was joking. "But, I didn't really have much... and I admit I was letting myself rot. That's why I look and stink like shit. But no one could ever do it, no one could beat me, even like this. I didn't really want to die, but I didn't have anything to live for... I guess. As much as the old cow, Delores, was a cruel and evil woman, she understood in some small way and took me in," Vexx unloaded. Jayce remained silent, listening carefully as Vexx processed his own thoughts. "Well, we've got you now. So just tell me if you need anything," Jayce said, with an affirming smile.

Vexx nodded and the pair continued onwards, eventually arriving at the docks on the northside of the central island. The newish fishing boat Jayce had seen previously was still there, it wasn't much, but it would do. Jayce left his things with Vexx by the vessel, before heading over to the dockmaster's house nearby. He knocked on the door and eventually a rather old woman came to the door. "Yes?" she asked through several missing teeth. "I'm looking to buy that boat," Jayce told her, pointing to it. She squinted as she looked at it and then at Jayce. "It might be a bit out of your price range, young man," she told him. Jayce smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out the four gold coins for the vessel. "Is this enough?" he asked as her eyes widened. "Darvy!" she yelled behind her. "Bring a bowl of water and the permit for the boat on dock nine!"

A rather rotund and red-faced man came over, carrying an authenticating bowl with water in it, after verifying the money was real she handed over the license

for the vessel, in a very cheerful mood. "Is there anything else I can get you, sir?" she asked. Jayce shook his head. "Thank you very much, good day!" he told her, turning around and heading back to their new boat. "Well?" Vexx asked, picking up his things and stepping towards it. "She's ours!" he said proudly, picking up his own things and stepping aboard.

The boat already had a name, The Small Catch, to Jayce's disappointment, but otherwise he was very happy with their new home. It was a little smaller than Corina's yacht in height, but a fair bit longer. It had only two decks, although the aft deck, with a wheel on top, made a third over the captain's quarters. They left their things on the top deck whilst they looked around. It, like all other sailing vessels in the New World, had a sail to move itself. A jib was attached to the mainsail, but otherwise, excluding the large cargo containers and the brazier, presumably for cooking and storing caught fish, the top deck was remarkably spacious.

The captain's quarters contained a simple bed, a desk, and several cabinets for storage, as well as a bathroom. Vexx immediately unloaded his many bottles into the drink's cabinet. The aft deck had a compass next to the wheel, and provided an easy look around the boat, but when the sail was lowered, Jayce noted it would be difficult to see up ahead. The bottom deck was completely open, allowing for full use and customisation of the space. It was huge, perfect for cargo and easily capable of fitting numerous passenger beds and hammocks. Vexx dropped off his things and after looking around, he gave Jayce a thumbs up.

"Why did you bring all of those weapons?" Jayce finally asked, as they climbed back up onto the top deck and prepared the sails for departure. "You suck at fighting," he stated aptly, climbing up the mast. "Still beat you," Jayce smirked. Vexx rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Regardless, the north is dangerous from what I've heard and despite your friends' little abilities, she, and you, both need to learn proper fighting. Actually, Bjorn sucks too, so all three of you," Vexx continued, jumping from the top of the mast to the deck with a silent landing. "How did you do that?" Jayce asked him. "Magic," Vexx joked, waving his hands in front of him and mimicking Wicke. "Funny."

Their fun was interrupted by the arrival of Wicke and Bjorn, both of whom were carrying large bags of things, as well as dragging two carts behind them, ladled with boxes and crates. "So, this is it?" Bjorn asked, as he admired the boat. "Not bad." Wicke immediately walked inside the captain's quarters and claimed it for herself, dropping her coat off on her bed before returning. Jayce didn't protest,

figuring she deserved a little privacy. "So, quartermaster, what did you buy?" Jayce asked, helping to unload the remaining items before bringing the carts along and storing them below. "I didn't manage to get everything, but base necessities have been obtained. Wicke bought a lot of expensive Guild items so we're pretty much out of money, but I'll head back and get the rest," he admitted to the abject horror of Jayce.

Vexx perked up and looked towards the end of the dock. As Jayce went to go scold the girl, several Navy sailors were approaching them, accompanied by a rather dishevelled Delores, looking worse for wear. "Shit!" Jayce yelled. "We need to go!" he yelled, rushing to the mooring ropes, and untying them as the sailors pointed and ran towards them. Bjorn tied down the sails and Wicke ran to the aft deck to grab the wheel. Vexx stood there, glaring menacingly beyond the sailors as they approached. He then sprinted past Jayce, too fast for his eyes to physically keep up with. "Don't kill them!" Jayce yelled, as he sensed Vexx's bloodlust.

Vexx ran through them, all of the sailors desperately drawing their swords as they turned to face him, only to watch in horror as Vexx struck, in full view of Bjorn, Wicke, and Jayce, at Delores. "You betrayed me!" Vexx told her, as she backed up, cowering from him. "No, not you, they want the gi-", she attempted, just before Vexx flexed his fingers, flattening his hand and chopping straight through her neck with a single strike, her head sailing off and rolling away as her body dropped with a thud.

The sailors rushed him, regaining their senses quickly, but Vexx just vaulted over them, rushing back towards the already-departing boat. He reached the edge of the pier and leapt an impossibly large distance, landing cleanly on the deck. "Hold on!" yelled Wicke, as she raised her arm towards the sail, familiar black lines spreading across her fingers and hand. Wind flew into the sail and the ship lurched forwards, sailing quickly away from the island, alarm bells ringing behind them. Cannon fire rang from up ahead, and two large splashes rained down upon them from the starboard side. "Captain!" yelled Bjorn from up front. "Two Navy ships dead ahead, they're Inquisitors!"

Jayce ran up to the aft deck, grabbing the wheel and turning them northwest to see the two ships up ahead of them. There were two warships quickly approaching them from the starboard side, the angle of intercept fortunately preventing the ships from firing their full arsenal upon them. Wicke dropped her spell and rushed down to the central deck. "Jayce, keep it steady!" she yelled,

raising both arms before sweeping them from her left side to the right in a flowing motion as she chanted. The magical markings spread across all of her fingers, flowing across her hands, spreading up along both arms before spreading across the entirety of her torso. She yelled and the very ocean around the two warships rose up before crashing into the ships, slamming them into each other, before rolling them in a tremendous display of power.

The markings faded once again and she recast her wind magic, accelerating them away from the Capital, away from danger. Jayce angled them north and locked the wheel before he ran and collected his map from his bag. "Jayce," Bjorn called, rushing over to him as Vexx took the helm. "Which way are we taking?" he asked to Jayce's confusion as he looked at the map. "What?" Jayce asked. Bjorn pointed to the map, showing off the large highway that came down from the north. "Sailing directly north will double the length of time, we need to go northeast or northwest," he stated, pointing at the two regions either side.

"Either The Storm or The Keeps," Bjorn confirmed. "The Storm is a tempestuous region prone to strong and calamitous weather. The Keeps are the territories of warlords, known by most Navy sailors as 'the grinder' for the number of wars that occur in that region. Which one Captain?" Jayce looked at the others and back at the map. "The Keeps. We can probably handle a few wars; a storm could doom us," Jayce decided. Bjorn nodded and looked up towards Vexx behind the wheel, one hand containing a bottle of rum. "Vexx! Northeast!" he yelled.

Vexx nodded and turned the wheel in that direction. Jayce looked behind them at the rapidly shrinking Capital: no vessels were in immediate pursuit, so he walked up to Wicke, who still had her backpack on. "We're clear," he told her. "Good job, also what was that?" he asked. She meowed at him, to his confusion. "Uh, what was that?" he asked. She looked down at her feet. "Nothing," she lied, as another meow came from her bag. Bjorn strategically wandered off as she took off her bag in defeat and opened it up, revealing a small black kitten with large, gorgeous, blue eyes. "Wicke..." Jayce began. "I'm sorry, she was all alone in an alley we passed through. I couldn't leave her," she cried, picking up the purring cat. "Can we keep her?" she asked, showing her off to Jayce and pulling a face at him. "Fine, kiddo. You're looking after her and cleaning up after her as well. Promise?"

"I promise. Hear that? You're coming with us!" Wicke said, dancing around with the poor kitten. "Hey, careful!" Jayce told her as Wicke stumbled, nearly throwing the cat overboard. Vexx looked down at the sight and chuckled to

himself. "Hey little witch, what are you going to call her?" he asked, Jayce immediately taking the cat and walking away as Wicke turned a deep shade of red. After getting an earful, Vexx repeated the question. They thought for a moment. "She's called Little Witch," Jayce interrupted, as he sat down with the cat purring on his shoulder. And so their voyage began, a baned, a sorcerer, an alcoholic, a champion, and a cat, as they sailed northeast towards The Keeps.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Paladin's Origin

It was the peak of summer within The Gardens archipelago: the seas were calm, the skies were clear, and Arthuria's armour was hot. Fortunately, the neatly layered insulation, and the ventilating layers, kept the burning hot armour plates away from her soft light skin, whilst still allowing the breeze to keep her cool. The Proctors of smithing, within the Order of the Glorious Light, had specially added the additional insulation and padding, as per her detailed specifications – a newly appointed Paladin deserves such intricacies after all her hard work. Despite the hot weather, chills ran through Arthuria as she looked around at the squad assembled on their ship – high-ranking members of the Order, all seven Sentinels, and even the Elder. It was an honour, nay, a privilege of the highest level to be counted among this exclusive squad. She, of all the Paladins, had been specifically chosen to join them on this quest, something Arthuria still didn't quite understand – sure she was the youngest female Paladin, sure she had a perfect record of arrests, inspections, and record-keeping.

"Rookie! Back to it!" interrupted High Sentinel Cauchon, snapping Arthuria out of her own internal awards ceremony. "Yes Sentinel!" Arthuria blurted, snapping to attention and drawing her longsword from its sheath. She lay her sword across her vambrace, focussing hard and drawing from within herself and her oath. The tip of her sword glowed before igniting into a heatless golden-orange flame. Arthuria then spread the fingers of her spare hand and an orb of golden energy formed in front of her palm. She aimed at the large crystal sphere near the rear of the ship and placed her palm onto the large ball. The water inside bubbled and the steam paddle connected to it began to spin, accelerating the ship. "Good job rookie!" confirmed the Sentinel, now satisfied that the grunt brought along was doing her job. "You can have another break in an hour," he said, stomping away to join the other Sentinels on the main deck, his own plate armour rattling as he walked. Arthuria sighed, so much for grandeur... or an acknowledgment of her skills and devotion.

It had been two long weeks of this, just the nine of them. An honour... sure; at least they were hunting. "More wreckage!" called Sentinel Dauphin from somewhere near the bow. "We must be close, Arthuria, we're counting on you to catch them!" said Sentinel Metz. "Yes sir!" Arthuria replied, repositioning herself to make better use of the sun's natural energy. The group returned to silence, but the signs of a potential end to their quest gave a renewed vigour to Arthuria. As she looked out into the sea, the wreckage of Imperial ships, cleanly cut in two, or otherwise eviscerated, surrounded their small ship, not too far away from the local Navy base smoking in the distance. A big hunt indeed: bandits, pillagers, raiders, all armed with magical weapons.

More wreckage drifted by, no longer Imperial – just simple merchants unlucky with their voyage. Arthuria ground her teeth, her body sore and sweaty as she pushed every last ounce of effort into her spell. It made no difference, but temporarily the pain ceased. An armoured hand rested itself on Arthuria's shoulder and she turned her head. "Good job Pendragon, that's enough. Grab your helmet," ordered Sentinel Pasquerel, helping Arthuria to her feet before slamming his flat headed helmet onto his head. Arthuria nodded and rushed to her temporary quarters, a bedroll on the wooden floor next to two barrels in the hold. Her silver, winged helmet lay where she had left it. She grabbed it, slammed it on, and raised the visor before heading back up top.

"Ready for some real action, rookie?" asked Sentinel Baudricourt, his giant frame blocking the view ahead. "Of course she is!" intercepted Sentinel Dunois. "Keep the chatter quiet, the rookie is staying behind," ordered the final Sentinel, Rais. The other Sentinels looked at each other and then back at their leader as she walked through them, dressed in her black and gold armour, to the front of the ship; allowing Arthuria to see the island cove directly ahead of them. The Elder turned back to them, her helmet in her arm and her sword not yet drawn. She looked at Dunois, nodding, before turning away. "That's that, stay close to me Arthuria. Time to show you how the best of the best handle pillagers and pirates!"

Chapter 18: A Paladin's Conquest

Arthuria and the Sentinels sailed straight into the cove, the Sentinels leaping onto the sands with their Elder leading the charge as their ship beached itself. They ignored the gunfire from the raiders holed up in the island's main cave, the rounds bouncing harmlessly off their enchanted armour, continuing their charge forwards, swords drawn. A more heavy boom echoed from the cave up ahead and a large cannonball flew towards them. "Get down, Arthuria!" yelled Sentinel Dunois, shoving Arthuria to the ground as the cannonball tore through the sand where she had just been standing. "Hallowed Ward!" yelled Pasquerel, warning the group of his spellcasting as a glowing gold shield surrounded them, a few other cannonballs bouncing off the barrier. Arthuria clambered to her feet, surveying the terrain: a large open beach with a water-filled trench dug into the sand, leading upwards to a nearby cave, presumably a means to stash the pirates' ship. If they weren't marauding raiders, she'd have been impressed.

With Pasquerel holding the shield up, the cannon and gunfire halted, replaced by a single glowing light emanating from the cave. "Scatter!" ordered Baudricourt from the front, as a bright beam of light turned the sand around them to glass, shattering Pasquerel's shield. The gunfire and cannon fire resumed; the squad separating and splitting up across the beach. They pushed up forwards, Baudricourt charging forwards across the sands, his greatsword slashing any flying cannonball in half. A glowing ball flew at him, and he slashed at it, only for it to explode as he accidentally ignited the blast powder inside. He flew backwards, tumbling down the beach, but, by digging his greatsword into the sand, he managed to land back on his feet as he slid across the sands to land next to Arthuria – a holy Sentinel would never fall to such pitiful attacks. "Get to work Rookie! Charge!" he ordered, pushing forwards.

Arthuria followed him in pursuit, his much larger form getting away from her across the awkward footing of the beach. Glowing auras all shrouded the Sentinels as they extended one of their hands towards the cave, their eyes glowing a bright golden light from beneath their helmets and their swords ignited in a golden flame as they chanted. "Cleansing Ray!" they yelled, beams of golden energy firing from their hands towards the cave. Yells came from inside and the pirates charged out in retaliation, wielding a variety of stolen Navy weapons. "To the Elder!" yelled Rais, backing towards the rest of the group to resume formation. The other Sentinels matched him, surrounding their leader with Arthuria at the rear.

The Elder pointed her sword down to the sands, sticking it deep into the ground as she began to chant quickly in Arcanum, the language of magic. The shrouding aura that emanated from the Elder when she cast was larger, brighter, and, unlike the Sentinels, it covered her entire body as well as her sword, glowing like another layer of armour. She raised her head, twisting the hilt of the sword and spraying sand into the air as a glowing wave of golden light spread out from her in a bubble. "Holy Aura!" yelled the Elder of the Paladins. Any fatigue faded, a glowing shield forming around all of the Sentinels and Arthuria, and she felt faster, stronger, braver. "Paladins! Smite these scum!" yelled Dauphin, rushing forwards across the sands in a blink of an eye, the rest of the squad in swift pursuit. "For Elder d'Arc!" yelled Metz, his cry taken up by the others as they engaged the forty-or-so pirates stampeding from the cave.

The pirates never stood a chance: any attack that managed to slip through their guards bounced off the enchanted armour of the Paladins like sticks against a brick wall. Every strike they made bisected, cleaved, or otherwise sliced through their enemies as if they were paper. Arthuria faced her few, those cunning enough to try to flank the group, but she easily dodged their strikes, retaliating with a clean beheading blow each time. "Arthuria look out!" cried Elder d'Arc from further up the beach. Arthuria just managed to dodge, vaulting away with a one-handed back-handspring, as a golden bolt of light flew past her eyes, an enchanted spear digging a new trench into the sands all the way to the water, several metres away. The spear disappeared in a burst of blinding light, leaving nothing behind but a stream of molten glass and a pool of boiling water.

Arthuria cleared away the stragglers with a barrage of quick and exhausting slashes before she turned away to look up the beach. The Sentinels all stood in a large heptagon around Elder d'Arc as she duelled the bandit leader, longsword versus spear. They moved in a blur, Arthuria's eyes hardly able to keep up. The bandit leader was bleeding heavily through their clothes; Jeanne's armour remained unblemished. The bandit thrust forwards in an overreaching, and fatal, jab – Jeanne sidestepped and delivered a powerful kick to the weapon, sending it sailing away into the sands of the beach before she carried the momentum with a twist and cleaved her sword through her enemy, just above their hips. The bandit stood there, unable to move as they looked around at the corpse-filled beach. Their torso then slid away from the rest of their body, and they fell to the ground, dead. Silence echoed across the cove, and the group looked around the beach – at the field of corpses of their own making.

Jeanne wiped her sword and slotted the blade back in its sheath before walking over to the discarded spear. She picked it up: it was a large weapon, nearly two metres in length and covered in runic etchings, brimming with magical energy. "Mission complete!" declared Rais, putting away his own weapon and sliding up his visor. He looked over at Arthuria, passing over her as he assessed the area, before turning to Metz and Baudricourt. He tilted his head towards the cave and the pair set off, as the other Sentinels and the Elder headed back to the ship with their prize. She stopped next to Arthuria, her shoulders low and hands gripping the spear tightly. She looked up at Arthuria through her helmet – her green eyes filled with remorse and regret as she looked once more around the battlefield. She then tapped Arthuria on the shoulder in acknowledgment, before carrying on silently back to their ship.

Arthuria nearly fainted from the recognition, but a swift punch to her shoulder from Dunois snapped her out of it. "Ow," she said, out of shock rather than pain. He nodded to her and beckoned for her to follow. "Good job. Was this your first battle?" he asked, carrying his helmet by his side. She shook her head. "First of this size, but no – I partook in the battle of Two Rivers, among others," she stated, following closely and wiping off the blood and gore from her armour and sword. "You did well, I'm sure the others noticed as well... not quite to a Sentinel's standard, but of a fitting calibre to say the least. With a few more quests under your belt, who knows, maybe you'll be considered to become the next Sentinel," he told her, once more causing her to sway on her feet. "Hey, hey, get a hold of yourself," he ordered, laughing as she stumbled over her own feet. "Yes, sir!"

A scream came down the beach from within the cave, followed by a few more – all swiftly silenced. Baudricourt and Metz emerged not long after, both splashed in deep crimson. "All clear!" yelled Baudricourt, as he limped out into the sunlight, carrying several additional magical items. Metz extended a glowing arm and he quickly stopped limping as he was healed using Metz's magic. "And he wonders why he's called The Butcher..." muttered Dunois, shaking his head. "You could have spared a few for questioning!" Dunois yelled up the beach, ignoring the insults sent back in retaliation as he climbed back on board their ship. Arthuria followed and stood waiting at attention as the other Sentinels returned to the ship.

Metz checked her over for any wounds, then swiftly ordered her to make the battle report and request a clean-up from the Navy. She didn't mind, it wasn't the worst job and, compared to being used as an engine, it was a job she much

preferred. After finishing the write up, she used the communicator given to her to get in contact with the Navy headquarters, the Guild logo stamped onto its metal shell. The magic crystal that powered it thrummed in her hand as she walked back and forth in the hold talking to one of the attendants on the other side. "Yes, yes. No, no," Arthuria concluded with a deep sigh, "Look it's just my orders, straight from the Elder herself. Please just get it done. Thank you, goodbye!" she finished, almost throwing the device across the hold in anger. Joint operations, open communications... as if – she thought.

"Ahem," came a soft voice from near the stairs. Arthuria turned around quickly, lowering her arm in mixed horror as she faced Elder d'Arc. "Sorry Elder," Arthuria said, hanging her head in shame, terrified at what other gestures and actions had been observed during her communications. Jeanne smiled a little, her mouth hardly moving. Her hair was dark, almost black, and shaped like a bob on her head – slightly longer at the front, leaving the back of her neck exposed. She stepped forwards and walked up to Arthuria, looking slightly upwards to meet Arthuria's shameful gaze. She got close, unnervingly so, her armour fantastically decorated and perfectly fit to her frame; it was almost silent as she walked. She gently grabbed Arthuria's wrist, turning her hand over and taking the communication device.

Arthuria was stunned; she had never been this close to the Elder, and on closer inspection, Arthuria suspected that Jeanne was younger than her – roughly sixteen, one or two years younger at most. They stared at each other in silence, her green eyes meeting Arthuria's golden yellow; Arthuria getting redder and redder by the moment. Eventually, Arthuria cleared her throat and Jeanne blushed, shaking her head as she realised a little too late that she had invaded Arthuria's space. Flustered, she quickly stepped backwards and shook her hands in front of her, embarrassed by her actions as she desperately tried to find her words. "Sorry," she said softly, disappearing quickly out of the hold. Arthuria stood there, confused, but it wasn't long until a voice echoed across the ship. "Rookie! Get to work!" yelled Baudricourt.

They sailed north, aiming to meet up with the eastern highway, to carry them more quickly back to the Capital - that was until Metz announced they were running low on food. With little other choice, they angled for a nearby island, Rosemary Court. The island was small on approach, covered in open plains and farmland, not too different from any of the other farmland islands within the Gardens Archipelago. A small village sat near the main island port, the many island villas made out of a light-coloured stone, their roofs made of curved

orange slate. Cobblestone or dirt roads marked the majority of the transport routes within the island; from Arthuria's view at the rear of the ship, it looked peaceful.

They docked in the port; surprisingly it was empty, there was no-one around and the area was a mess. The Sentinels looked at each other nervously, and cautiously they departed, the island too quiet. Arthuria stuck to the rear as they moved in a casual formation, weapons yet to be drawn but hands hovering ready. "Where is everyone? There should always be at least a dockhand..." Dauphin muttered, as he walked next to Arthuria. "Quiet! Does anyone else hear that?" Cauchon asked. The group slowed, a set of deep stomps could be heard not too far away. They stopped. A loud roar followed, and the entire group of Sentinels charged forwards, rushing up the steps towards the village, leaving Jeanne and Arthuria behind. Jeanne looked at Arthuria and nodded before running after them, with Arthuria close behind.

The village was full of monsters: a pair of huge ogres stood stomping around the centre of the village square, an overly large cart full of vegetables lay tipped over on its side next to one of them. Children ran in a hurry, a small gang of green, pointy-eared goblins chasing after them. A shadow sat in the fountain, her pure black body nude, her curved horns twisted to the side, and her glowing orange eyes watching the children as they ran from the goblins. She flickered – changing her form in a puff of smoke into one of the children. The Sentinels leapt forwards, Baudricourt rushing forwards and leaping off the tipped-over cart to plunge his huge sword into the nearest ogre's neck, whilst Pasquerel and Metz took out the other one with a powerful combination as they attacked high and low with a series of piercing strikes. Dunois, Cauchon, and Dauphin all set upon the playing goblins, hacking them down before they could even react, whilst Rais unleashed a powerful blast of radiant energy into the shadow masquerading as a child.

It was over in an instant. Arthuria hadn't even drawn her sword as she looked around the square – the villagers all staring in horror, the small children looking up at the three towering Sentinels, smeared in the blood of their playmates. The second ogre succumbed to her wounds, her hand smacking down onto the cobblestone, her nails painted and decorated a variety of colours and patterns, her oversized and handcrafted clothes well-kept and colourful. The shadow reverted back to her original form, slowly reaching out towards a small group of villagers huddled together near one of the shops. An old man rushed over, heading towards her, waving a cane and crying out, only for Rais to plunge his sword through her, finishing her off.

"Oh gods," Arthuria muttered, horrified, screams echoing around the village as the majority of the island's villagers ran off. Rais stood proud on the fountain, looking around from beneath his helmet. "Stay calm, islanders – the danger is over!" he proclaimed proudly. "The non-humans have been purged, you are safe!" he declared. The old man fell to his knees by the fountain, the shadow's orange blood spreading across the waters; he grasped her hand and held it tightly, bowing his head as tears flowed down his face. Rais' prideful manner dispersed as no-one cheered for him. Dunois, Pasquerel, and Metz all took off their helmets, their faces filled with the horror of their own actions as they slowly stepped back towards the others, reconvening around Jeanne, who remained silent – her helmet hiding her face and her body expressionless.

The old man looked up at Rais. "Murderer..." he said quietly. Rais turned to look down at him, his sword still drawn. "What was that?" he asked. The old man slowly got to his feet, his joints creaking and back popping as he tried to straighten his curved back to look upwards. "Murderer!" he yelled, spitting at Rais. Baudricourt grabbed Rais just as he went to swing, dragging the Sentinel back to the group as the first stones and sticks started to fly in their direction, the feeble projectiles bouncing harmlessly off their armour.

"What a mess..." muttered Metz, looking at the others. "Grab what we need and let's get out of here." The others nodded, the few remaining villagers stepping aside as the Paladins requisitioned the supplies they needed, or wanted. Arthuria stood motionlessly next to Jeanne, her eyes wandering to the crowd, spotting several small shadows and goblins hidden amongst the wall of villagers. She opened her mouth to speak, only to quickly notice Jeanne's helmet angled slightly towards her, her green eyes looking right at her in her periphery through the gap in her visor. Arthuria closed her mouth, deciding to keep it quiet, instead picking up one of the sacks of vegetables and walking with it back to the ship, each step feeling heavier than the last.

As she returned to the group, a mob of villagers armed with pitchforks and other farming tools came running into the square. The Sentinels spotted them quickly, drawing their own weapons, expecting a fight, but in a burst of blinding light Jeanne appeared between the two groups. The mob stopped and she looked at them, holding up a hand. She threw a pouch of money onto the floor, several black coins bouncing across the cobblestone. She bowed low and turned around, walking away back to the ship. The Sentinels put away their swords, and collected their supplies before following, leaving Arthuria behind. The old man

looked at her and she looked at him as he cradled the corpse of the female shadow. "I'm sorry..." she said, before turning and following after the others.

The remainder of the journey held a much more sour mood, but the entire group put in the effort to speed along their voyage as best as they could, and it wasn't too long before they spotted the familiar sight of the Imperial Capital on the horizon. They docked on the Isle of Sanctity, using the Paladin ports to enter the conclave unhindered. As Arthuria packed up her equipment in the hold, she heard a knock come from the stairs. The Sentinels had already disembarked, so she turned her head casually out of curiosity – almost jumping out of her skin as Elder d'Arc stood there.

"Elder! Sorry, I thought you had left already," Arthuria stammered, fixing her loose armour and standing to attention. Jeanne shook her head. "It's alright," she said softly. Arthuria had hardly seen her since the incident, but she felt relieved to see the Elder was okay. Jeanne opened her mouth to say something, only to close it and look conflicted. She shook her head and steeled herself. "What are your thoughts on what happened?" Jeanne asked uncomfortably. Arthuria went to speak, only for Jeanne to hold up a hand. "Truthfully... please," she requested, placing down a backpack of her own on the stairs and sitting down.

Arthuria nodded, thinking to herself. "It was a screw-up, and it was a lucky break that it didn't end in human bloodshed," she answered, relaxing a little from seeing the leader of the Paladins sat casually on the stairs. Jeanne nodded. "Human bloodshed?" she asked Arthuria curiously, holding her hands in her lap and tilting her head slightly. "I... I don't know how to answer," Arthuria stated. Jeanne nodded and stood up. "Human life is the most valuable, is it not? That's what the Sentinels believe," Jeanne said, turning away. Arthuria looked up at the Elder. "Is it not?" she asked. Jeanne looked over her shoulder before picking up her bag. "Dismissed, Paladin. You did well..." she said softly, before walking out of the hold.

Arthuria stood there for a while longer, desperately trying to make sense of it all. Frustrated, she grabbed her things and headed off the ship, dropping her things off in her quarters before setting off on patrol – an excuse for a long walk to unwind after a long voyage. She headed to the central isle, walking across the long interconnecting bridge, other Paladins - most of them simple Knights or below - saluting her as she passed. She returned it with half effort, unable to keep her head held high as she traversed the streets, her armour rattling with each heavy footstep. She found herself near the centre of the island, the other Paladins

on patrol too engrained in their own work to pay her any attention – she didn't particularly have many friends within the order anyway, so it wasn't as if she was expecting a conversation.

Instead, she leant against a wall, observing the streets and munching on a late morning breakfast pastry from her favourite shop, Wilham's Emporium. The streets were surprisingly busy for the time - some people acknowledged her presence, most didn't. As she finished her food, a set of small and quick moving feet caught her attention as they rushed through the crowd. They carried up quickly behind a pair of travellers, both carelessly walking through the streets with several large bags of luggage. The small boy reached forward, weaving his hand between the tall, young man's arm and snatching his money pouch.

Arthuria rolled her eyes and as the child attempted to get away, she tripped him, catching the flying pouch and turning on the urchin, his eyes full of terror and face full of mud as he looked up at her. He shut his eyes defeated, looking away as if expecting a finishing blow. He remained that way a little longer before he slowly looked back up at her. "You're not going to kill me?" he asked nervously. "What makes you think I would?" she asked. He looked around and climbed to his feet, holding his hands up. "Isn't that what you people normally do?" Flashes of the slaughtered goblins obscured her vision, but she shook it off and looked back at the boy. "No, we're the good guys. Don't pickpocket. This is your one warning, if you need a place to go and get food, go to the old chapel. Don't let me catch you again or you might not get off so lightly!" she warned. His eyes lit up and he cautiously backed away before racing off in a full sprint. She looked back around, trying to spot the pair from earlier: a flash of orange hair caught her attention, and she ran off after them. "Excuse me!" she called out.

After giving them directions, she left the pair to their travels and headed back to the conclave, walking straight to the Paladin district. As she walked through the hallways of the Holy Palace, the Warlocks of the Blind Mother and Daughters of Shade didn't even bother to acknowledge her presence, but a few Sisters smiled at her, which was always nice to see. She headed to her quarters, glad to no longer be in the barracks and actually have some privacy. She locked the door to her room and ran herself a bath, taking off and polishing her armour as the tub filled, before opening the shoebox hidden under her bed and pulling out one of the books from her, more private, collection. 'Noire Lucinda's Adventures of Love, Adultery, and Heroism - Volume II' by Thalia Amore, to be exact. Smut by any other term, but a bit of fun that she enjoyed and something she would get in big trouble for possessing.

After her bath, she retired to her bed, something she had sorely missed over the last few weeks and, despite it being early afternoon, she shut her eyes and drifted off to sleep, her body overwhelmingly exhausted. She woke up multiple times only finding a true sense of sleep once the sun had sunk into the horizon, but dreams still interrupted her rest. Her mind flashed with the images of the villager's fear and horror, the terror and acceptance of the street urchin, and the disillusioned, confused, and scared look of the Paladin Elder, Jeanne d'Arc.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Paladin's Truth

It had been a few days since Arthuria had returned to the Capital, a restless few days. There had been little to do, so she found herself often trying to find something, anything, to occupy herself with. She wandered the city, visited Sister Meredea at the old church – to which, even days later, she didn't quite understand why the tourists had been there, and otherwise tried to find some semblance of peace. Unfortunately her mind continued to disturb her and just as she was making headway, she found a note slipped underneath her door.

She opened it to find the official stamp of the Elder marked upon the letter: orders from the top. She read it, dressed in her under-armour, and her stomach sank. She grabbed the door handle, pulling open to door to find a very startled Squire stood at the door about to knock. He looked up at her in fear, before regaining his composure. "Paladin Pendragon, your presence has been requested by the dock. You are to leave immediately!" he declared boldly, his voice breaking as he said so.

Arthuria sighed, shutting the door in the kid's face and putting on her armour, before grabbing a quick bag of supplies for a long voyage. She opened and locked her door, hurrying quickly towards the dock, only to spot a familiar figure walking along one of the corridors in her ceremonial armour - a more ornate version of her battle armour decorated in platinum, gold, pearl, and gemstones - with a large crown on her head and a long flowing red cape. Walking next to her was Sentinel Rais, his shoulder-length dark hair tied up in a bun and his short beard styled in a pointed look. Arthuria stormed towards them. "Elder, did I do something wrong? Was I not a useful member to the team?" she confronted. Rais' red eyes flashed at her with quick anger.

Jeanne looked at Arthuria in surprise, her gaze quickly averting. "Why have I been sent up north, on an inquisition of all things?" Arthuria asked. Rais stepped

forwards as Jeanne stammered, confused. "Your orders are your orders, know your place Paladin and treat the Elder with more respect or I'll have you brought up on disciplinary charges!" he yelled at her, getting terrifyingly close to her. Arthuria stood her ground, looking up at him with a cold and unafraid look, but eventually he stepped back. "You are dismissed, Paladin," he told her calmly, before walking past her, Jeanne following closely.

Arthuria stood there until her body stopped shaking, then with a defeated sigh she headed to the docks. A Bishop stood waiting for her. "Ah, finally. Get on board Paladin, the rest of the fleet has already set off." Arthuria nodded and climbed on board, a few other Paladin Knights standing to attention as she stepped onto the deck. "At ease," she said quietly, leaning against the railing as the ship set off, the various Priests on board using their magic to boost the ship's speed. "What's the mission, Paladin?" asked one of the Knights, walking up to lean next to Arthuria. "We are hunting the Nomads of the Ice Floes - prepare for a long, cold, and boring trip." The Knight left to relay the orders to the other Paladins on board, leaving Arthuria to watch as the Capital sank further and further into the distance.

Chapter 19: Brothers in Arms

Zenobia beckoned for Alara to follow, leading her away from the main training yards, Alara carrying the large glaive carefully in her left hand. She was led to a large building, designed no different from the various other wooden and metal buildings, but this one was more like a complex, or an academy – it had at least three floors and a large internal gymnasium. The Instructor led Alara through the main doors of the large hall, returning her to the group she had initially been dropped off with. The twelve Marines - Wulf counted among them, albeit stood away to the side talking with another outcast - all stood to attention as they walked in, most looking Alara up and down with curiosity. They were all wearing their armour, excluding their coats, most of which had been folded and placed, or thrown, to the sides of the hall.

“At ease. Squad, this is your newest member, Alara Vanathur – make her welcome and catch her up to speed,” Zenobia stated. She then turned to face Alara, speaking more quietly. “I’ll put in a request for your official weapon. Officer’s training will occur three times a week: Solansday, Antumday, and Lunday - straight after dinner; until I deem you fit to join the official course. Come to this building. I’ll also get a research permit assigned to you. Don’t be embarrassed to ask questions, we’re here to mould you into something greater than you would be otherwise. Work hard, Marine,” Zenobia concluded, patting Alara on the shoulder before turning to walk out of the gymnasium, halting once and looking over towards Wulf, beckoning him to follow.

The squad converged on Alara, surrounding her and unleashing a barrage of excited questions: where was she from, why was she joining late, why did she have a unique weapon? “Let the newbie breathe, stand back!” came a posh, deep, and well-spoken voice from amongst the group, as a tall, blonde, man stepped forwards, his eyes an ice blue colour. The others seemed to listen and stepped back a little, automatically forming into their friendship groups – mostly pairs and trios. “Anson Brett, pleasure to meet you number thirteen,” he said, extending a gloved hand to her. “And you. Number thirteen?” Alara queried, shaking his hand tightly. He smiled and stepped back. “Hierarchy; as the newbie you’re number thirteen, although I guess Wulf is twelve point five, maybe eight. Ah, you’ll be number twelve then,” he laughed, Alara not understanding the joke. “And you are?” she pressed, bringing herself up a little taller as she tried to read the room. “Number one, of course,” replied Brett, with a slightly irritated look. “Ah, doesn’t matter – welcome to squad W6.”

Alara looked at the others, the members introducing themselves one after another; a few, the ones mingling with Brett, introducing themselves alongside their group-assigned numbers, all significantly higher than Alara suspected was warranted. The squad was mixed, four women, eight men, and one baned – Alara quickly broke them down into smaller groups based on how they interacted with each other. There were the ‘air-breathers’ - Anson Brett, Luke Ryker, Lyon Axel, and Raine Delex - all categorised from their self-proclaimed hierarchy of numbers one, two, three, and four. There were the ‘gossipers’: a pair of talkative and overly positive girls, Violette Bancroft and Astris Kai. Then there was the ‘filling’ - the rest of the group, excluding the pair of ‘outcasts’: Ashton Braze, Chase Soner, Silas Gale and Corenthydallos Philentis Witchford – the last of which was only referred by his last name. That left Wulf, who had returned by now and was glaring at Alara from across the room, as well as a loner girl with only one name – Riley, or Wiley according to the gossipers.

As they began their interrogations, a loud whistle echoed around the room. Immediately the entire group ran to the sides, forming up in a line – the recently returned Wulf stood grumpily at the end, vaguely staring at Alara. “Right!” yelled out an Instructor as he entered the room, the squad immediately standing to attention. Alara quickly made her way over to the line, standing on the end next to Wulf and mimicking the other recruits. “That’s enough time to stretch and warm-up, as Imperial Marines you should expect to fight against enemies of all calibre. Now that you’re settled in, the training really begins. Pair up and pick a mat, you’ll be practicing your martial training - get used to this, you’ll be doing it daily!” he ordered. The squad paired up, all sticking to those they had befriended, leaving Alara on her own.

The Instructor looked around, peering curiously through his spectacles, his short white hair cropped neatly. He counted the group, then counted again, then again, until finally he pointed at Alara. “Who are you?” he asked, noticing the glaive in her hands. Alara stood at attention. “Alara Vanathur, sir!” she stated, a few quiet laughs coming from the air-breathers. The Instructor nodded, thinking to himself before his face changed into swift realisation. “Right, of course you are. Welcome aboard, refer to me as Instructor Gibbs, or sir. Riley, pair up with Vanathur, Wulf can be your joint opponent,” ordered the Instructor, stepping back. “Learn fast recruit, you have a lot to catch up on. Get to work!”

The line broke up, the various pairs spreading out to the various large padded rings located across the room. Alara took off her coat, folding it neatly and placing it to the side, alongside her training glaive, before turning to face the pair

she was working with. Riley was a slightly shorter girl, her long blonde hair clipped upwards at the back of her head, with a small fringe that stuck upwards before falling diagonally across her forehead. She had large brown eyes, and what Alara had immediately thought was a quiet disposition, turned out to be a rather cheery and alert personality as she talked to a rather disgruntled Wulf. She spotted Alara looking at them and the outgoing personality shifted, becoming sterner, quieter.

“Hi there,” Alara attempted, receiving next to no response outside of a simple nod as they stepped into the ring. Wulf looked at the pair, before chiming in. “We met before, call me Wulf, this is Riley. Senior Instructor Zenobia ordered me to look after you, so if you have any questions, please ask someone else,” he stated. Alara looked around the room, spotting a collection of textbooks on a table by the side. She started to make her way over to the table only to jump as the Instructor’s voice rang out as he watched her walk across the room. “To start things off, demonstrate what it is you do know,” he ordered, tilting his head back towards Alara’s mat. “Any holds, grips, strikes, demonstrate. We’ll move from mat to mat, show me your best and don’t hold back.”

Alara trundled back towards the mat standing at the edge and observing alongside the rest of the squad as the various pairs demonstrated what they did know – it was clear that the majority had all received training in some form or another, with Brett and Astris in particular showing high levels of familiarity with the specific instructions given out by Instructor Gibbs. Finally, the group rounded on the trio. “Wulf, you’ll be on the receiving end. I don’t want any permanent injuries today!” ordered Gibbs. Riley went first, given a rather poor strike to Wulf’s chest. She rubbed her sore knuckles, and stepped back. “Anything else?” asked the Instructor. Riley shook her head. He nodded and looked towards Alara.

“Hey Wulf, give the rookie a proper bout!” called out Brett from the back. Gibbs turned towards him, and Brett immediately backed down, but Alara raised her arms to form a guard and looked up at Wulf, a small grin on her face and her hair tied up. “Show me what you’ve got Wulf,” Alara told him. Wulf looked at Instructor Gibbs, who nodded, granting permission. He was considerably larger than Alara, nearing seven foot, but compared to Ottar, he was a runt. Wulf rocked back before launching a fast and powerful blow towards her. Alara ducked under, grabbing his forearm before wrapping her legs around his arm and shoulder, throwing him down over her with a slam. She landed on top, her knee hovering just above his throat, her leg pinning his arm and both hands free. The

silence was palpable as shock echoed around. Wulf blinked heavily as he looked up at Alara, the ceiling lights casting a glow around her head. Alara stepped off him, offering a hand, which he ignored. The other members of her squad stared in a mixture of awe and envy. "There are others I can demonstrate, sir," Alara offered, a bit too proudly. Instructor Gibbs nodded. "Demonstrate away – squad, watch carefully."

The hour went quickly, Alara using it to show off the training Ottar had given her, whilst also hungrily accepting any of the techniques Instructor Gibbs had to offer the squad. Riley remained silent throughout, deliberately engaging as little as possible throughout the training. They packed up and reassembled before their Instructor, as he asked them various questions about their training and exercise, most of which Alara was stumped by. "Vanathur, within the chain of command, it is imperative that communication remains clear. In the case you receive two different orders, one from Senior Instructor Zenobia and then later one from myself, who's orders do you follow first? You are nearly finished with Instructor Zenobia's orders and mine will require at least an hour to complete," he asked. Alara froze, she had no idea.

"Instructor Zenobia," Alara guessed. A few quiet laughs came from Brett and his followers down the line. "False, follow the last order given. It is on you to inform me, after I have given you your orders, that I am countermanding the Senior Instructors commands. After which it is my responsibility to either insist on your new orders, which you will follow dutifully, and inform the Senior Instructor of this reassignment or to reassign your previous orders." He walked down the line to face her. "This is something you should have learnt a week prior, you have some catching up to do. Witchford, why is it we operate in this manner?" asked Instructor Gibbs, walking away from Alara, her twisted stomach slowly unknotting itself. "In battle, previous orders may have become irrelevant, in which case new orders take a precedence and require action to aide in the conflict," Witchford stated with great articulacy from down the line. Gibbs stepped back, looking over the group. "Precisely, no point continuing to scrub the deck in the middle of an ambush. Make your way over to the training fields - dismissed."

Alara sighed to herself as she relaxed, frustrated and embarrassed by her failure. She put on her coat and picked up her training glaive, walking quickly with the others out of the gymnasium. "Tough luck rookie," smirked Brett from the front of pack as he looked back at her. Astris nudged Alara. "Don't mind him, you weren't here for the first week. By the way, Alara, why is it you have a glaive

rather than a sword?" she asked curiously, her long black hair tied in a simple bun, her dark eyes looking at Alara intensely. She was of a similar height to Riley, a few inches shorter than Alara, with fair skin. The others all looked at Alara curiously as she walked in the middle of the group. "Probably because she's too careless to use a sword so she needs the big stick," laughed Axel, his red hair bright in the sunlight. "Instructor Zenobia recommended I use an alternate weapon, since I'm on the Officer's course," Alara retaliated quickly in a boastful manner. Brett turned an extremely pale colour and Axel turned the same shade as his hair. "Oh," Astris said quietly, the other members of the group all stepping away from Alara.

The rest of the walk occurred in muted conversation, Alara spent the entire time regretting her choice of words. They arrived at the training fields quickly, the three other squads within their platoon arriving shortly after. They were split up across the dirt field, with each recruit assigned a square to follow their weapon drills within; the drill leader, another Instructor under Zenobia, stood in front of the entire platoon, demonstrating a variety of sword forms. Gibbs stood to the side, talking to Zenobia whilst keeping an eye on the squad. Alara, noticing herself as the one outlier, practiced the few forms she had learnt aboard The Heavenly Hand, keeping far to the back so as to not draw any attention. She practiced her thrusts, sweeps, and parries, but she felt uncertain, and it clearly showed.

Zenobia walked around the large field, correcting a few forms as she passed, eventually stopping next to Alara. She placed a large textbook on the ground, flicking through the book to a specific page showing off several forms and styles for glaive users. "Recruit, if you don't mind?" she asked, extending her metal hand towards Alara's temporary glaive. Alara nodded and handed it over, stepping aside to grant Zenobia full use of the court. She briefly glanced at the open page, adjusting her grip – demonstrating for Alara to mimic in the air. The blade was pointed behind her with the main staff directly across her body in front of her. She winced a little, the large scar across her chest, neck, and cheek, clearly uncomfortable, before she loosened her grip and rotated the staff. It moved terrifyingly quickly in her hands, her eyes constantly on the book as she adjusted her position and stance, the blade and staff circling around her with a blur of motion. She twisted and struck with lightning speed, the blade halting a centimetre away from Alara's eye. "Not a bad style, follow the book – keep it handy for all future weapon drills and I'll critique where necessary," Zenobia told Alara, handing back the glaive before walking away.

Alara followed the manual for the rest of the hour, returning to the rest of her squad before they made their way over to the shooting ranges. They were each requisitioned a rifle - a riptide - a heavy weapon made mostly of wood, designed to rest on top of the shoulder, with a bolt-action handle to load the next shot from the clip into the rifle's chamber. It felt uncomfortable to handle, but by the end of the hour, of which the entirety was spent disassembling and reassembling the weapon, Alara knew every inch of the rifle.

The rest of the day passed quickly; they first headed back to their barracks for inspection and reflection on their day, Alara's stomach growling the entire time from missing lunch. Then they had physical training for the following two hours: weightlifting and bodyweight workouts, cardio from running, and then a long swim in the bay to finish, both sets of cardio occurring in full equipment.

With training over, the group progressed to the mess hall. They had been given plenty of time to eat, and, with such a long day, Alara quickly shovelled down the rice, vegetables, and meat as quickly as possible, heading back for seconds and thirds. Had she not been sitting alone, she was sure she would have been embarrassed by the ravenous display. Eventually, after presumably looking depressed for far too long, Wulf made his way over and sat across from her on one of the benches. "Look, I don't appreciate being forced to socialise, but I don't like doing a job half-arsed," he said gruffly, resting his hand into the dark fur on his chin. "The first week mostly consisted of understanding chain of command, discipline, expectations..." he ran through, continuing the list for some time and varying in detail about what Alara had missed. She nodded along, quickly noting down his words to research in depth later on. "There, good luck!" he concluded, standing up and walking away. "Thank you!" Alara called after him.

Now aware of their schedule, Alara headed back to the barracks to hit the showers before anyone else. The sleeping quarters were separated by squad, with nothing more than a large opaque curtain granting privacy between the male and female sides. Alara found her things waiting for her, along with a library pass resting on the bed. With little else to do, she used the rest of the time allotted for food to check out the library, returning quickly to the barracks, as the others arrived to use the showers, carrying a large stack of books. After shower time, two of the four Instructors under Zenobia began to patrol the halls, observing as the various squads used the tools and time provided to maintain and repair their equipment. With the remaining hours officially dedicated to 'free time', Gibbs made it his personal mission to assign the various members of the squad jobs to do - fortunately for Alara, the large stack of books, and the notes she was taking,

seemed to deter him from interfering with her studies. Lights out came at nine, and Alara fell asleep extremely quickly.

The morning came too soon, and by too soon – it was three-thirty in the morning. Various members of the squad getting up and moving around disturbed her sleep as they prepared for the official wake-up call. Alara sensed this was for a reason, and she was very glad she made the right choice, when a very loud and very irritating Gibbs walked through the door yelling. Dressed in their armour, the squad assembled outside for their first drill. As they did push-ups on the floor, Gibbs walked in front of them, asking them questions that the majority of the squad had no clue how to answer. “Vanathur, under the Imperial rules of naval conduct who’s jurisdiction is a joint operation strike against a renegade compound, considering the task force is made up of both Marines and Navy?” Gibbs asked, various eyes widening at such a question. “Sir, Marine jurisdiction, unless the highest ranked commanding officer in charge of the strike is of Navy affiliation – in which case each party is in charge of their own!” Alara stated from plank position. Although she couldn’t see it, Gibbs smiled before walking away to ask the next question. Brett swiped her leg, causing her to collapse.

Following the first drill came breakfast, Alara once again sat on her own, but she used the space to eat and study, earning a few glances from her comrades. The squad then found themselves returned to their platoon, all marching towards the large lecture hall on site. Lessons detailing military law, codes of battle conduct, as well as imperial history, filled the following hours until they were granted a short respite, after which came a very early lunch. Weapon and melee training followed, and the day looped, with Alara taking her dinner to go, before quickly making her way to the gymnasium in the early evening. Zenobia was waiting for her, and she looked at Alara disapprovingly as she spotted Alara carrying her dinner. “Eat first, I need you to listen not multitask,” she ordered, Alara apologised and wolfed down her meal.

Zenobia escorted her through the building to a more secluded area filled with offices and meeting rooms. She opened a door and invited Alara to sit down at the desk before she sat down on the other side. “Well, I hope you’re not finding it too overwhelming. I’ve heard good things from your Instructor so far. I wanted to discuss and explain your future with you, specifically that involving this course – I’m sure Admiral Exarga has great plans for you, she’s been more than curious in your progress,” Zenobia stated, as she relaxed in her chair, sliding across some paper and a quill to write with. “You know the Admiral?” Alara asked. Zenobia laughed, a broad smile on her face. “Of course, I was her

Commander before I got wounded in battle, she led me on many campaigns. By extension, I also knew your parents.” She noted Alara’s extremely curious face, holding up a hand to indicate there would be an opportunity, before reaching below the desk and presenting a specialised sheath for Alara.

“It was made under express order so I apologise if it’s not as custom as you would like,” she stated, sliding out two poles from within the back sheath – one with a tongue shaped blade on the end, the other a small spike. She connected the two poles together before twisting to lock the collapsible glaive in place, presenting the weapon to Alara. Alara held it nervously, it was heavy, yet felt light – it was also perfectly balanced. “Thank you,” Alara told her, separating the halves and returning them to their sheath. Zenobia waved a hand. “Anyway, down to business. Marine basic training lasts thirteen weeks, we are on week two. After training is complete, you will finish advanced training whilst deployed on board a Marine ship, this will last for twenty weeks, after which you will be classed as a full Marine, although you will have already technically qualified. Your officer’s training is eight weeks long, as such, in order to finish both halves simultaneously, you have three weeks to reach a level where you are capable to qualify for officer’s training. Your morning lectures would then be replaced with officer’s training before you returned to continue training with your squad. Let me state this clearly: this is a lot. I’m surprised the Admiral even suggested it, but I guess that shows how much faith she has in you.”

Zenobia slid over a large stack of documents. “Here is everything you need to know, use the library, ask me for help, use your allies to secure victory,” she stated, standing up and indicating that Alara should follow. They walked back to the barracks, during which Alara bombarded Zenobia with questions about her parents and Zenobia’s time in the red fleet. “Best of luck, Alara. If the Admiral believes in you, then you can do it,” Zenobia concluded, winking before walking away. Alara stood there a few moments in the darkness, a smile on her face and a giddy feeling in her stomach before she nodded and walked into the barracks.

“Oh look the cursed monster has feelings.” Alara heard as she walked in, to find Wulf sat on his bunk in the corner, the four air-breathers surrounding him as they attempted to goad him. Alara dropped her things and stormed over, kicking the back of Brett’s legs and dropping him, surprised, to his knees as she grabbed his head and leant closely to his ear, speaking loudly enough for the other three to hear. “What do you think would have happened had it been one of the Instructors walking through that door, rather than me?” Alara asked, releasing him. “We can find out, I know for a fact Instructor Zenobia is less than twenty

metres away. Shall we find out, or are you going to leave him alone?" Alara threatened, crossing her arms and looking at them. Brett slowly rose to his feet, his face a dark crimson, but Axel stopped him as he moved towards Alara. "Don't, it's not worth it," Axel warned, tilting his head to the others, before walking past Alara.

Wulf didn't move from his position as he lay curled towards the wall, the other members of the squad looking ashamed. Alara approached him. "Hey, you okay?" she asked. He remained silent, ignoring her, and she felt a hand on her shoulder. "I've got it... thanks," Riley told her, stepping past and sitting down on the bunk next to Wulf. Alara returned to her bunk, storing her new weapon before getting ready for bed, lights out following swiftly, marking the end of another day. The following morning, after running through the already-familiar routine, Alara found herself sat in the lecture hall, this time, to her surprise she wasn't sat alone. Riley sat next to her, looking curiously at the various textbooks Alara had scattered along the empty row – Wulf sat next to Riley, his arms folded and a bored look on his face.

"So, why do you have all those textbooks? If I'm correct, a lot of this isn't anything we need to know for some time," Riley asked quietly, but loud enough to involve Wulf in the conversation. Alara slid the document Zenobia had given her, detailing everything she needed to know for the exam. "I've got an exam within the next three weeks, so I need to study hard," Alara replied, scratching her head. Riley passed it over to Wulf, his eyes widening as he flicked through the pages. "Do you want a study buddy?" Riley offered, quickly pretending to take notes as the lecturer looked in their direction. "I can't throw this on you, it's a lot and I shouldn't distract you," Alara replied. Riley shook her head. "I disagree, we'll be learning it later anyway, think of this as getting ahead on our course. Oh and Wulf, you'll be helping us," she ordered, turning her head away from Alara and muttering something to him. He let out a loud sigh, "Fine."

The lecture passed quickly, the majority of the three hours spent rapidly researching and memorising various laws and regulations, every now and again drawing the glare of the lecturer as they got too loud. The various manuals Alara carried with her proved to be extremely useful during martial training, both Riley and Wulf helping Alara to practice the advanced tactics required. "It is important to choose a style fitting to yourself, not that of your allies, when learning how to face an opponent. Versatility is key, however you will not find success by fighting strength with strength when you are half the weight of an opponent," reinforced Instructor Gibbs, looking at Riley and Alara as they practiced against Wulf.

“Choose between precision and technique, strength and power, or manipulation and awareness,” he concluded – Alara demonstrated her choice by showing off to Riley how to throw Wulf whilst disarming him. Gibbs headed over towards the trio, looking to intervene, but - as Riley mirrored and listened to Alara’s tips, she managed to flip Wulf over her - he turned around nodding to himself in acceptance.

Weapons training followed, Zenobia keeping a close eye on Alara as she practiced using her glaive, following the instructions and techniques within the manual. They grouped up, Alara practicing against Riley whilst keeping her cover on the blade of her glaive. Wulf stood to the side, observing, surprised at Riley’s ineptitude with her sword. Alara batted away the training blade and it flew away towards another recruit. “Sorry!” Riley called out, as she went to retrieve it. Wulf looked at Alara, the pair laughing loudly as she returned red-faced. The squad then progressed to the shooting range, first of all demonstrating that they could disassemble and reassemble their rifle. For the first time, they all succeeded to a satisfactory level. “Well, mark me impressed!” stated Gibbs, looking towards to an onlooking Zenobia. She nodded, walking over to observe as he beckoned the squad over to a large range with stationary straw dummies at the end.

Each member of the squad was given half a clip of ammo, six shots, one for each of the dummies. They lined up one after another taking a shot at each dummy, the majority of the shots missed. Alara manage to graze two, but she couldn’t quite get a feel for how to hold the rifle. Astris and Riley were the final two left to demonstrate. Zenobia stood to the side, clearly bored by the poor show. Riley stepped forwards, leaning across the bench and looking closely down the sights. She fired her first shot, a clean hit through the head. She paused and aimed at the next, slowly repeating her precise shot one after another – scoring perfectly. The group stared at her, and Zenobia nodded approvingly at Gibbs. “Good shots, recruit,” Zenobia stated, watching Astris with increasing curiosity as she stepped up to follow Riley’s example.

Astris looked down the sights from a standing position, pulling the trigger and quickly aiming at the next, pulling the bolt action to load the next shot before firing in a very quick burst. Every shot went wide, and she placed her rifle onto the bench. “Not so much...” Zenobia muttered. Astris turned on Zenobia, red in the face. “It’s this stupid rifle - “, she complained, Zenobia’s eyes widening slightly and Gibbs quickly stepping forwards. “Kai, step back!” Gibbs ordered angrily, she looked at him pleadingly, but Zenobia held up a hand. “Continue

recruit, finish your sentence," she said calmly, crossing her arms. Astris regained control of her emotions. "I trained for the Navy, I learnt using a pistol, not a heavy rifle. If I had pistols, I wouldn't miss a shot," she stated. Zenobia stared her down, Astris stepping back, shrinking away from her. "Very well, prove it."

Six pistols were brought for her, each containing a single shot. Astris stood behind the barrier, one pistol in each hand as she lined each pistol against the two outmost dummies. She pulled the trigger, immediately switching to the next pair of pistols waiting on the bench, she aimed and fired, repeating with the final two weapons. Headshot, headshot, headshot. All six shots were fast and terrifying accurate for an infamously inaccurate weapon that the sea dragon was. Astris turned around to face the group, a smug look on her face, that quickly disappeared as she realised she was likely in trouble. Zenobia bit her lower lip in thought, nodding and reaching into a pocket before pulling out two slips of paper. She wrote on each of them, handing one each to Riley and Astris. "Take these to the quartermaster, you have my permission for specialist equipment. Carry on," Zenobia stated, walking away.

The rest of the day continued quickly, Astris suffering her various punishments for her disrespect throughout, and the following evening Alara found herself once again sitting before Zenobia. "You look like you want to ask something," stated Zenobia, towards the end of the evening. "Why did you requisition specialist items for Riley and Astris? I thought uniform was an important aspect within the Empire." Zenobia nodded, sitting up straight and turning to face her properly. "The Navy utilises size and power to dominate their enemies, the Marines value skill and comradery instead. To accept that in its truest sense we must embrace both our strengths and our weaknesses, as such we encourage specialisation and variation. Riley has demonstrated a keen eye, she would make a great marksman; Kai showed skill with a pistol, why waste time training her for a rifle when she can work on mastering her pistol technique instead. We do have to acknowledge weaknesses as well. Riley, to be frank, is pathetic with a sword. It is unlikely she will be able to overcome this so I suspect she will be trained for close-range shooting instead, or paired with someone who is good with a sword. People have their limits, that includes the pair assisting you with your studies."

Alara nodded along, looking slightly ashamed of the last statement. "Do not be embarrassed for using their aide, it is a sign of a good leader to let others help them. Just be aware of their limits, they may not be able to keep up with you," she concluded. Alara held Zenobia's advice close to her, but Riley and Wulf

continued to help her, the days blending together, as they repeated their daily routine, broken up only through a day of sailing at the end of the week. Others amongst their group distinguished themselves: Witchford as a fantastic scribe, and, irritatingly for Alara, Brett as a scout. Finally, on the tenth day, significantly earlier than expected, Alara attempted Zenobia's exam – she passed with flying colours, Riley and Wulf excelling alongside her.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Meeting With a Higher Power

It had been a long time since William had visited the Capital. He gazed upon its majesty as his ship came into dock, but he had no time for distractions – there were more important matters to tend to. He abandoned the ship, handing the mooring ropes to another Deacon stationed on the dock. "Hey, you can't just- ". William was already gone. He strolled straight towards the Holy Palace, his robes letting him walk straight past the guards. He passed through the various sections, ignoring the lesser people around, as he headed towards the central dome, his previous visions guiding his way down already familiar routes. A large marble staircase led upwards, the sides adorned with golden drapes, but unfortunately for him and his visions, his mind wasn't shared with others.

A lowly Bishop stopped him. "Excuse me Deacon, this area is off limits, please return back the way you came," he instructed, William's face twisted in shock that someone had dared to interrupt his quest. "I must see the Pope," William stated. The Bishop raised an eyebrow. "What business could you possibly - never mind, do you have an appointment?" the Bishop asked. William shook his head. "Then, bye," the Bishop concluded. William smiled, turning to walk away before running past the Bishop up the stairs. The overweight and unfit Bishop wheezed after him in pursuit, but the much younger man quickly ascended the stairs rushing towards the huge, black, stone doors he had seen in his visions. He pushed open the door, charging inside. The room was huge, its walls made of a black stone and the only source of light stemming from the stained glass windows near the ceiling. In the centre, a pair of figures dressed in purple stood talking in front of a large white and gold throne.

"Your excellency! Your excellency!" cried out William as he ran into the room, both the figures in purple drawing tomes from inside their robes and raising their arms towards him. "Halt!" came a voice, all three figures freezing in place as the Pope slowly rose up from his throne, stepping down the stairs as William stood stuck in place. "Prostrate yourself!" he ordered, William and the two Bishops

falling to their knees with their heads on the cold stone floor. Large circles of light illuminated small areas of the room, the majority especially focused on the Pope's throne. "Why have you disturbed this holy room uninvited?" he asked. William shook softly as he lay there. "I have received a vision, your Holiness. The Sorcerer girl, Wicke, she is alive. I was instructed by the gods to deliver this message to you directly."

The Pope looked at the two Bishops, both slowly getting to their feet. "Do you believe this to be true?" the Pope asked them. They both shook their heads, just as bells began to ring out across the city. "Find out what is going on!" he ordered, one of the Bishops racing off out of the room. He returned quickly, a shocked look on his face. "Your excellency, a redhaired Sorcerer was spotted by the dock, travelling with a polar bear baned, and two young men. She matches the girl's description."

The Pope laughed, a deep and unnerving laugh that echoed throughout the room. "Very good, you have earned your keep Deacon, what is your name?" he asked, extending a hand to William and helping him to his feet. "William." The Pope nodded. "The gods have deemed you useful to me, from this point forwards you are a Priest. Inform me of any more visions. I respect when those around me take initiative - you are dismissed," he told William, turning around with a smile on his face as he walked forwards towards his throne. "So she survived... Launch an Inquisition!"

Chapter 20: A Thirst For Adventure

The Capital fell behind them, Wicke channelling her magic into the winds to boost their ship across the waves. Bjorn stood behind the wheel, Vexx napped below deck, and Jayce patrolled their new ship, taking notes – on Bjorn’s instruction - of the various issues the vessel held: small leaks, a slightly damaged mast, a derelict and lagging rudder... among various other issues. For an exorbitant price like four thousand pearl, Jayce had been expecting a ship in much better condition; still, The Small Catch was more than adequate. Little Witch trailed behind him, the small kitten enamoured with the attention she got from her new master. Eventually, he returned to the top deck, Vexx now awake, Wicke tired from her spellcasting, and Bjorn walking between the various crates and items they had purchased, muttering to himself as he flicked through a rather thick set of papers.

“Damn, damn, damnit!” he growled, rubbing his chin as checked through the last few crates before carrying them below deck. “What’s wrong?” Jayce asked, when Bjorn finally settled on the top deck. “We have a problem, Captain. Our stock-up was interrupted, we are missing a few crucial items,” he stated, looking over in Wicke’s direction. She raised her hands, before pulling out of her pocket, and turning on, a small rectangular box – a news feed and radio playing from the device. “Don’t blame me! It’s because of me we actually have a means of finding out what’s going on elsewhere. We can also send letters!” she stated proudly. Jayce nodded in acknowledgement, giving a thumbs up behind his back before turning back to Bjorn. “How bad is it?” he asked, glancing towards Vexx who seemed fixated with something above them.

“It’s bad,” Bjorn stated, handing over the documents to Jayce, a large checklist on one of the pages. “We have less than a week’s worth of food and water, and without the correct items we have no way to replenish that, nor store any fish we catch. We need supplements as well,” he concluded. Jayce nodded, heading into the captain’s - Wicke’s – quarters and retrieving the map. “Well, guess we find a trading outpost,” Jayce stated, estimating their current position before finding the nearest Guild settlement. He glanced over at Wicke, she was playing with her thumbs and looking restless with Little Witch balancing on her hat. “This takes priority, and it’s on the way. A quick stop then we’ll keep going, okay?” Jayce asked her. She nodded, putting down the cat before moving towards the mast. “Sooner we get there, the better,” she stated, raising her arms and beginning to chant.

They sailed quickly, altering the course to sail more deeply towards The Keeps, rather than skirting along the outside of the northern highway. Wicke spent the first day showing off all of the gadgets she had purchased with Jayce's money: a radio, a tracking compass, a mail beacon; the list was endless, and Jayce felt all the more glad they had a discount. The following few days were filled with ship maintenance, a new hole to patch every day, pranks – mostly instigated by Vexx and Wicke – as well as fishing, the catches small and far between. Bjorn was always the last one up in the evenings, and the first one awake in mornings, sleeping in the other end of the hold away from Vexx and Jayce. Otherwise, the time went quickly and before long the group lay their eyes on their objective, rapidly approaching on the horizon.

It was a small, round island, with twenty or so piers extending out from the centre in all directions. The majority of the piers were clear of ships, but from the traffic heading to and from the island, Jayce estimated they received at least fifty or so ships a day. "Right," stated Jayce enthusiastically, drawing their attention. "What's the plan?" he asked. Bjorn shook his head and let out a long sigh. "Food supplies, a source of renewable water, enough supplements to ward off disease for a few weeks," Bjorn stated, looking at the group of youngsters. Jayce nodded, but Wicke bashfully raised her hand. "Can I put in a request?" she asked shyly. Bjorn nodded, crossing his arms and leaning against the mast. "I, uh, need some personal items," she stated, the three men looking at her curiously. "Ah," Jayce stated, grasping her request first. "Go with Bjorn, Vexx and I will gather information." She smiled at him and went to prepare her things. "Meet back on the ship within three hours," Jayce told Bjorn. "Stick together." Bjorn nodded. "Of course, Captain."

They disembarked, paying the docking fee, and stepping foot on the island of Azure Shield. Wicke carried Little Witch with her as she and Bjorn set off on their mission, whilst Vexx and Jayce mingled around the dock, watching the ship. "Want to get a drink?" Vexx eventually asked, after sitting, bored, on the deck of the ship for far too long. Jayce looked at him curiously. "Sure, why not?" he answered, the pair giving one last look at The Small Catch, before they abandoned the vessel looking for the nearest tavern. They found one not too far away, the establishment busy with travellers of all kinds within. Several baned mingled around, most wearing an unusual, blue, layered armour, adorned with a cloak and hood. Large weapons lay propped next to them.

Vexx and Jayce headed straight to the bar, two large flagons of beer landing in front of them quickly. "Cheers!" Jayce stated, the pair tapping their drinks

together.

"You're paying, right?" Vexx asked almost immediately. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Well, I technically never got paid by the old lady... so... since you're my boss and all," Vexx said quietly, scratching his cheek. Jayce sighed and nodded. "Ah, cheers boss! Barkeep, a round for the room!" Vexx declared to the cheers of the tavern, and Jayce's dismay. "Hey, hey, what do you think you're doing?" Jayce asked him quickly. "Softening the room. You said we were looking for information – this is how we do it."

As Vexx had predicted, the room picked up, conversations flowing louder around them as the various groups began to merge together. Jayce lost Vexx somewhere amongst the sea of people, but a curious barkeep drew his attention instead. A young woman, dark skin, long auburn hair held back by a green headband, with bright brown eyes, leant across the bar before him – a few buttons of her shirt strategically left open. "Howdy, mighty generous of you to keep buying rounds for the folk here today. You had good favour on the seas or something?" she asked curiously, running her hand through her hair. Jayce smiled at her and shook his head, a large arm wrapping itself around his shoulders as a very drunk baned leopard leant on him. "Thankss for the dwinks, stwanger! You're a good one!" he yelled loudly, before smacking Jayce on the rear and stumbling away. The barkeep laughed behind her hand before putting on a wide smile. "Struck some luck in the Capital, my friend is clearly wanting to pass it on to others," Jayce told her, finishing his drink and sliding a few coins across the counter to pay the tab.

"Folks could use some around here, what with what happened in the Capital and all, plus the tragedy that happened not too far from here," she stated, sliding another drink his way. Jayce shook his head and she shrugged, downing the drink with terrifying speed. "What tragedy?" Jayce asked curiously, glancing around and leaning in as she beckoned him closer with a finger. "A cargo ship sank not too far away from here, all hands lost. Apparently the crew were smugglers, with some very valuable treasures; too deep to retrieve without proper equipment," she told him. Jayce leant back, nodding. "Anyway, Maran down at the docks can tell you more about it if you want to check it out – apparently some people are looking to form a group to scavenge the cargo," she told him, ideas quickly forming in Jayce's head. "Thanks for the tip," he told her, flicking a red coin to her, before standing up to find Vexx. "Hey, what's your name?" she asked quickly, tucking the coin inside her shirt. "Jayce," he told her. She smiled and let down her hair before tucking it

behind her right ear, her eyes looking anywhere but his face. "Rosie. You ever come back here, let me know!"

Jayce left her, finding Vexx stumbling around outside with a few other drunkards. "All good, boss?" Vexx asked, somehow gaining a quick sense of control over himself and following Jayce as they headed back to the dock. "Yeah, found us a little treasure quest. Help me find Maran." The pair searched for a while, eventually finding the man they were looking for. By the time they returned to the ship, information and exact coordinates in hand, Bjorn and Wicke had already returned. "Ah, there you are!" Wicke stated, waving her hand in front of her face as she caught a whiff of Vexx's breath. "Have you been drinking? What happened to getting information?" she asked.

"Don't worry, we got some. Did you get what we need?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded, beckoning for them to follow as he headed to the stern of the ship, a strange-looking barrel now mounted to the wall of the captain's quarters. "Take a look," Bjorn instructed, opening the barrel up to show off a rather colourful display of cyan sponge lining the inside. "This stuff will purify any water we put in there; it'll grow and replicate as well, so if we're smart we can make bottles to carry around to purify water in an emergency," he stated proudly, before heading off below deck, Jayce and Wicke following him. "I also got us a fridge," he declared, showing off a large crate lined with internal shelves. The sides were lined with algae, white in colour and crystalline, pulling in heat from the surroundings. "Make sure not to touch it. I'll work on making us a freezer as well. I'll also make some vitamin pods with some of the fruit we bought; however, if we want it done properly, we need a cook."

Jayce patted Bjorn on the back. "Good job. We found out about a wreck full of loot not too far away. It's too deep without equipment to retrieve, but I was thinking we should be able to reach it. Do you have anything that can help us get it?" Jayce asked, turning to Wicke. "This is adding needless time, we already made a detour!" she protested. "Look, I understand, but this will help us in the long run, we aren't exactly rich anymore and being able to afford the repairs needed for this ship will get us there faster. Do you have anything that can help?" Jayce asked. She let out a long sigh. "As it so happens, yes, I can help us get it. We also managed to get information. To get through the Ice Floes we need a Glacial Chart, found only at Frozen Branch," she stated, crossing her arms. Jayce nodded and looked over at Bjorn. "Let's go then!"

With the exact position known, finding the wreck wasn't an issue. The waters surrounding it were clear enough, and shallow enough, that they could see all the way to the sea floor. Vexx sat slumped on floor, fast asleep as he slept off his drinks, the other three looking down at the wreck from the bow. "So, how are we getting down there?" Bjorn eventually asked, looking at Wicke as he took off his clothes excluding his underwear, Jayce doing the same. Wicke turned a bright red colour, but quickly followed suit. "I can give us water breathing for a little bit, it'll increase your lung capacity but won't render you immune to drowning and should protect a little against the pressure. You'll be able to hold your breath for longer, three minutes or so at a time, but don't overdo it," she warned. Jayce nodded and Bjorn mirrored him.

Wicke took a deep breath, cupping her hands together before beginning to chant, the now familiar black markings spreading all along her fingers and hands before stopping at her shoulders. She tapped Jayce with her hand, then Bjorn, and finally herself, a small black ring appearing where she touched. The marks faded and Jayce looked around confused. "I don't feel any different," he said. Wicke nodded, looking uncertain herself. "Well, only one way to find out," Bjorn stated, rolling over the edge into the water. Wicke and Jayce looked at each before diving after him.

To say the water was cold would be an understatement; the polar bear had no issue, swimming down quickly, but the other two gasped for air at the top of the water as shock ran through their bodies. Bjorn quickly realised no one was swimming with him and looked backwards, spotting the pair still near the surface. He quickly turned around and headed back to them, breaching the water between the pair. "Calm yourselves, float and let your bodies adjust! We aren't in the warm seas of the Frontier, float and adapt, follow me when you can control your breathing," he told the pair, before diving downwards to find their treasures.

The waters were clear, a deep blue with long rays of light guiding the way to the bottom. The sea floor was a forest, covered in large beds of coral and seagrass, with brightly coloured fish swimming around, passing in and out of the damaged sunken ship. It lay on its side, a huge tear across its hull, but the majority of the ship – including its sails - was still relatively intact. It was a sight to see, a shame as well, as Bjorn spotted the faint remains of a sailor wrapped in the grass of the sea floor. He measured himself, he was thirty or so metres from the surface, the pressure felt relaxed on his body and his lungs still felt full of air – as if he had only just taken a breath and was near the surface. The other two

swam down towards him, a sight that strangely brought an internal sense of happiness, as he saw them clearly through the water. He paused, looking away, surprised at himself, before pointing to the large laceration in the hull and swimming carefully through the gap.

Crates of cargo filled the decks of the ship; several had been broken open, the goods inside ruined by the waters, but the majority remained sealed, only kept down by the ropes that bound them. Bjorn tore through the ropes with his teeth and claws, the other two swimming the crates outside of the hull and letting them rise quickly to the surface. There were crates of ammunition, as well as black powder that Bjorn pointed towards. Jayce thought to himself before nodding and swimming up alongside the smaller caskets to ensure no accidents. Feeling the air start to run out, Wicke and Bjorn followed him, all three stopping mid-journey as a very large figure swam slowly towards them, a large grin on her face. The shark was huge, its underbelly white and the rest a deep grey colour with black tips on its fins and white gills. Its mouth alone could easily snap Wicke in half, if not eat her whole. They looked at each other nervously as it continue swimming towards them, but Bjorn held out a hand to the other two and they floated where they were. It swam towards him, floating just in front, ten metres long and taller than Bjorn in height. After a second, she continued forwards and Bjorn put his hand on her nose, before she continued swimming onwards, fading slowly into the distance.

They breached the surface, calling over Vexx to help load the goods. Irritated by the awakening, but with no reason to refuse, he pulled the items onboard with simple ease, as Wicke swam the floating crates over to him. Jayce and Bjorn took another deep breath and dove back down, splitting up to search the other decks of the very large ship before reconvening. The crew quarters held a few items of value – and, using a net Jayce had borrowed from the hull, he began to load the various treasures he could find, trying to ignore the lost letters and photos of the previous crew. It became too heavy to swim with and Jayce passed it over to Bjorn, who easily carried with him as he swam after Jayce through the halls.

They came to the captain's quarters, the door locked, and windows shut, so as Bjorn swam up their treasures, Jayce searched through the surrounding grass, eventually coming across the remains of someone he assumed to be the captain. He checked their coat, taking the money pouch within and letting it go, the buoyant bag floating quickly upwards. Within an internal pocket he found a locket, a photo of a smiling man within, but also a large key. Jayce looked at the corpse and the other bodies around, closing his eyes, putting his hands together,

and bowing his head. "Thank you," he thought quietly to himself before swimming back to the ship and unlocking the door.

Jayce returned once more to the surface, throwing the money bag onto the deck of The Small Catch, Little Witch watching the group curiously as she sat on the bow of the ship. "Last run!" Jayce declared, Bjorn and Wicke nodding before diving down. After one last check, they all convened in the captain's quarters. Waterlogged maps, books, and letters lined the dead captain's desk, the captain's bed floated softly, the bedding ruined. It was well decorated, photos of the crew lay in stands, trophies of their adventures were mounted on the walls. The three floated there solemnly, an uneasy feeling in their bodies as they intruded into another's life. Jayce nodded, and Wicke and Bjorn searched the room, as Jayce searched through the captain's desk. They left with several sealed scrolls, a large bountiful chest of treasure, a pristine and ornate sword found resting in the captain's wardrobe, and a few other items of note taken as well.

They emerged into the open waters, taking one last long look back at the ship. Jayce looked at Wicke, giving a silent command that she understood without hesitation. Her familiar marks spread along her hands, her arms, eventually across her entire torso, as she moulded the water around and within the ship, pulling back an underwater wave before throwing it at the wreck. The tear in hull spread and split, the entire ship shaking before shattering in a thousand splinters before their eyes, drifting away into the waters. They returned to their ship, uneasy, but feeling more peaceful knowing the crew wouldn't be disturbed again. The haul had been bountiful; large crates lay stacked high on their open deck and a considerable hoard of treasure lay before them. Vexx had lit up the brazier and they all stood huddled around it, wrapped in towels.

"Well, that was certainly worth it!" Vexx exclaimed, tearing off the lids of the various crates to reveal fine cloths, rare spices, ship supplies, seeds, drugs and medicines. Jayce nodded, quickly putting his clothes back on and replacing his borrowed sword from the arena with the one he had found. Wicke raised her arm, beginning to chant and point at the fire, only for a shiver to run through her body, interrupting her. "Ow!" she complained, shaking her hand as an audible fizz and pop rang out. Jayce looked at her, confused "What happened?" he asked, throwing Bjorn his clothes. She shrugged. "She was interrupted," Bjorn clarified. Jayce looked at him for further elaboration. "Spellcasters take damage if their spellcasting is interrupted, a lesson you learn quickly in the Navy."

Jayce raised an eyebrow, Wicke listening curiously as well. "You must have noticed?" Bjorn asked Wicke, she shook her head. "Fair enough. Regardless, spellcasting takes six seconds. If you interrupt the cast, the magic charged erupts through the user – the more powerful the spell, the more damage taken. The moment you see those lines start to form, you can interrupt. Throw something, yell, hit them, whatever it takes. You should learn how to hold your concentration," he concluded, looking directly at Wicke. "Would help if you three knew Focus," Vexx chimed in.

They looked at him, his gaze drifting off into the distance once again. "Focus?" Jayce asked. "Yeah, Focus," he said, following up with a long sigh. "Fucking amateurs, magic isn't just through spellcasting, it makes up everything – or so I've been told. That includes using the innate stuff in us." Vexx straightened up, walking to the edge of the ship and concentrating, his hand forming a fist. He punched towards the air, and it physically bent around his fist before launching in a wave across the water, throwing up spray as it travelled. Vexx then walked up to the mast, placing a foot on the wood and walking upwards along it before standing at the very top. He leapt back down, landing silently on the deck with hardly a vibration. The trio stared at him, but he just blew the hair out of his eyes before sitting on a crate like it was nothing.

"To be blunt, and this was a long time coming, Jayce you were let off lightly in the arena. Without Wicke's tricks you would have died a dozen times over, and had a single person bumped into her whilst you were fighting, you'd have lost or died," Vexx stated, a finger in his ear, he then looked at Bjorn who whistled to himself and started to walk away. "Had Bjorn not gone easy on you, you'd have also lost." Jayce looked at Bjorn, his mouth slightly open. "Did you go easy on me?" Jayce asked. Bjorn rubbed the back of his head, trying to not to meet Jayce's gaze. "Well, you did get me good, but, uh, well, um... yeah. Your speed was good, but I could match it and well strength versus strength... Sorry, the boys wore me down, and I kinda liked you, so I let you win," he admitted to the shame and horror of Jayce. He looked at Wicke, who just nodded in agreement. "Ah... fuck. Fine, Vexx teach us," Jayce ordered, the other two looking towards him as well. Vexx sighed, before nodding. "You'll refer to me as Master Vexx," he said with pride. The other three looked at him blankly. "No," they said in unison.

They looked through the remainder of the loot, carrying the various cargo below deck, before a loud gasp from Wicke drew their attention. "What is it?" Jayce asked, hurrying over to her as she squealed. "Spell scrolls!" she exclaimed

excitedly.

"What?" Jayce asked, as Bjorn and Vexx sighed before wandering off to do their own things. "Spell scrolls, I can learn new magic!" she squealed, unfurling a large roll of papyrus, glowing and shifting words floating across the page. Jayce nodded, opening his mouth to speak, only for a thump in the distance to draw his attention.

Vexx leapt across the air, his body pivoting as he delivered a powerful kick to the cannonball aimed at their mast, the large metal ball spiralling back the way it came. "Pirates!" Jayce yelled, running to lower the sails as Bjorn rushed to raise the anchor. Wicke raised her arms towards the winds, Jayce only just tying the lines as she unleashed her magic, the lurch throwing him off his feet. "Wicke, warn us when you're casting!" he yelled, scrambling to his feet and rushing towards the wheel. His eyes glanced towards the small ship coming towards them, a cannon on its bow as well as one on either side of the top deck, a single mast with an exposed aft deck at the stern of the small ship. Vexx, stumbled around The Small Catch, a bottle in one hand, a handful of ammunition looted from the sunken ship in his other. Whenever a cannonball came too close he threw a shot, hitting the majority of the cannonballs with enough force to shatter them – a few glanced off, altering the direction just enough for the projectiles to hit the waters nearby.

Eventually, the cannon fire stopped but the enemy ship remained in pursuit, gaining speed on them even with Wicke's magic boosting The Small Catch. "They've got a Mage!" Bjorn yelled from the stern, "We're not going to outrun them, and I think they're out of cannonballs!" Jayce glanced over his shoulder, ducking as a bullet sailed past him. "Time to try something different! Hold on!" Jayce yelled, turning the wheel and dropping their portside anchor. The Small Catch lurched, the ship groaning under the stress. Wicke dropped her magic and as the enemy ship desperately changed direction to avoid collision, Jayce – swords drawn, Wicke – already chanting, and Bjorn – roaring loudly, leapt onto the enemy vessel as it zoomed past, the two hulls scraping together as Vexx cheered and whooped, somehow with even more booze in his hands.

There were six pirates, not including the Mage and enemy Captain behind the wheel. Bjorn grabbed the large powder keg the enemy were using to re-powder the cannons, a few balls loose on the deck. He grabbed the lit fuse from the cannon, stuffing it inside the keg before throwing it at the enemy Mage. It exploded, unfortunately too early to do any real damage, but the blast rocked the ship and shattered the wheel, sending the unprepared enemy stumbling around.

Jayce leapt at his opponents, kicking and slashing at their hastily drawn blades, disarming as many as he could as quickly as possible. Wicke finished her chant, Jayce's words quickly ringing in her ears. "Gust!" she yelled in warning, Bjorn and Jayce quickly grabbing hold of the ship as she launched a powerful blast of wind into the sails from an awkward angle. The lines holding the sail strained under the unfavourable wind, and the ship lurched out of control, until finally they snapped, the entire mast cracking and tearing off into the water, she then twisted the wind using it to throw her foes off the ship.

A blue orb struck the centre of the deck, expanding into a large bubble that consumed all three of them, Wicke's magic faded, and Bjorn felt strange for a moment, but nothing about him changed. The Captain and the Mage leapt down onto the deck, large tattoos spreading all across the Mage's exposed arms and torso as he powered up a spell. Jayce leapt forwards, slashing with both blades across his chest. The Mage yelled in pain, the wounds large but shallow, only for his eyes to widen as the magic build up inside him released, the blast throwing him backwards off his feet. Bjorn engaged the Captain with a terrifying level of ferocity, his huge weapons dominating his opponent as she desperately tried to fend him off. He reared up, bringing both his axe and sword down on her sabre, the blade shattering as she hit the wall behind her, hard.

With the crew injured or unconscious, Vexx sailed The Small Catch over, picking the trio up from the out-of-control and damaged pirate ship. "Rethink things over!" Jayce yelled back towards them. "Someone will be along in a day or two, maybe!" he said smugly, sitting down and catching his breath as they sailed quickly away, their ship full of loot, a battle won, and several lessons learnt, as Vexx yelled insults at the ship growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

Seize the Seas Tales: Prying Eyes

Vexx didn't actually mind the sea, he had been a little bit worried the first two days, but the calm, the quiet, the peace – it was actually quite nice. He leant over the side of The Small Catch, the cat watching him curiously. "Shoo, go find Wicke," he told her. She meowed at him and then glanced off towards something a little bit above Vexx, her eyes focusing. Vexx turned and looked, there was nothing there. "What are you looking at?" he asked her, sitting down next to her and following her gaze. There was nothing there. "Dumb cat," he muttered, stroking Little Witch. She remained unmoving, still fixated on the spot.

Vexx shrugged and took a deep breath, the sounds of the crashing waves around him increased tenfold, swarming his senses before he heard a singular drop hit

the water in his mind, the waves rolling out before forming a calm surface. Everything around him turned grey, except for Little Witch who glowed with a bright outline. The fish swimming around them near the surface, as well as those much deeper, glowed brightly in the grey. The birds in the skies too were outlined. He could see the flow of magic hitting the sails from Wicke's casting, her body – specifically the tattoos on her hand-glowing in a luminescent and iridescent colour. He looked back where Little Witch was looking, a small orb floated in the wind, following the ship closely. It looked like an eye, completely invisible to ordinary vision. He stood up, leaping high into the air and swatting it with his hand, the orb disappearing in a puff of smoke. Vexx landed back on the boat, looking down at Little Witch who purred loudly and brushed herself up against his legs. "Good cat, tell me if you see any more!" he told her. She meowed back at him.

Chapter 21: A Lack of Focus

With a bountiful haul on board, the group sailed quickly north, stopping for a break as the sun started to set. “Boys, and lady, tonight we celebrate on a scavenge well-done!” Vexx declared, carrying a small crate out onto the top deck, where the others sat huddled around a large fire held in the brazier. It clinked as he set it down, a small wave of water and ice flowing out over the sides as the many bottles of cider and beer jostled within. “Cheers!” he declared, handing them out to the group. Jayce intercepted Wicke’s bottle, glaring at her as she protested. “When you’re older,” he told her. She listened to him for a second, before sneaking a bottle of beer out from the container when he wasn’t looking. She took a deep sip, before spitting it out across the deck. “Hey!” complained Vexx, “This stuff isn’t cheap. It’s straight from the Gardens archipelago!”

Jayce took the bottle from her as she rushed to rinse her mouth. “You deserved that!” he yelled after her. She swore at him from darkness, but made no more attempts to steal any drinks. They roasted food on the fire long into the night, the drinks flowing and good moods all around as Wicke played music from one of her various devices. Bjorn, despite being the biggest at a giant seven-and-a-half feet tall, was the first to fall asleep, a neatly organised pile of bottles by his ankles as his chin began to sink into his chest. To the group’s intrigue, and gentle surprise, they saw him transform; the outer shell of his cursed form glowing before disintegrating in a swarm of green particles.

He was hairy, as if he had never been shaved. A thick, dark beard flowed from his face, tangled and messy beyond belief. His hair was long, all the way down his torso to his hips, large knots immediately obvious from the brief glance. It was dark brown, slightly darker than his skin, but not much. His eyes were closed, naturally, and he had a relatively large and pointy nose. He was muscular, and hadn’t shrunk too much in size, definitely a foot taller than Vexx at least, who, then again, wasn’t much taller than Wicke. “Wow,” Vexx muttered. “Not what I was expecting.” Jayce looked at him. “You haven’t seen him like this before?” Jayce asked. Vexx shook his head. “You know what he’s like, he’s kept to himself at night since we set off. He was like that before at the arena,” Vexx stated.

Bjorn snored loudly, causing the group to jump. Wicke edged his way closer to him, looking at him curiously, only to recoil in mild horror as she saw his hair moving, small parasites living in the knots. “Gross,” she said, recoiling away and jumping behind Jayce. “That’s a lot of lice! What do you think happens to them

when he transforms?" Jayce asked. The other two looked at each other and then back at Jayce. "Probably best not to think about it," he advised, the pair nodding in agreement. "We should probably wake him, and get to bed - long day tomorrow," Jayce said, leaning forward to disturb him. "Wait, we can't just leave him like that," Wicke protested. "What do you expect us to do?" Vexx asked. "Shave him?" They all looked at each other and back at Bjorn, one of the lice crawling across the floor towards them. "I'll get a razor, you get a bucket, let's pray to all the gods we don't wake him."

Wicke, as the only sober member of the crew, took the reins, using the blade to delicately trim away as much of the mess of hair as possible, as close to the scalp as possible, without actually touching it. The other two worked on removing the mess carefully, throwing the lice-infested nest overboard. It wasn't quick, it wasn't easy, but as Wicke finished his beard, his large brown eyes snapped open to find the three of them hovering over him. A green shell of his usual polar bear form weaved itself around him before filling out from his body as his transformation occurred. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he roared, standing up and towering over the trio.

Wicke looked up at him, her hands shaking as she held the small blade. He snatched it from her, looking it over, before twisting around to look at his body. He turned back to them, confused. "What did you do, I feel strange?" he asked more calmly, leaping backwards as he spotted several lice wriggling on the floor. "Lice! Keep them away from me or I'll never get them out!" he yelled, stumbling over with a crash. "They came from you, you were infested so we, uh, gave you a shave. Sorry? You're welcome?" Wicke tested. Bjorn looked down, deep in thought, before he looked back at the trio - Jayce and Vexx hiding behind Wicke. "Huh, I would appreciate a warning next time. I guess I did avoid the others at night, and that does explain the itching... Thanks. What was I like?" Bjorn asked curiously. Wicke and Jayce looked at each other. "Hot," said Vexx, giving a nonchalant thumbs up.

They sailed fast over the following days, the time flowing away from them and each member continuing to grow more comfortable with each other. Bjorn no longer slept on his own, to his detriment, as Vexx started to include him in his rituals of pranking. Jayce finally had the chance to use the paper they'd bought, summoning a Guild bird to take away a letter, and a few days later he got a reply from Alara - her response in high spirits, to his relief. With Vexx pushing all three of them beyond their limits, their plans were interrupted as The Small Catch

began to groan and a loud crack echoed from the rear of the ship – the rudder sinking quickly behind them as they sailed forwards.

“Look, I’m sorry Wicke, we need to stop. I know we can turn without the rudder, but this ship needs an overhaul, and using your magic every time we need to turn will get us killed if we run into trouble. I’m sorry, we’re stopping at Red Glaive,” Jayce told Wicke, ending her complaints once and for all. She stormed off in a huff and slammed the door to the captain’s quarters with a loud bang. “Too much?” Jayce asked Bjorn. “Nah, I’d have been thrown in the sea if I complained as much as she did.” “I heard that!” came a muffled voice from inside. The pair shrugged before turning to face the large island on the horizon.

Red Glaive was a strange location, with a strange name. The main settlement was walled inside a large keep, the village mostly made up of simple wooden buildings, with wooden or thatched roofs. A large guildhall stood near the centre, located directly along the path that led to the local warlord’s palace. For a location supposedly always at war, the Keeps had been surprisingly hospitable so far. As the majority of their funds were siphoned away to repair and upgrade the ship for a cold journey north - the various trinkets they had obtained unfortunately not useable as bartering items - they found themselves stood outside the large hall. “Three days!” Wicke protested, drawing the ire of some of the villagers as they went about their day-to-day activities. “Look, I’m not happy about it either, but let’s at least use this time to recover some funds,” Jayce responded, pointing towards the large noticeboard stationed outside the guildhall, various flyers and posters displayed upon it. Wicke sighed and sat down on a nearby bench with Little Witch in her arms.

“Well?” Jayce asked, looking at Bjorn and Vexx as they crowded around the questboard. “This seems fun,” Vexx stated, pointing at one. Both Bjorn and Jayce looked at him. “Are you insane?” Bjorn asked. “No, no way are we doing that.” Jayce nodded in agreement. “Look, you said you wanted to learn Focus. This is a good way of practicing,” Vexx advised, eventually just walking into the guildhall and walking out with three posters in hand. “There, you two were taking too long, let’s go.” Jayce sighed as he looked through the three Vexx had selected; of the ones available, these seemed the least terrifying.

They found Wicke talking excitedly to an old woman near the bench. As the group approached, the old woman bowed her head and hobbled away, Wicke bounding towards them with an excited look on her face. “They were here! My

group came this way!" she stated, with a bright smile, her grumpy demeanour now non-existent. "She said I looked like two women she had seen a few weeks ago. It was my sisters! It must have been! A strange group with lots of siblings that looked identical, that's my group!" she stated gleefully, Little Witch clinging on desperately in her arms as Wicke bounced up and down. "What about your parents?" Jayce asked. Wicke's eyebrows furrowed. "It's just me and my sisters, I don't have any parents. None of the members in my group have any parents, just siblings," she stated matter-of-factly. Bjorn and Jayce looked at each other. "Cool, I don't have any parents either!" Vexx stated, the pair high-fiving each other as they danced with excitement. "Right, well, anyway, that's good news. See, it was good we stopped off here. Let's complete these quests, cash out, and get back to our voyage."

Of the three quests Vexx had chosen, the bounty seemed the easiest. The mission was simple: capture a thief, retrieve the stolen item, and bring both back to town. Following the map on the poster, they arrived at the sight of the crime. It was a small house, the lock on the back door bashed in and the home still in a messy and disorganised manner. "Right, this seems like a good chance," Vexx stated, concentrating for a brief moment before looking around, his red irises glowing slightly. "Okay, well I've got the trail. Now you three find it as well using Focus," he ordered. Bjorn and Jayce wandered around for a while trying to spot what Vexx had seen, but eventually Wicke got bored and cast a spell on herself, pointing it out with her enhanced vision. "Well that kinda defeats the point, Wicke," Vexx said with a sigh, as Wicke started following the hidden trail.

It led them out of the village, to a small grove in the nearby woods. The tracks led straight to an inconspicuous tree stump, which, on closer inspection, contained several trinkets such as wedding rings and necklaces, all simple jewellery that clearly did not belong to the stump. "Well, that solves one thing. Guess all we do is wait," Jayce stated, sitting down on the stump. It wasn't long before a gangly woman emerged from the woods, her hands holding a pearl necklace and her eyes looking down. She walked straight into Jayce, screaming and throwing the necklace high into the air, before drawing a knife from her pocket. "Ah, perfect!" Vexx stated. As Jayce backed away, the thief noticed the group. "Try to use Focus to dodge her attacks," Vexx stated casually, as he leant against a tree. The woman stared at Vexx in horror before rushing at him. He sidestepped her attack, grabbed her arms, span her around, and pushed her back to the middle of the circle.

After an hour of trying, the thief barely standing on her feet by this point, Jayce finally gave up, Bjorn already quitting after his first cut. "I can't do it, it's not working," he stated with a huff. Vexx sighed and shook his head. "You need to clear your mind completely, focus on nothing, and everything," he stated, quickly realising Jayce was fed up. He lunged forwards, delivering a strike across the thief's neck, her body falling limp as she fell unconscious. "We'll try again tomorrow." They carried her back to town, taking along all of the stolen items and delivering her to the guildhall, where she was handcuffed and taken away along with the stolen items.

With the ship under repairs and their valuables all positioned, noted, and covered to prevent any thievery, the crew took up residence in a local lodge, utilising the hot showers, large baths, and comfortable beds to get some respite. The following morning they reconvened for breakfast, Vexx running them ragged through their daily workout. "Why don't you have to do this?" panted Wicke as she lay on floor. Vexx looked down at her, nudging her with his foot. "Come on, ten more laps," he ordered, stepping back and taking a deep breath in. He spread his limbs as much as possible before contracting every muscle across his body in a gruesome and somewhat horrific display. His entire body pulsed, and his skin flashed a deep red as he strained, before he relaxed and shook himself off. Wicke stared at him, horrified. "What was that?" she asked, sitting up and looking at him as Bjorn and Jayce ran by them. "My training - get running!"

With the sun high in the sky, and the cold autumn air rolling in from the east, the group departed on their second quest. They followed their map up the mountain, coming to a large cave hidden in the woods. Large scratches lined the walls and huge tracks had torn up the leaves and mud by the entrance. "Nope, no way!" complained Wicke, turning around and sitting down on a nearby boulder before pulling out a spell scroll. "You guys go ahead, I'll be here," she told them, crossing her legs and getting comfortable. With a sigh, the trio headed inside the monster's lair.

"Steal a carapace, get out... easy enough," Jayce told himself, trying to calm his rapid heartbeat as he passed by several large animal corpses. "We'll be fine," Vexx told him, taking the lead and guiding them through the winding caves. The creature had nested itself among a ring of large rocks; old foliage, bones, and other items had been piled and glued together to form a nest, where, from their position, as they looked forwards towards the creature, they could see several large eggs protected by the brood mother. The mother herself was huge, a large

chitinous creature with mean-looking pincers and a large flat tail. "An overgrown lobster, this'll be fine. You two work on your Focus. If you can master it, you'll be able to grab her old shell, no problem!" Vexx stated, pulling out another bottle of booze from his limitless bag.

Jayce and Bjorn took turns, each time attempting to get as close to the nest as possible without inferring the wrath of the mother. She would bat at them with her pincers, often finding that the large rocks in her nest acted as a shield for her targets to hide behind. She leant forwards out of her nest swinging wildly at Bjorn, managing to catch him in his chest and sending him flying backwards. "Dammit! I give up. Not today," Bjorn growled, before taking Vexx's drink and sitting down. "You need to dig deep, it's not a feeling you're used to. Reach into every cell and pull out the energy within," Vexx stated. "Although... now that I think about it. Can baned use Focus?" he asked Bjorn.

Jayce stepped back, closing his eyes and slowing his breathing as he tried to ignore the squabbling behind him. He listened to her movement, trying to feel her position without actually seeing her. A loud crashing built up in his ears, the sound of waves that continued to get louder and louder, until finally, a droplet hit the water and the ocean calmed to a flat lake. He opened his eyes, everything around him had become shades of grey: the bright beams of light coming through the cracks in the cave ceiling, the colourful nest, and his companions as well. The world moved with a slight blur and when he focused on Vexx and Bjorn they glowed softly against the background. His body felt lighter and as he bounced on his feet, he jumped higher than he could before.

He landed and darted forwards, the large creature raising her claw upwards before bringing it down towards him, a faint red line guided its fall, he stepped to the side and the claw hit the ground, another line following horizontally. He leapt, the claw sweeping under him as he pushed forwards, entering the ring. She backed up, covering her eggs, but he instead reached for the large exoskeleton she had moulted. It was heavy and cumbersome, but he managed to move it, dragging it backwards across the nest and between the rocks as she screeched after him. "You did it!" Vexx whooped, as Bjorn grabbed the shell, and they ran back the way they came. "I did it!" Jayce laughed, the world coming back into colour and his body suddenly feeling a lot heavier.

They reunited with Wicke and carried the trophy back to the village, Jayce activating Focus over and over until he collapsed onto the ground, exhausted. "It takes a toll, moron! You've unlocked the most basic form, don't think too much

of it. Remember, there are ten advanced principles, all of which require further mastery. Think of this as the baseline you'll use to unlock the others," Vexx warned Jayce, as he carried him on his back. "But, well done," Vexx said, struggling to hide a proud smile. They handed over the shell, collected their reward, and rested up.

The following morning, after Jayce had tested to actually see if he could still use Focus – which he could, much to his joy - the group departed on their last quest. They followed the old paths across the island, heading to a long-abandoned village on the opposite shore. The otherwise warm sun felt weaker, despite being high in sky, and the winds howled around them as they approached – the entire area felt significantly colder than the otherwise mild day. The old houses were derelict, their roofs decaying or destroyed, the doors rotting or creaking in the wind. "I don't like this," Wicke whined. "Something attacked the villagers, we need to find out what and defeat it. Keep your eyes peeled," Jayce warned the group as they searched around the site, eventually stumbling on a rather fresh, and bloody, hand sticking out of a doorway.

The sun disappeared behind a cloud, and the entire area became masked in shadow, with such chill that they could see each other's breath. Jayce stepped forwards towards the building, both swords drawn and his eyes quickly spotting the pools of blood inside, left behind by the previous adventurers who had accepted the quest. The door slammed shut as he tried to step through, a chain rattling from the inside and a faint green glow floating from within. A bottle smashed behind him and Jayce, Bjorn, and Wicke all jumped out of their skins as they turned to face Vexx as he discarded an empty drink. "By the gods, Vexx!" exclaimed Jayce. Vexx looked at him, his eyes flashing red before he nodded in acknowledgment. "That solves that, a Wraith," he stated casually, taking a deep gulp before raising a fist and looking beyond Jayce.

"I see it!" Bjorn stated, drawing his axe. Wicke chanted quickly before tapping her temple, her eyes glowing. Jayce turned around, nothing was there. The door slammed open, but there only an empty doorway. He shut his eyes, the crashing waves building up before being silenced by a drop of water. He opened his eyes, the world grey, and a shrivelled and skeletal face of a woman staring at him from beneath a long veil, a large black void where the mouth should have been. It screeched and rushed at him, long fingernails coated in a dripping, black liquid, swiping towards him at a terrifying fast speed. "Hellfire!" yelled Wicke from behind, just as the sword Alara had given Jayce passed harmlessly through the

Wraith, a long stream of blue fire flying past him. The Wraith screamed and disappeared in a flash of green light.

"Swords don't work!" Jayce yelled, putting his blades away and backing up to get closer to the others. "It's a spirit, magic or life force will harm her. Use your bodies, but stay away from its claws," Vexx slurred as he swigged from his bottle, leaping up and kicking twice as the Wraith flew towards them from behind another house. His feet connected and she flew backwards, once again disappearing in a flash of light. Bjorn swiped with his claws, narrowly avoiding her swipes in retaliation as she emerged from the ground behind Wicke. The wraith screeched and the entire world around them darkened, her body splitting into multiple copies of herself, as she prowled across the area.

"Light!" yelled Wicke, holding up her hand as it glowed brightly in the darkness, revealing the real Wraith as it charged towards them, its copies disappearing and its body burning in the light. It came at them from Vexx's side, and as he swigged from his bottle, he stepped to the side, the wraith slashing wildly at Jayce's undefended back. He yelled in pain as it cut deeply into him, dropping to the floor. "Jayce!" screamed Wicke, Vexx pulling back a heavy fist before punching straight into the Wraith's chest. His other hand followed into its body before he tore it apart, the rags of its clothing disintegrating as he tore apart its essence, leaving nothing behind but a silvery dust that collected onto the floor.

Jayce pushed himself up from the floor, his back bloody and large dark marks surrounding the wound. Bjorn pulled out a healing potion from his bag, pouring it quickly across the wound, the flesh knitting itself back together – the dark marks remained. "You okay, Captain?" Bjorn asked, as Vexx stared in shock. Jayce nodded, his brow sweaty and his skin pale. "We won," Jayce said weakly, leaning over and throwing up blood across the floor before collapsing.

They ran back to the village, Bjorn carrying Jayce in his arms, a small pouch containing the Wraith's essence tied to his belt as proof. "He can't die, he can't die," Vexx muttered as they ran. "Shut it!" ordered Bjorn. "Take the pouch and turn in the bounty, we'll head to the doctor," he told Vexx, as Wicke sobbed quietly, running after them as quick as she could. They burst through the gates, the pair splitting up and the villagers jumping in shock as the group charged through. "Where's the doctor?" yelled Bjorn, the villagers quickly pointing to a small house by the dock. Bjorn banged on the door, a rather startled and dark-skinned woman rushing to the door. "Fix him!" Bjorn told her, presenting the

injured Jayce in his arms. She nodded and quickly guided them inside. "Tell me what happened," she ordered, rushing over to inspect him.

Bjorn recounted the tale, Wicke stood quietly to the side waiting for Vexx to return as the doctor looked him over. "His body is deteriorating. From what I can tell, he has been cursed, this is something I can't treat. He will get worse and worse until his body succumbs to the injury, unless you can find someone who can remove it. A Sister would be your best bet, if you can make it to the Capital in time," advised the doctor, giving Jayce an injection as she turned to Bjorn. "That's not possible," Bjorn stated looking down at Jayce as he lay there unconscious. "Then I suggest you find another doctor who can help. There's one a few days travel away, however the island she's on is currently in a war against the Empire," the doctor told them, walking over to her desk and picking up a bounty poster, handing it Bjorn. 'Quack Doctor Yuthura' it read.

"Head to Golden Bow, soon. I'm unfamiliar with this kind of injury, but I get the feeling your friend doesn't have long. I'm sorry I can't be of more help," she said sincerely. "Thank you doctor," Bjorn told her, handing a black pearl to her before picking up Jayce and leaving the room, Wicke on his heels. Vexx was waiting for them at the boat, his eyes widening as he saw Jayce still weak in Bjorn's arms. The Small Catch looked brand new, it had a new blue paintjob, new white sails, the mast had been replaced and so had the rudder and wheel. However, they didn't have time to admire the work, Bjorn paid the workers, and they quickly departed the island.

Jayce lay shivering on the bed in the captain's quarters, under Wicke's watchful eye, as Bjorn and Vexx plotted their course east. They sailed for the entire day, eventually dropping anchor as the sun set. The group gathered around their captain, still fast asleep in his bed. "I'll take the night watch," Vexx stated. Wicke grinded her teeth and turned towards him with tears in her eyes. "This is all your fault! He got injured because of your carelessness, now he might die, and we are once again sailing off course!" she yelled, turning on Vexx who simply looked down and shrunk away from her. "Wicke! This is not helping. Vexx messed up, that's true, but we need to focus on Jayce. Everything else can wait - get some sleep, we'll need your magic over the next few days. We don't have the means to travel accurately at night, so prepare to move at dawn. Vexx, I'll do this night," Bjorn ordered, standing up and shooing Wicke away.

She turned a deep red, glared at Vexx, and burst into tears before running off below deck. "You fucked up, don't let it happen again," Bjorn said quietly. Vexx

nodded and wandered off to the stern of the ship, slumping down against the wall of the captain's quarters. He pulled out a bottle of rum, looked at it, and threw it over the edge of the boat before curling up on the floor. They sailed quickly, Jayce turning paler by the day, his muscle melting away and dark circles appearing around his eyes. Wicke spent all day standing behind the sail on the deck, as she used her magic to speed them along. She was exhausted by the end, and each day grew longer and longer, until on the night before they were due to arrive at Golden Bow, Bjorn called out to them.

"Guys, come now!" he yelled, a sense of panic in his voice, that neither of them had heard before. Wicke and Vexx crashed through the door to the captain's quarters. His eyes were wide as he sat next to Jayce, softly wiping the sweat from his chest and face as he breathed raggedly and loosely. His skin was grey and his body gaunt compared to his usual self. "I don't know what to do..." Bjorn said softly, as Wicke knelt next to Jayce, Vexx stood unmoving from the doorway. Jayce's eyes fluttered open, and he glanced over towards the trio, a weak smile at the corner of his mouth. "We're here Jayce, hang on. You need to fight it, we're nearly there!" Wicke told him, taking his hand as he slowly reached out to them. "Please, hang on..." Wicke told him, just before his hand went limp in hers and his eyes shut.

Seize the Seas Tales: Vexx's Vexations – Gaze

A few days prior, as the crew sailed towards their next destination, Vexx summoned Jayce and Wicke to the bow of the ship, as Bjorn washed himself inside the bathroom. "Right, for today's lesson I'm going to teach you about Gaze," he told them proudly, as he beckoned for them to look over the side at the waters beneath them. "Gaze?" Jayce asked curiously. "Damn right. Gaze is a style within Focus, one that specifically enhances the eyes. At a base level it'll allow you to see spirits and other ethereal things, at more advanced levels you can spot things that are invisible and even things that are yet to happen. A base level will also give a slight idea of where something is moving, however this is inaccurate and will only really work on things that cannot change direction – like a fist in motion," Vexx explained to the very excited Jayce and the bored-looking Wicke.

"I can already use my magic to do most of that!" she countered. Vexx rolled his eyes. "Well, in the case where you don't have time to use magic, Focus is always available. So learn it anyway. How many fish can you guys see?" Vexx asked, looking over the side. Jayce squinted trying to spot any. "Five?" he guessed. Wicke shook her head, casting a spell on herself before looking as well. "Sixteen,"

she answered, sticking her tongue out at Vexx. "There's a few more than that," Vexx said with a smug smile, as he pointed a little ways off out to the open water. It split and a gigantic creature leapt from the water with a splash, the wave rocking their ship as they sailed. The large whale launched a geyser of water from its blowhole and both Jayce and Wicke rushed over to get a better look.

A roar echoed from behind them, and the planks of the ship rumbled as a very angry, and very pink, Bjorn emerged from the bathroom with no clothes on, not even a towel around his waist. "Who did this?" he roared. Wicke covered her eyes and Jayce laughed, prompting the angry bear to assume it was Jayce as grabbed him by the ankle and threw him overboard before turning on Vexx as he burst out laughing. "Something funny?" Bjorn asked. Vexx gulped, entered into Focus and ran towards the rear of the ship. "Come here you bastard!" Bjorn yelled in hot pursuit, as Jayce clambered onboard and Wicke ran off to get Bjorn a towel.

Chapter 22: In The Deepest Abyss

The wind rushed past Jayce as he fell, the air around him dark, the skies empty, and his body cold. His eyes were open, he thought, yet he could see nothing, hear nothing, except the rushing of wind. He could feel nothing, but the inertia of gravity as he fell quickly through the air. With a splash, he hit water; his eyes finally opening to see clearly in an endless abyss. The water was everywhere, there was no surface – just more water. It was bright, and perfectly clear as he looked upwards, but as he turned to look down, the waters darkened and became murkier.

He gasped for air, reaching for a breath to fill his lungs, but nothing came; his lungs empty, yet full of air at the same time as he struggled under the water. A splash echoed next to him, followed by another, and another, and another – all around him bodies hit the water, some flailing and struggling as he did; others just lay there, calm and focused. Some of the calm ones sank quickly, disappearing into the abyss beneath them, others flailed there, trapped floating in the water. Jayce relaxed, twisting to look around – there were endless bodies, endless souls waiting to move on.

He began to sink as he relaxed, some of the other bodies out reaching towards him as they tried to follow, held back by the light weight of their souls. The waters darkened around him as he sank, and he felt a pull from within him, dragging him down: he listened to it – stretching out and pulling himself rather than drifting. He passed other souls on their descent; most ignoring him; some confused, surprised by his actions as he swam deeper into the unknown. They disappeared into shadow, hardly visible in the rising murkiness of the waters, but Jayce followed the pull, and, after a while, the murkiness vanished.

A huge, dark grey, sandy seabed rose up to meet him as he cleared the fog, still a hundred or so metres away as he swam. The waters remained, but it lightened, and he dropped as if he was in air, landing on his feet in the sand. He jumped, his body floating then sinking slowly back down to the sand. It was strange. A nervous energy built up around him, the environment charging before releasing in a loud crackle, a large wave of blue light flowing over his head. He turned, looking for the source, only to see a large black pyramid that lay before him. Many floating orbs of coloured blue, green, and purple fire lined several paths towards the main set of stairs leading to the top. They acted like gates, and the various souls walked through them, heading to the pyramid.

It had a flat top, with a huge golden bell that lay suspended from a long silvery rope floating upwards towards nothingness. The feeling of energy reappeared, and the bell slowly tilted, before dropping and letting out a loud ring, a flowing wave of blue fire radiating around it, quickly spreading outwards. As Jayce looked more closely, he spotted a large portal, a swirling pool of purple and blue light floating just below the bell. The countless souls ascending the stairs all halted before stepping through, heading onwards to whatever came next. Jayce felt something brush his leg and he looked down, a small cat sat next to him, its fur white and brown, but body mostly transparent. It meowed at him, and he reached down, stroking its back as it purred. It then left him, following the path that lay before them, joining the numerous souls as they continued forwards.

Several groups of glowing figures stood to the sides, waiting next to the paths: small children, elderly parents, lone lovers... Every now and again one would run off, rushing into the arms of the person they were waiting for. Some of the numerous animals and creatures did so as well, but not nearly as many. The water around Jayce roared and swirled, but the pyramid did not ring, instead a colossal creature, with a huge and flowing tail and numerous fins, swam over him. In the far darkness, surrounding the area like a ring, he spotted several of these leviathans swimming in and out of the abyss.

Jayce looked down at himself: he was still wearing his usual clothes, but although they were there, they were transparent, and he could see his skin. He could see through himself, his bones highlighted across his body and several organs clearly visible as well, most notably his heart as it sat still in his chest. Beyond his organs, lay a strange object that Jayce didn't recognise. It was tall, made of a bright, glowing metal, with several bowls floating over each other. They overlapped each other, each tier getting larger as it got lower in his body. There were ten to his count and they were all empty. Jayce turned his gaze to his heart and focused for a second: it pulsed once, followed by another as he tried again. It took a while, or at least what felt like a while, but eventually he willed it to beat – irregularly, and slowly.

A dark cloak wisped past him, and Jayce turned to face a white mask attached to a long black cloak. A white rope belt lay around its waist and no legs were present from below the long cloak. Its hands were hidden beneath its sleeves, and it floated in the waters around him. He stared at its face: it held a strange expression, a mixture of glee and sadness. The eye holes held nothing but darkness, the same as its mouth. "Hello?" Jayce asked it. It leant forwards, gazing into his face, before lowering its head and looking at his slowly beating heart. It

jumped back, raising a sleeve and pointing towards his chest, before getting closer and looking towards Jayce.

It spoke, silently, yet Jayce could understand it. He nodded, and it pressed its sleeve into his chest grasping his heart. He gasped, his body shuddering as the creature quickly let go, backing away in surprise. They looked at each other, equally surprised by the other, until the reaper tilted its head, a loud whooshing sound echoing behind Jayce, a warm glowing light passing through him. Jayce turned around; a portal had appeared behind him - it swirled in a lustrous manner around the edges, but the surface was smooth like a mirror. He could see a bright grove before him, islands floating in the air in the distance, large waterfalls running off them. A huge fountain sat in the centre, identical to the object in his chest, only this one flowed with glowing blue water. Jayce turned back and the reaper raised its arm, pointing towards the portal and nodding its head. It then bowed slowly, and Jayce bowed back before stepping through, the portal closing behind him.

Warm air flowed through him, and bright sunlight shone down onto his body. Rainbows filled the skies, and a calm, gentle melodic music emanated across the plane, originating from an unknown source. His feet, bare, stood comfortably in ankle-high grass, the blades tickling his toes. Large trees dotted the floating island he stood upon, and large red fences lined the edges with floating, glowing, lamps adding little light to the already bright area. He felt at peace, relaxed, unburdened. The fountain gurgled next to him, the floating bowls overflowing into each other with bright, glowing, blue waters. It was then, as he looked towards it, that Jayce spotted a man sat next to the fountain. He was bare-chested, with blue, puffy trousers that tightened at his ankles. His feet lay wrapped in white bands, accompanied by simple sandals that merged with the wrappings.

He was big, his shoulders rounded and his back extremely muscular, only heightened by the large and heavy-looking white beads hanging from his neck. He sat there cross-legged, floating casually above the ground. Jayce circled him slowly, looking towards the Monk's face. It was grizzled with age, tanned like the rest of his body. His head was smooth, but he had a large, dark beard, accompanied by a thick set of eyebrows. His eyes were shut. "Hello?" Jayce asked, the Monk opening his brown right eye and looking towards Jayce. "Hello?" the Monk asked, closing his eye and extending his legs out slowly to touch the ground.

He matched Jayce in height, but certainly outclassed Jayce in brawn. The Monk then bowed to the fountain before turning to face Jayce. "I apologise. You startled me," he said gently, much to Jayce's confusion from the sheer lack of reaction from the Monk. "It has been a very long time since anyone has visited this place, I long thought the technique of traversing the Underworld had been lost to time. Who was your master?" the Monk asked. Jayce opened his mouth and then closed it slowly.

Brief realisation crossed his face as he spotted Jayce's faint transparency, a feature the Monk did not have. "Oh, are you dead?" he asked. Jayce shrugged. The Monk nodded. "I see. Your heart still beats, so I presume not. Undeath, is it? It has been many years since I have had a visitor in this pocket of Heaven. Tell me your name, boy?" the Monk asked, sitting down and inviting Jayce to sit with him on the grass. "Jayce. Where am I? What is this place?" Jayce asked, sitting down and crossing his legs like the Monk. "We are in the Underworld, specifically one of the dimensions known as Heaven. Traditionally, people used to traverse here to open their Spirit Font, but times have changed so this place sits empty, save a few Demons," he answered.

"Demons?" Jayce asked. The Monk nodded, pointing to a large island floating in the distance, a white palace sat on top. "Gods, Demons, same thing. Anyway, refer to me as Abbot Song. It is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance," said the Abbot, bowing slowly from his seated position. "I'm sure you have numerous questions, but first, please explain how you came here." Jayce nodded and recounted his adventures, starting all the way from the incident on Last Drop, all those months ago.

Abbot Song listened intently, nodding along and waiting patiently for the right times to ask questions. "I see, how unusual. So you died, then?" he asked at last. Jayce nodded. "Well, your heart still beats, so although you have passed through the Abyss, I believe you may still return home. Many have come and gone from here; originally this place was the main means of unlocking magic, or Qi as we traditionalists call it," he stated, Jayce's eyes widened as it dawned on him. "How do people not know of this? Surely if everyone can unlock it – ". Abbot Song laughed.

"My boy, surely you are not so naïve as to think reaching this place is easy. By the Great Dragon, you died to get here, try convincing the people of your New World to follow that. No, with Mages able to unlock Fonts without this place, this route has long been lost to time. Besides, even with the newer techniques, with

this era's attitude to magic, magic is much less common than the times of old," he stated. Jayce's eyes widened. "Where are you from and how old are you?" Jayce asked. Again the Monk laughed. "I am a Dragon Monk from the trees of The Frontier. I have lost track of my age, but I achieved enlightenment, I believe, some hundred and fifty years ago. I'm not too certain, I very rarely descend from the treetops," he said with a smile.

Jayce slumped into the side of the fountain. "My boy, are you alright?" he asked. "Yes, you're from The Frontier? The Frontier?" Jayce asked excitedly. "Please tell me all about it. What's it like? What's on the other side?" A soft sobbing echoed around them as the Abbot went to answer. "Ah, it looks like time is running out. I'm sure you have many more questions, and I hope to answer them someday. But it appears someone wants you back," he stated, pointing to Jayce's body as the transparency faded and he became more solid. "Now, from your tales... as well as your presence here, I believe it would be best to open your Spirit Font. Have you unlocked Focus yet?" he asked. Jayce nodded, concentrating – the familiar rush building up in his ears before silencing at the sound of a droplet.

"Good, continue your studies and practice," the Monk told him, standing up and facing the fountain. "Now, as you have no doubt noticed the Font within you is closed, simply drink from these waters and yours will open," he instructed, offering a hand to Jayce. Jayce took it and stood up, looking into the tenth bowl before him. "How much do I drink?" he asked. The Abbot paused for a second, thinking to himself. "Not too much, drink too much and you'll burn away," he stated casually. "Don't worry too much, I've only read of such things – you'll be fine," he stated quickly, noticing Jayce's worried expression.

Jayce nodded and leant forwards, looking towards the swirling waters. His nose brushed the surface: it was very cold, yet warm at the same time. He buried his face, taking a deep gulp before shooting backwards and landing on his rear, his body burning from the inside. "Am I dead? Again?" Jayce asked, a strange feeling inside him, like a new muscle had formed. Abbot Song shook his head. "No, you are fine," he told Jayce, helping him back up. "That was exciting, I've never seen anyone do that before. Ascension taught me many things but gave no means to share it. Anyway, let's take a look." He tapped Jayce, once on the sternum before tapping each shoulder. He then drew a circle around Jayce's chest, golden lines tracing his fingers as he moved from shoulder to shoulder, before dragging his fingers back to Jayce's sternum. A gold flash erupted between them, and Jayce could once again see inside himself - this time his organs were omitted, and he could only see the Spirit Font.

The very top bowl was filling quickly from a small spring of water, it was very small and quite shallow, as were the majority of the others. Abbot Song nodded, noting Jayce's curiosity. He then repeated the movement on himself, highlighting his own Spirit Font. His bowls were all much deeper, and much wider as well. All ten tiers overflowed, and the very surface sprayed like a fountain. "As you can see, each person's Font is different, dictated by lineage and experience. Yours is small, but with practice and time it may surpass my own, as your friend no-doubt explained," Abbot Song told him. Jayce nodded, thinking back to Wicke's previous explanations and the various inaccuracies from what he could see.

The sobbing got louder again. "Well, time is running out, so I will show you one last thing, such that we may resume our conversation someday, if we do not meet in the land of the living," he told Jayce, stepping away from the fountain to a more open area. "This technique will require a greater level of Focus than you can currently maintain or output; practice – you'll achieve it one day. This technique will allow you to project yourself into the Underworld, and with high enough prowess, even to other planes, such as this one," he told Jayce, crossing his legs and sitting down.

Jayce sat opposite him and mirrored the Monk. "Follow my movements, precisely," he instructed, flattening his left palm and holding it vertically in front of him, whilst extending his other arm high above him. "Enter a state of Focus, manually, if you cannot achieve it passively," he continued, his eyes flashing a deep cyan. Jayce mirrored him, the bright colours of Heaven muting in the background. Abbot Song glowed intensely before Jayce, a second layer of glowing skin floating around his body, his entire presence dominating Jayce's vision. Every muscle across his body was heightened, focused, refined. "Focus Jayce," the Monk stated, meeting his gaze as he ran his raised arm around in a clockwise direction before he folded his arm inwards – his fingers bending into a fist as he did so. His hands collided and his entire body rippled before Jayce. Jayce copied, not achieving the same effect.

The Abbot ended his Focus, correcting Jayce's technique and guiding him until he could do it backwards. "You will not be able to activate this technique for some time, but you will figure it out eventually," Abbot Song told him. "Now, I believe it is time to return home," he told Jayce, placing his palms together before spreading them apart, a portal appearing before them. "Thank you for everything," Jayce told the Monk, extending an arm. The Abbot gripped his forearm tightly before stepping back and bowing. Jayce mimicked him and the

Abbot smiled in appreciation. "I pray we meet in person someday - try not to die again."

The words echoed in Jayce's mind as he stepped through the portal, the world fading around him into darkness and a cold and painful feeling tearing through him. A heavy weight fell upon his chest as he lay, his body cold and in a deep sweat, it sobbed quietly as it lay there, and he felt his lungs scream inside him. Jayce groaned and the sobbing halted, the weight on his chest bolting upright. "Shit, it didn't turn him into a zombie did it?" asked Vexx, furniture rattling in the room as the trio around him leapt backwards.

Jayce took a deep gasp of air, slowly opening his eyes in the darkness. His mouth felt like a desert, and everything hurt. He rolled his head to the side and looked at the others, his left eye still mostly closed. "Jayce?" Wicke asked slowly and softly, as she edged closer towards him, her eyes puffy and red. "Heya kiddo, why the tears?" he asked, quickly getting winded as she pounced on him, the sobbing resuming louder than ever. "Uh, Captain... don't know how to tell you this, but you died. As in, dead dead," Bjorn affirmed. Jayce nodded, closing his eyes as he struggled to lift his arms to hug Wicke back. "So it wasn't a dream," Jayce muttered. "Fill me in on what's been happening."

Bjorn recounted the last few days, leading on from the incident as well as where they were currently headed. Jayce nodded, looking down at Wicke as she lay on him. "I'm sorry Wicke. It's my fault we are making another detour." "Fuck that!" she yelled with a muffle into his chest. "First of all, it was Vexx's fault, and second, we're doing this together, right? If I have to pick between you living and getting there sooner... well, the choice is obvious!" she told him. Vexx stood quietly to the side, a look of shame on his face. Jayce tried to sit up, but lifting up his head was the best he could do. He quickly gave up, groaning in pain.

"Try not to move, save your strength," Bjorn stated, pushing a cup of water to Jayce's dry lips. Jayce accepted the water and nodded slowly. "I leave myself in your care. You're in charge, Bjorn," Jayce told him, smiling faintly as he looked upwards, his skin sweaty and blotchy, with large dark marks across his body. "Stay strong, Captain. We'll get there soon," Bjorn told him, patting Jayce gently on the shoulder before turning to walk away. "Hey Wicke, I don't suppose you could tell me the incantation for that fire spell?" Jayce asked. Wicke raised an eyebrow and slowly iterated it to Jayce, he copied her phrasing and mimicked the gesture he had seen her do many times before. Jayce felt a pull inside himself

and before the eyes of the entire crew his finger darkened, all too familiar patterns wreathing his skin. He clicked his fingers and a flame ignited at the end of his index finger. "Well, that's new," Jayce smirked, ending the spell and falling asleep as the other three stood silently in shock.

Wicke lay there, her head on Jayce's chest, until the early morning – she couldn't sleep, she wouldn't sleep; she was too worried he would stop breathing again. She had lost people before, but this felt different. The others, her original crew, had been with her for longer, yet she had mourned them and moved on quickly. Jayce felt different, she couldn't explain it – couldn't understand it. He meant something different to her, something more. Her stomach twisted and knotted inside her as silent tears ran down her face, guilt eating her up as she pictured Jayce, cold and unbreathing, or Bjorn riddled with bullet holes, or even Vexx, hanging from the gallows. "I'm so sorry," she muttered quietly, rubbing her face on his shirt.

Bjorn too couldn't sleep, although his reaction to Jayce's temporary death had been surprising, especially to himself - he felt angry more than anything. Frustrated at his inability, his foolishness, and his weakness. He was one of the largest baned on record, yet he felt small, insignificant, and pathetic. After watching Wicke and Jayce for a few hours, deep into the darkness of the night, he eventually retired, heading down to the hold, opting to instead sit on the floor rather than lay in his hammock. It was cool to him, where it was cold to the others, and he could feel the rocking of the ship more from this position, an old and comforting feeling from his days in the Navy. At least this time there were no chains, he thought. Vexx lay curled up on his own hammock, his body faced away from Bjorn and too still for any normal person.

"You awake?" Bjorn asked Vexx, resting his head gently against the walls of the hold. "Yeah... What do you want?" Vexx asked, not moving from his position. "Nothing in particular, I just wanted to thank you... I guess its overdue. You got us out of the arena, you chose us... You saved me from the Guild. So, thank you," Bjorn said quietly. "Oh, don't mention it. I was planning on leaving anyway, the old hag kept bugging me," Vexx lied. Bjorn knew it was a lie, a poorly disguised one at that, but he chose to ignore it. "Right, well, thanks anyway..."

The morning came and as soon as the sun first glanced over the horizon they were on their way, Jayce in varying states of consciousness, Wicke using her magic on the sails, Bjorn by the maps, and Vexx on the ship's wheel. It took the majority of the morning, but eventually their destination appeared on the

horizon: Golden Bow – an island covered in smoke and fire as a pair of Navy ships fired at the island from the bay. “Are we sure about this?” Vexx asked. “She may not even be here.” Bjorn stood up tall, Jayce wrapped tightly over his shoulders like a backpack. “Maybe not, but this is our best chance. Let’s not fuck it up,” Bjorn stated, glancing nervously around as the sound of cannon fire echoed across the sea.

“Are we all in agreement?” Bjorn asked. Wicke and Vexx nodded, Jayce doing so weakly as well. “You find the doctor, get him healed. Then you use the flare, and we will pick you up and get out of here. Simple enough,” Wicke stated, checking Jayce over quickly before taking her position in front of the sail, Vexx already behind the wheel. Bjorn stood at the edge of the boat, taking one last look at the other two as they sailed quickly towards the opposite side of the island. “Good luck!” Wicke called out, as Bjorn dove over the edge into the water.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Matter of Respect

The first three weeks of Alara’s training had flown by - some days definitely felt longer than others, but she had truly come to love the whole experience, even the early morning starts and overwhelming amount of work she had to complete each day. However, there were a few things that had started to really get on her nerves. They sat there as a squad, her and the new additions to her friendship group, eating their dinner. Wulf, Witchford, and Astris Kai sat opposite her, whilst Riley and Violette Bancroft sat either side of her. Various pieces of mail lay scattered across the table, letters from family and loved ones. She held her letter nervously in her hands, the all-too-familiar handwriting of Jayce on the front of the envelope, his writing immaculate, as always, compared to her sloppy scribbles.

She held it tightly, unsure of what to expect; she almost feared its contents, especially if it was the usual drivel Jayce typically wrote to her. “Who’s your letter from?” Astris asked curiously, a mischievous grin on her face and her long, dark hair hanging loose over her shoulders, as she looked at the handwriting from across the table. “None of your business,” Alara told her with a hardly hidden smile, flipping over the letter and moving to put it away. A hand appeared from behind, snatching the letter from Alara’s hands as Brett and his goons approached the group.

“My oh my,” chided Brett, stepping back and playing with the letter. “No need to be shy, Vanathur, share with the group. Surely, we should all get to hear the words of that mysterious, loser of a boyfriend of yours?” Witchford stood up

from the other side of the table, his usual calm demeanour flashing with quick anger as his tanned skin turned a shade of red, his green eyes glaring at Brett and his friends through his glasses. Wulf stood up next to him, the two giants of the group staring them down. Alara raised a finger behind her back, pointing downwards; they slowly sat down, but the message was clear. "Give it back, Brett," Alara ordered coldly, standing to her feet.

Brett laughed. "I don't take orders from you," he sneered, gripping the letter and tearing into four pieces before throwing it in her face. Brett hit the floor before the paper did, as Alara broke his nose with her fist. "The fuck! You'll regret that Vanathur, do you not know who my father is?" Brett yelled from his position on the floor, the other three in his group all stood in stunned silence. Alara looked down at him, her face calm and stony, her eyes on fire. "You know what, I think I've had it. You've actually fucking gone and done it, you asshole! You broke me, well done, feel proud, but - since you're so curious about my love life - how about I tell you about it."

She stepped out from the bench, Brett stumbling backwards to his feet as she walked towards him, each step aimed to step on him. "My father will -" "My boyfriend's name, which you will find written on that letter to me, is Jayce Exarga," Alara stated, the few onlookers all immediately packing up their things and clearing the area. Violette all but fainted, Axel, Ryker, and Delex all turned a deep shade of red, immediately raising their hands before them and backing up in apology. Brett turned a shade of white lighter than the hair of their Instructor.

"Perhaps you've heard that surname before, if not, let me enlighten you. That hand-written letter from my dearest boyfriend of several years, just happens to be the son of the Admiral of the North, the Bloody Barbarian herself, as well as the son of the Vice-Admiral of Imperial Intelligence. The two people, who - after my parents, a pair of Vice-Admirals themselves, left - raised me as their own and more than happily accepted me as their destined daughter-in-law. So Brett, pick up my letter, put it back together in near-perfect condition and bring it to me personally. Or, since you decided to suggest bringing in outside help to try to threaten me with, how about we both do it and see how that pans out? You bring your father, I will bring the Admiral and the Vice-Admiral, maybe some other old family friends as well. Or we could settle it here and Wulf, Witchford, and I will send the four of you to the hospital - I can promise you now it will be marked as self-defence."

Brett stammered as the other three quickly picked up the letter and dragged him away. Once they were gone, Alara let out a long sigh and sat back down, resting her head face down on the table. "Oh shit! Go Alara" Astris whooped from across the table, Witchford and Wulf both laughing. "Exarga, as in the Exargas?" Violette asked, her purple eyes flashing and her brown hair swaying as she rocked the bench. Alara gave a weak thumbs up, her heart racing as she lay there. "What's the Admiral like? Tell us everything!" Riley asked quickly. "Hey, hey, let her breathe," Wulf told the others, nudging Astris to settle down as he struggled to hide a wolfish smile. Brett returned quickly, his nose still untreated and bleeding, but the letter glued back together. "Leave, I expect better from you and the others," Alara ordered, sitting back up straight and shooing him away. He ran away quickly.

Alara opened the letter, Violette and Riley peeking at it curiously. Astris got up and ran around to look over Alara's shoulder. She read the first few paragraphs quickly, her face turning a bright shade of crimson as the three around her gasped. She slammed the letter face-down on the table immediately burying it beneath her arms and hair. "It's- it's not what it looks like!" Alara stammered quickly. The three around her wide-eyed, faces red, and mouths open. "What a description..." muttered Riley, fanning her face as she flashed a wide smile. "Pure pornography," muttered Astris, as she squealed into her hands, her eyes peeking through her fingers. "What a dreamboat! And he's the son of two Admirals... Does he have any siblings?" Violette asked. Alara's soul left her body as sat back up, tucking the letter quickly into her pocket, Wulf and Witchford laughing loudly as she did so. She covered her face in shame, hiding a smile as she thought up what to send back to him.

Chapter 23: Docs, Quacks, Wars and Curses

Bjorn swam quickly, holding his breath for as long as possible to keep Jayce at the top of the water - the ocean waves bashing them from all directions as they navigated the rocks surrounding the west side of Golden Bow. They bounced into a rock; Bjorn taking the full brunt of the blow to protect Jayce. "Hang on, this is going to get rough!" Bjorn called out, as he dug his claws into a rock for a better grip. Jayce spat out a mouthful of seawater. "We are not going this way on our way back," he groaned, before taking another deep breath as Bjorn pushed off, following the cliff line towards a rocky beach. Bjorn pulled them out of the water, taking one quick look behind; The Small Catch was sailing away quickly into the distance. "Good. Let's find this doctor."

Golden Bow was a small island, barely a kilometre across and mostly covered by open grassy plains, with small woods splashed across the land. A large lake stood in the middle of the island, with a large channel dug from the coast directly to the waters. Within this lake sat a castle keep on a smaller island, attached to the rest of the island by a large stone bridge. Fires raged across the land, with gunfire, and the sounds of swords clashing, echoing all around. Bjorn ran quickly, his axe and sword tucked away on his belt, Jayce's own weapons hanging there as well. The ride was bumpy, Jayce feeling, and looking, miserable as they bounded quickly from cover to cover through the woods.

"There!" Bjorn said at last, crouching low in a ditch to scout the route ahead. Jayce opened his eyes, his vision was still blurry, but the island's keep lay ahead. The bridge was guarded by the island's inhabitants, identified by the colours and equipment they wore, deep golds and mostly leathers. A large encampment had been built around the bridge and guards patrolled the keep walls, watching for surprise attacks. A bullet sailed past Bjorn's head from behind. He turned to see a small squad of Navy sailors tracking them through the woods, their equipment all too familiar to Bjorn. A few fired their pistols at him: 'Sea Dragons', historically unreliable at range and only capable of a single shot; their bullets flew wildly as he darted to the side, drawing his axe and sword as he prepared to charge them.

Jayce groaned on his shoulder and Bjorn hesitated, quickly sheathing his weapons and opting to run instead, the Navy following in quick pursuit. "Get them men! For the Empire!" ordered the Petty Officer in charge of the squad. Bjorn ignored her, running quickly for the encampment, the various guards calling out and pointing in his direction. Bjorn waved his arms, pointing towards

Jayce on his shoulder. A cannon roared in front of him, and a large glowing cannonball sailed past them, a loud explosion rocking the ground behind them. "For glory! Push forwards!" cried the Petty Officer, her squad continuing their pursuit. Three more cannons fired, but Bjorn didn't dare to look behind, vaulting over the barricade quickly as the various guards provided cover.

"By the Gods! Who are you? Where did you come from?" asked one of the guards, turning his rifle on them. "Calm yourself, we're looking for a doctor. Yuthura. My friend needs her help," Bjorn answered quickly. The few guards around them looked at each other and then back at Jayce. "Alright, Bricker get 'em to the hospital," said the guard captain. Bricker, a young looking boy, dressed in armour a few sizes too big, nodded. "Follow me and keep low!" he told them, running off across the bridge, using the stone walls for cover as bullets began to sail towards them from both sides. They moved quickly, the few marksmen along the bridge and castle walls providing cover as they ran, until finally they passed through the portcullis and into the main keep.

A large tent had been set up in the centre of the courtyard, a hastily painted 'Hospital' splashed across its sides. "There! Good luck!" yelled Bricker, as several cannons blasted from the top of the walls, before he ran off back the way they had come from. Bjorn ran quickly towards it, the pair of guards stood outside both pointing their spears towards him, large bandages across their heads and arms. "Who are you?" asked one. Bjorn ignored them, slapping their spears away and pushing inside. "Hey, you can't- ", cried one of the guards as Bjorn entered, untying the cloth around Jayce and holding him in his arms. The few injured islanders, as well as the doctors inside, quickly turned to face them, their eyes wide. "Please," Bjorn said, rushing towards the doctors. "Save my friend."

One of the doctors rushed forwards, looking Jayce over in Bjorn's arms. "Put him on a bed. Nurse, get Yuthura," ordered the doctor, examining Jayce quickly and wiping the water off his body before handing Bjorn a towel to use on himself. A purple-eyed woman emerged from behind a set of curtains, her long hair grey with splashes of black. She was tall, and thin, with wrinkled skin and a pale complexion. A doctor's coat hung across her shoulders, vials and syringes attached to the inside. A tight, black, sleeveless coat wrapped her chest, with a large zip running down the middle. There were bandages wrapped around her wrists and exposed forearms, several splattered with blood. She wore black leggings, pockets sewn into the material and full of random items. She also had black laced boots, stopping midway up her calves.

She rushed over to Jayce, surprisingly quickly for a woman in her sixties, or even seventies. She checked him over quickly, looking up at Bjorn. "Tell me what happened. Quickly bear, I don't have much time for lollygaggers!" she ordered sternly. "He got injured by a wraith a few days ago, the local doctor said he was cursed," Bjorn told her, stammering a little as he spoke. She let out a sigh, rubbing her scalp; Bjorn quickly noticed the bags under her eyes and the sweat across her brow. "By whatever-is-in-charge-of-this-damned-world, is that it?" she asked, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small red stone.

She placed it on Jayce's chest and held her hands over it, muttering in an unknown tongue similar to what Wicke normally spoke. The pair of large circles tattooed into the back of her hands glowed, intricate etchings marked throughout the entire pattern, and a red smoke billowed from the stone into her hands. Jayce lurched in his bed, black smoke rising from his mouth and nose. It formed into a ball and Yuthura grabbed it, swallowing it quickly, the veins across her face and neck turning black before fading. "He'll be fine, next!" she called out, taking the stone and searching for another patient.

The other doctors shook their heads and her shoulders relaxed, her entire body slumping where she stood before she let out a stretch. Jayce blinked, the blurriness to his vision gone and the pain in his body subsiding. "Bjorn?" Jayce asked, looking up him. "Yes, Captain?" Bjorn asked, looking down at him, the paleness gone and the dark marks fading quickly into nothingness. "Am I alive?" Jayce asked, sitting up and trying to stand only for him to fall back onto the bed. "I guess you are!" Bjorn laughed, the days of stress fading away as he too sat down exhausted.

"Thank you," Jayce told him, Bjorn nodded and punched his arm, before handing Jayce a towel. "Thanks Doc, you really saved my hide!" Jayce said a little more loudly to Yuthura. She turned around and looked him and Bjorn up and down. She thought to herself and approached them, pulling out two vials of a green and orange liquid. She pulled out a pair of syringes, slotting the vials into a holder built into the items, before stabbing both Bjorn and Jayce with the needles. "Ow!" they complained, their bodies warming up quickly and the fatigue fading. "Quit whining you babies, you're welcome. I suggest you get off this island the same way you got on, quickly as well. Things are bad now, but they're gonna get a whole lot worse when they send the Marines," she warned, stepping away and cleaning the syringes before putting them away in her coat again. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other before standing up slowly. "Unless you want to make

yourselves useful. The Navy captured a wagon full of supplies a few hundred metres away, we need it back or we won't be able to treat many more injuries."

"We can help," Jayce told her, her eyes widening briefly in surprise. She shrugged and wandered off, returning with three backpacks. "Huh, guess I read you wrong. My bad." Yuthura pulled out a small orb, a silvery liquid inside the sphere, she then handed it to Jayce. "This'll help with your recovery," she told him, before looking towards Bjorn. "I take it you can fight, good. What are your names?" she asked, stabbing her leg with another syringe, the fatigue in her face disappearing quickly. Jayce swallowed the sphere, and his body began to vibrate. "Jayce, ma'am. This is Bjorn," he told her, standing up straight, his body full of colour. "Quit with the ma'am stuff, I'm old, I don't need coddling. Make sure you boys keep up," she told them, handing them backpacks before grabbing a small crossbow-like device resting on a desk. She pressed a button and it collapsed into a small baton that she tucked inside her coat. "Let's go."

Bjorn and Jayce looked at each other, concerned at what, and who, they had just got themselves involved with. She led them further inside the keep, towards a hole in the floor with a ladder going down. She climbed down, tucking her knees to the sides of the ladder and sliding, rather than climbing, quickly into the darkness. Bjorn followed, with Jayce following afterwards. They slid for a while, Bjorn accidentally letting go as they entered a large cavern, landing on the floor with a crash, Jayce falling quickly on top of him. Yuthura rolled her eyes and lit a pair of torches, handing the other to Jayce. "These caves run straight under the lake, we'll use it to get to the mainland and sneak our way from there," she explained to the pair. They nodded and followed quickly behind her.

"So," Jayce said, as he took his swords back from Bjorn, "Who are you?" Yuthura glanced over her shoulder, "Yuthura, you should already know that by now since the big guy came looking for me by name," she stated. "But I guess you want more than that. Call me Doc, Yuthura, some call me the Quack Doctor; I don't really care as long as it's said with an essence of respect. Best doctor in the known world, only one with the balls to actually use magic," she told them. "You can use magic?" Jayce asked. Yuthura turned on her heels, walking backwards, a look of disgust on her face. "Did the curse addle your brain as well? Of course I can. By whoever-runs-this-existence, you're slow."

"Hey, rude. I can use magic as well, we also have a Sorcerer on my ship," Jayce retaliated. Yuthura rolled her eyes and turned back around. "Look kid, everyone can use sorcery, it's the base class of all magic. I'm an Alchemist. I hope for your

friend's sake, you're not the Captain," she added, Bjorn laughing softly to himself as Jayce turned a shade of red. "Hey now, just wait- ". She held up a hand pointing to a ladder mounted on the wall. "We're here, get climbing," she told them, dropping the flaming torch and heading up quickly, leaving the pair behind. "She's rude," Jayce muttered, looking at Bjorn. The bear shook his head and began to climb. "She reminds me of Vexx," Bjorn said, the pair laughing to each other before following quickly after her.

They climbed through the darkness, relying entirely on the feeling of each ladder rung to guide them upwards, until eventually the faintest trickle of light illuminated their path. Yuthura opened the hatch, glancing around briefly before climbing out with surprising ease. "It's too risky to return this way, so if, for whatever reason, we get separated, head to the camp guarding the bridge," Yuthura instructed, resealing the hole behind them before once again taking the lead. Jayce and Bjorn nodded in acknowledgement before following her closely.

They moved quickly and quietly across the fields from woodland to woodland, until eventually their objective arrived in their sights. It was a temporary base, a few guards lining the perimeters but the majority of the buildings inside were little more than tents. "How many are there?" Jayce asked, as they watched from the nearby woods. "I'm not sure, but from what I can tell, the guards are minimal. The gang back at base have been more than they were expecting, so I'd expect the majority of their remaining troops are either at the harbour or the forward camp. No one would expect an attack here," Yuthura stated, passing around a flask full of water. Bjorn nodded in agreement. "The Navy has never given much thought to land-based warfare. The majority of cities and settlements are normally coastal after all," Bjorn stated. Yuthura looked at him in surprise before looking back at Jayce. "Not just muscles and feelings this one, that's reassuring."

"Is there anything you can do with your magic to get us in?" Jayce asked. Yuthura rolled her eyes. "Alchemy is not that kind of magic. We'll just have to run it," she stated. "Run it?" Jayce asked, but Yuthura had already started the charge. Bjorn chuckled and left in pursuit. "Great, just great. Where are Vexx and Wicke when you need them?" Jayce muttered, leaping from cover and racing after them. They cleared the distance quickly, Jayce entering into Focus to catch up to the pair; both Bjorn and himself quickly overtook the doctor, drawing their weapons and leading the charge silently across the grass.

A guard quickly spotted them, opening his mouth to yell only for an orange dart to fly past Bjorn and Jayce, his eyes rolling back and body slumping as it

embedded itself in his neck. Yuthura loaded another vial into her injector, firing off the capsule inside high into the air, a dark black smoke trailing from it as it flew over the camp. The pair stopped, turning back to Yuthura as she whistled at them. "It's an attack!" yelled a voice from further inside the camp as the base fell into darkness, completely obscured by the smoke. "I can't see!" yelled another voice. Chaos erupted across the small base, yells and confusion echoing throughout the camp. "To the south, there's five!" yelled Yuthura, beckoning with her thumb for the pair to follow as she led them silently around the edge.

They stopped outside a large tent, Yuthura firing off several more vials across the camp. Without orders, Bjorn slashed his way inside, a young sailor yelping before dropping to the floor as Bjorn hit them hard with the handle of his axe. The entire area was a mess, disorganised beyond belief, with several large crates scattered around the room. "Grab what you can, anything that looks useful," Yuthura ordered, sliding off her backpack and filling it quickly with bandages and bottles of chemicals. Bjorn and Jayce sheathed their weapons, following suit and filling their backpacks before stepping outside.

The smoke had started to dissipate, and the few guards had clearly noticed something was up. "Get moving boys, don't wait on me!" Yuthura yelled, running quickly past them in the direction of the keep, the pair racing after her. "There they are!" yelled a sailor, a gunshot echoing across the field. Bjorn yelped loudly as it hit his shoulder. "Bjorn!" yelled Jayce, but the bear shrugged it off. "Shit, ow! Keep going, don't stop!" he yelled, his face wincing in pain. Several more shots peppered the ground around them, Jayce vaguely spotting the bullets with his Focus as he glanced behind him. "Don't let them get away!" yelled a sailor. "We can take them!" Jayce yelled. Yuthura turned on her heels and fired off another vial. "Boys! Don't stop now! Keep running!"

Jayce shook his head, turning around, only for Bjorn to grab him across his waist and carry him along with him, a steady trickle of blood running down his arm. "No, we keep going. This is not a fight worth having," Bjorn advised, throwing Jayce forwards as they climbed quickly up the field, the keep coming into sight in the distance. A few more bullets whizzed by them from a different direction as another squad of sailors joined the chase. Jayce slashed with his swords, catching a few that came too close for his liking, as he watched the lines they made in his Focused vision, his swords sparking as the metals collided. Yuthura stumbled, but Bjorn swept her up into his arms carrying her as they ran. "What a gentleman," laughed Yuthura, climbing over him to reach into his wound with

her fingers and pull out the bullet. Bjorn roared in pain but kept running as she worked.

Jayce watched her as she pulled out a red stone and hovered her hands over the wound. The tattoos on her hands flashed and the hole in Bjorn's shoulder sealed, the fur regrowing around the wound. Yuthura winced and rolled back into Bjorn's arms as the guards stationed by the keep opened fire on their aggressors. Bjorn leapt over the fence, Jayce leaping after him and rolling across the floor as he caught the top with his feet.

"We are not doing that again!" Jayce wheezed, as he lay there on the floor. Bjorn set Yuthura back down on her feet and she gave a little curtsey, before patting him on his arm, her right arm limp by her side, a faint trickle of blood dripping from her fingers. "You did well boys. You have mine and these other people's gratitude. Thank you," she told them, turning around before falling backwards. Bjorn caught her again and she extended a weak hand to pat his chest. "I'm fine, just a little tired is all. Be a darling and take me across the bridge, bear," she asked, shutting her eyes and breathing softly.

They headed quickly across the bridge with their supplies, this time no attacks coming towards them. Yuthura slept soundly in Bjorn's arms, tucked tightly into his chest as he carried her. "She did good," Bjorn said quietly to Jayce. Jayce nodded in agreement. "That she did, let's drop off the supplies and get out of here," Jayce said as they entered the courtyard. A few islanders came and took their backpacks as Bjorn laid Yuthura to rest on one of the beds in the hospital, a kindly and slightly rotund old man with a large moustache walking over to them as they stepped back.

"Thank you for your aide, we truly appreciate the assistance you and Yuthura have provided us," he told them in a very formal fashion. Jayce and Bjorn nodded. "She treated us, we were simply returning a favour," Jayce told him. "Regardless, thank you. As the Mayor I would normally offer a reward, however, as you no doubt have noticed, we are currently in the midst of a war, so I can only offer my thanks. My people have had a hard few weeks, and this may help us survive until negotiations can be had. Without the doctor, well, we wouldn't still be here," said the Mayor, inviting them to follow him to the more secluded area of the hospital. "You speak like she's not from here," Jayce enquired.

"Indeed, she came to us by chance, and she offered her aide in this conflict." He spotted Bjorn and Jayce readying their next questions. "We were not proud of the Church's meddling, my daughter was a proud Mage and a damned good one

at that. Our crops were bountiful, our island safer, and the lands peaceful until a Priest sought to lynch my girl. My people took poorly to that, and although I'm not proud to admit it, I stand by what they did to that bastard. So conflict erupted and we've been at battle since."

They nodded. "I'm sorry for your loss," Bjorn said softly. The Mayor shook his head. "My daughter left, we sent her away hoping that would be the end. She is safe, in a faraway land. I get letters constantly from her and I pray I live to see her again. Regardless, when the chance came for the others to leave, for them to abandon me to take the fall, my people refused. I am grateful to be surrounded by such brave and moronic folk. Say, speaking of, you got here by ship. Since you slipped by the Navy, I'm sure you could do it again. I beg of you, please take the doctor with you. This battle is not hers-".

"No way, not in every layer of the abyss!" yelled Yuthura, as she stumbled across the hospital tent towards them. The Mayor opened his mouth, but Yuthura interrupted him. "No, I will stay by your side. Your people need me!" she argued. "If she doesn't wish to go, I cannot take her," Jayce told him. "But I would gladly accept the doctor in my crew, if she wishes to join us," Jayce offered. Yuthura looked at him and then back at the Mayor. One of the nurses wandered over to them with a large backpack, handing it to Yuthura who gripped it confused. She smiled at Yuthura, faint tears in her eyes and a cunning look on her face before she took a deep breath and stepped back next to the Mayor.

"It's all your fault this war is continuing!" yelled the nurse. "You're making the battles worse!" The patients around the hospital began to sit up, the various other nurses and doctors all turning as well as a collective idea formed. Jayce and Bjorn stepped past Yuthura, standing next to the exit. "It's all your fault, get out of here! Never show your face here again!" yelled a wounded soldier through a kind smile and a salute. "Never come back!" yelled another doctor, handing a large suitcase to Bjorn. The Mayor bowed low to her. "Please, leave this place. You ruin everything you touch," he told her with the utmost respect. Tears dripped from his moustache. "Leave!" he yelled.

Yuthura stared at those around her, her nose runny and eyes wet. "You idiots," she said softly, stepping backwards. "I'll never forget you," she told them, walking quickly next to Jayce and Bjorn, with her backpack on her shoulders. "For as long as this war continues, don't ever come back!" the Mayor told her, standing up straight, with those that could all bowing to her. "Live long and happy lives!" Yuthura told them, stepping out with Bjorn and Jayce in pursuit.

She wiped her eyes and blew her nose on a handkerchief, her arm no longer bleeding.

"Are you okay?" Jayce asked her, following Yuthura towards the underground passage once more. She shook her head, and descended quickly below ground. "So, Captain, was it?" Yuthura asked Jayce, as they landed into the caves once again. "Jayce will do," he told her, taking her backpack as she threw it to him. "Good, I had no intention of calling you it anyway. Lead the way, Jayce," she told him. They ran quickly through the caves, re-emerging once again in the woods. They headed back to the west side of the island, Bjorn lighting a green flare as they ran towards the cliff hanging over the coastal waters.

"Where's your ship? How many do you have in your crew?" Yuthura asked. Jayce pointed at The Small Catch sailing quickly towards them. "With you, six if we include the cat," Jayce stated proudly. Yuthura looked down at the rocks not too far away, weighing her choices. "Oh no," she muttered. The Small Catch sailed closely along the coast, coming in right underneath them. The three of them leapt, dropping hard onto the deck. Yuthura grimaced as she landed, her ankle bent at an odd angle, but she simply stretched her leg and her ankle realigned, to Bjorn and Jayce's surprise and horror. "I may have a few tricks," she told them with a smug smile. The ship lurched as Wicke used her magic and they sailed quickly away from Golden Bow. Jayce looked back at the island as it fell away in the distance, three more Navy warships sailing straight towards it. "Good luck!" he muttered, before turning away and heading to meet the others.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Doctor By Any Other Name

"Who's this old bat?" Vexx asked, locking the wheel north-west and stepping down to the main deck as the five of them reassembled, Little Witch quickly emerging from the captain's quarters and rushing over to Jayce. Wicke dove straight into Jayce, wrapping her arms around him. "Thank goodness, you're alright!" she said into his chest as he hugged her back. Yuthura glared at Vexx, rolling up her sleeves and putting her hands on her hips. "So you two left the children in the charge of the ship? By any Gods, I've got my work cut out for me," she retorted, Vexx turning a deep shade of red. "Children?"

She ignored him and took her suitcase from Bjorn. "So, where am I sleeping?" she asked, Wicke quickly hiding behind Jayce as she glanced over in their direction. "We're in the hold, so I guess you can share with Wicke in the captain's quarters." Yuthura stood up straight and nodded, walking over to the door and stepping inside. Vexx and Wicke quickly looked towards Jayce. "Um, Jayce, who

is she?" Wicke asked, nervously. Bjorn cleared his throat, pointing to Yuthura's wanted poster attached to their wall. Their eyes widened. "Why's she here?" Vexx asked. "Yuthura's joining us as our doctor, she saved my life, so make her feel welcome," Jayce told them.

Wicke relaxed, but Vexx folded his arms. "We don't need anyone else, she's just deadweight. She'll probably die of old age before we reach the Ice Floes," he said snarkily. "Look here short-stuff, go through puberty and then complain about who's deadweight," retorted Yuthura through the open door as she unpacked, pulling out a silver pocket watch from her suitcase and opening it. Jayce glanced at the photo of a small baby inside, before she quickly closed it and put it in her pocket. She then stepped out onto the main deck and looked over the crew. "I assume you're the Sorcerer?" she said, pointing at Wicke.

Wicke nodded. "This is Wicke, that's Vexx, you've already met Bjorn, and the cat is called Little Witch," Jayce stated to her, providing introductions. Vexx stood steaming to the side, more flustered than Jayce had ever seen him. "Vexx, cute. Nice to meet you Wicke, Little Witch," she said with a soft yet stern smile, sticking her tongue out at Vexx as he made a series of rude gestures at her. "Nice to meet you too," Wicke returned, her body relaxing as Vexx and Yuthura threw insults back and forth about each other's age and height. "Look kid, don't get snippy at me just cause you didn't drink your milk," Yuthura tied off before looking over at Jayce. "So, where we headed?"

Chapter 24: The Crucible Begins

"Alright, fall in!" yelled Instructor Gibbs, late in the evening on the last day of the fourth week. Alara quickly folded away her latest letter from Jayce before rushing to stand in line with the others, Astris to her left and Riley to her right. "Now, as some of you may have heard from the other squads, as well as from your seniors further along in their own respective training, tomorrow is your first Crucible. These next five days will have you worked to the bone, you will be exhausted, destroyed, and remade by the end of it. After which you will get the weekend off, provided I am satisfied." There were some slight murmurs from the others, most already dressed in their night clothes. "Ahem." The murmurs halted.

"As I was saying, we will sail tomorrow to a nearby training destination. Along the way, you are expected to follow orders as if you were an official Marine. I expect your best behaviour, listen to the Captain and keep your heads low. When you arrive at your destination, you will be tasked with reaching the summit and returning once you have bathed in the waters at the top. Then the real fun begins. You will be facing your rivals in a series of team-based games, three-a-day, then you will return to the summit before returning home. Any questions?" Gibbs asked, walking up and down the line as he spoke. There were none. "Good. Sleep well squad. Fight hard, and do me proud!" Gibbs departed and the squad relaxed, excited conversation spreading quickly before the lights turned out.

The morning came too quickly; as it always did, and with their gear packed for the week and a hasty breakfast consumed, they made their way down to the docks. A huge Marine warship lay in front of them, its hull a mixture of grey and red splashes, with a large, horned, bear figurehead at its bow - its fur a deep red and horns platinum. The ship dwarfed the many others across the dockyard, and unlike the others whose sails were a simple white, this ship had red sails, painted with the image of a bear wielding two axes. All across the dockyard stood squads of Marine recruits, all standing neatly with their Instructors.

Gibbs led squad W6 to join their platoon, the other three Instructors already lined up together with their own squads. They quickly organised with the others, Alara's squad forming a neat line with her stood near the middle. Zenobia walked across the way, standing in front of the four Instructors as the leader of their platoon. Her usual casual, albeit militaristic, outfit was replaced by a much more ceremonial uniform. A large red and white cape adorned her shoulders, and, for once, she wore a Marine jacket, although hers was white with a red

underlay. It was open, revealing her scar, done so clearly out of personal comfort. She wore a set of red boots to accompany her slick white trousers and a red beret lay on top of her head. She looked over the platoon, a faint smile in the corner of her mouth as she spotted Alara before she turned on her heels and stepped away.

Alara glanced along the dockyard: there were thousands of other recruits, all comprised into squads of up to thirteen. It was impossible to count from her position, but Alara knew roughly how many recruits there were likely to be, a lucky bonus from her officers' training. With four squads to a platoon, four platoons to a company, four companies to a battalion, and four battalions to the regiment, Alara estimated a little over three-thousand recruits. "How many?" Alara whispered backwards to Witchford. "Three-thousand, three-hundred and twenty-eight. If each squad is thirteen," he answered swiftly, confirming her rough estimate. Alara nodded her head to herself, straightening up as she refocused.

Along the dock, none of the other Senior Instructors were wearing a ceremonial outfit like Zenobia had been, in fact none of them had stepped away either. A gasp came from another recruit in a different squad and murmurs spread quickly as a figure stepped into view on the stern of the huge ship in front of them. She was dressed in almost entirely red, a large cape across her shoulders, not too dissimilar from Zenobia's. Her hair flowed in the wind alongside her cape, a bright orange colour not too far off from her outfit. "It's the Bloody Barbarian!" muttered a few voices.

A cold wind rushed through the entire regiment, the murmurs silencing instantly as she looked over the recruits. Four more figures stepped into view behind her, one Alara immediately recognised as Zenobia. "Well," boomed a voice from all directions, a voice all too familiar to Alara. "I am not one for speeches, as you no-doubt are aware. You are Marines to be and today you begin your first real step to achieving that goal," she told them, her eyes glancing across the crowd. Alara couldn't be sure, but she felt the Admiral's eyes pick her out - an impossible act, surely. "Today begins your first Crucible. You will break, shatter, crumble as you are hammered by the elements, and you will be remade into the image of a Marine by your rivals. It will be tough, brutal, and humbling, but do not feel disheartened by your failures; learn, adapt, and overcome your losses over the next few days, knowing that you will grow stronger. Good luck, fight hard! Prove your Empire proud!"

The Instructors all along the docks slammed their knuckles together, nodding their heads before looking upwards to the Admiral. "Oorah!" they cried. All across the docks, every recruit, Alara included, mirrored the salute, the banging of their armoured knuckles echoing across the waters before they nodded and raised their heads proudly. "Oorah!" Alara roared with pride, joining the chorus of her fellow Marines. Admiral Exarga nodded to her regiment before turning around and walking away. Zenobia stepped forwards to take her place. "Recruits, today you act as Marines. You will sail with our Red Fleet, brothers and sisters united under one banner, until we reach our destination. Listen well, learn well. Good luck! Instructors, you have your orders."

All across the dockyard, the many Instructors began to organise their squads, heading along the docks to the various ships stationed nearby. Alara's squad remained where they were, waiting patiently as the docks began to clear, even as the rest of their platoon departed. Gibbs eventually turned around, looking over his squad before placing a rare smile on his face. "I figure that's enough anticipation. That's your ship squad," he said, pointing at the Admiral's flagship. Eyes widened and smiles appeared throughout the squad. "Let's go."

They marched quickly along the pier towards the flagship, joining the other chosen squads as they slowly boarded through the large gangway extending from the side of the huge ship. The squad stood dumbfounded as they looked up, the rows of cannon ports indicating there were at least four decks within the ship. Witchford delighted to inform Alara, from his estimations, that the ship was nearly one hundred and twenty metres long from bow to stern. It was a ship definitely deserving of its classification as both huge and as a flagship.

Once onboard, they assembled alongside the other squads on the open deck of the flagship, various Marines moving around them to prepare the ship for departure. "Welcome aboard the Ursus Ultra," said Zenobia as she looked down at the assembled squads from the aft deck. "For the next eight hours this will be your home. You will be assigned an escort and you are to do as they say until we arrive at the training grounds. They will answer your questions, teach you how to handle your roles, and act as your mentors as you shadow them. Play nice," she added, looking towards the Marines waiting by the sides to collect their juniors, their usual grey uniforms highlighted with an almost-glowing red colour.

She turned and walked away, leaving the Marines to start calling out the names of their assigned recruits. Astris nudged Alara from behind, giving a broad smile

and a wink as she wandered off towards her escort, a short and young man indicated to be a Lieutenant from his uniform. Witchford departed as well, rolling his huge shoulders and straightening his glasses without a further word, as the ship's navigator called him over. One by one her squad departed, leaving both Alara and Wulf to stand nervously alone in the centre of the deck. Wulf looked down at his feet whilst Alara waited patiently. "I should have expected this," Wulf muttered sadly. Alara punched him softly in his arm. "Don't be so negative. Look where we are," she told him. He nodded and then shook his head, standing more alert as he put on a brave face.

"Sorry, sorry!" came a gruff voice echoing across the busy deck. They turned as a large figure bounded towards them, leaping over one of the large wooden grates on the deck and landing before them. He looked down at Wulf, his fur a mixture of greys and whites and his eyes a bright orange-brown. "Hey there, sorry I'm late," said the large wolf baned, straightening up and extending a hand to Wulf. "I take it you're my follower for the day, nice to meet you. Ensign Rafe, follow me Wulf." Wulf shook it, turning his head briefly towards Alara, eyes wide in surprise. She winked at him and turned away, looking for her own escort.

No-one came, leaving Alara to stand there confused until a whistle drew her attention to the stairs leading to the aft deck. Zenobia beckoned her over. Alara looked around confused, but ran over quickly. "Follow me," she said, leading Alara up the stairs and past the wheel of the ship. Witchford and his escort were talking intensively to the woman stood at its helm as she explained the connection between the navigator and the helmsman. He was so ingrained in writing in his notebook, he didn't even notice her pass. They headed towards a room mounted at the stern of the ship, another set of stairs leading to its roof, and its door only a few metres away from the wheel. Zenobia knocked on the large red door, before looking at Alara and patting her shoulder with her metal hand. "Good luck!"

"Come in," ordered a voice from inside. Alara took a deep breath and pushed open the door, stepping in to the cabin. The Admiral's quarters were large, the walls and floors well-varnished and clearly made out of high quality and beautiful wood. The room fell into two halves: work and pleasure. Upon entrance, Alara found herself stood in the former; a large table lay in the centre, holding a huge map of the New World, pins and markings had been placed in key locations, some changing and moving as she looked at it. To the left was a large rectangular table, with several cushioned seats, for the officers onboard the ship to discuss various topics, or for meetings to be held with guests. To the right

was a large noticeboard, plastered with the posters of wanted criminals, a desk and cabinet had been placed beneath, decorated with various Guild gadgets for communication and other purposes.

To the rear end of the room, separated by a set of sliding paper doors, currently open, was the bedroom. Alara stepped through, noticing immediately the huge windows to the rear and sides of the room. A large, emperor-sized, bed was stationed against the rear wall and another large desk sat looking out onto the portside of the ship. Several photos sat in frames on the desk, unconsciously bringing a smile to Alara's face as she spotted Jayce smiling at her. "Ahem," came a voice from her left. Alara turned and immediately stood at attention as she looked over at Admiral Exarga stood casually in the doorway of her personal bathroom. "At ease," said Cassandra, smiling proudly as she looked over Alara dressed in her uniform.

Alara relaxed, placing her backpack on the floor and rushing forwards into Cassandra's open arms. "It's good to see you, Alara," she said, embracing her tightly before holding her at arm's length and tidying up Alara's uniform and hair. "Your parents would be so proud. And I've heard interesting and reassuring things from Zenobia. Your weapon, may I see it?" she asked, Alara blushing bashfully as she stepped back from Cassandra's coddling. "Do you really think so?" Alara asked quietly, before connecting the two halves of her weapon together. Cassandra nodded, her face falling a little, before a small but genuine smile re-emerged. "Of course." She took Alara's glaive, pacing around the room as she checked its balance before twirling it around with accurate ease. She stood with her back to Alara, her previously relaxed shoulders tensing up a little. The room chilled slightly and, despite all doors being closed, a faint breeze ran through, Cassandra's hair flowing slightly as she stood up straight. "Speaking of pride, would you care to give your side of the story as to why Jayce isn't here as well?" the Admiral said, looking over her shoulder at Alara, her blue eyes sparking.

After a desperate explanation of her side of the events, followed by a long scolding, with most of the onslaught aimed across the seas at the Admiral's wayward son, Alara found herself sat on the edge of the Admiral's bed. Cassandra let out a sigh, rubbing her forehead before she disassembled and handed back Alara's glaive. Alara sat there quietly, before she looked up at the Admiral, an unwitting grin bubbling to the surface. Cassandra unconsciously copied her before the pair laughed. "Don't think you're getting off easy. My dear, we are not at home, you can't charm me anymore," she warned. Alara nodded,

following her years of training of getting out of trouble, straightening her face and sheathing her weapon. "It's a good style, a fitting weapon for you. Anyway, we can talk as we go. As you no doubt have realised, you are following me for today. A true honour of course, but unfortunately today I seem piled up with admin work, so unfortunately we'll mostly be wandering the ship, sitting in meetings and sticking to this room. So, prepare your story on how I worked you to the bone. Let's have a tour."

Alara found herself carrying a huge pile of papers as she wandered the decks following after Admiral Exarga. All of the other recruits stared in jealousy, but they were also unable to hide the sheer relief that they were not in Alara's position, as they and the other Marines all stood to the side to let them pass as they patrolled the Ursus Ultra. At first Alara believed the trip was simply a tour, but as Alara was introduced to the lead shipwright, the head doctor, the quartermaster, the navigator, the helmsman, the cooks, the master of arms, the gunnery chief, and the broker of communication, she swiftly realised that was a true introduction into the structure of a ship and its crew. By now the Capital had already long faded into the distance, but as she was given ample opportunity to interview and ask the pressing questions she inevitably had for each role, she found the time ticking swiftly away.

Eventually they returned to the Admiral's quarters, Alara buzzing with energy, steam almost billowing from her ears as she processed all of the information, whilst Cassandra looked almost completely exhausted. They took a seat around the meeting table, the Admiral slumping in her chair as she listened to Alara's excited ramblings, whilst flicking through the stacks of documents strewn across the table. "Do you want something to drink, or eat?" interrupted Cassandra, checking her clock as she attempted to get a break from Alara's excited monologue. Alara fell back into reality as she looked at the Admiral across the table. "Oh, um, yes please," said a much more subdued Alara.

The food was simple, not too different from what Alara was used to back at the Capital, yet, after every mouthful of today's meat and vegetable stew, Alara found herself both fulfilled and craving more. It was perfectly made. "This is amazing," she said quietly. Cassandra looked up at her, a document in one hand, a spoon in the other. "A warrior's life depends on a good meal, my cooks are the best in the Empire for just that reason. The only problem is that it makes other meals on different ships taste like ash. I'll pass on your words, they'll be glad to hear it. Anyway, take a look at these reports from a few weeks ago," she said,

sliding a folder across the table. Alara furrowed her brow, turning around the document to better read its title: The Rising Ace Incident.

Alara was still in disbelief a few hours later, as she leant on the railing looking out across the sea at the rest of the fleet as they arrived at their destination. She shook her head, purging the report from the front of her mind as she straightened up, preparing herself for the rest of the day. The Admiral stood by her side, both mirroring each other in position, and thought. The Ursus Ultra sailed into shallow waters, dropping anchor and raising its sails. "Admiral, we've arrived!" called the helmsman, heading over from the wheel to their position. Admiral Exarga nodded in acknowledgement, before she tilted her head indicating to Alara to follow her, walking towards the main stairs.

The recruits had already reassembled on the deck in their squads, excited conversations building up before silencing as the Admiral and Alara walked towards them. Squad W6 eyed Alara curiously as she re-joined them, an interrogation set for a later time. "Recruits," called Zenobia as she looked down on them from the aft deck. "We will be departing for the island, further instructions will be issued there. Follow your Instructors - dismissed." With little left to say, Gibbs took them to one of the rowboats hanging from the side of the ship. They carefully climbed on board, before they were lowered to the water, the oars immediately finding themselves in Wulf and Witchford's arms.

The journey was quick, the main beach was close to them and the only difficulty in the journey was the traffic from the sea of rowboats. They beached themselves, disembarking and standing on the sand on a huge island with a volcano in the centre. Gibbs took them to the side, to an encampment made up of a series of tents. "This is home for the next few days, keep your belongings with you. We'll only be staying here for the nights. First things first, to begin the Crucible we will set off for the top of that mountain. We will all carry a flag with us and leave it there. Then we will bathe in the waters at the top before returning to camp. On your last day we will make the trip again. You will bathe again, and we will return with your flags. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" clamoured the squad, some members more excited than others. Gibbs nodded, pointing to the pile of grey flags stuck into the ground in the centre of the tent. "Then let's go, recruits!" They emerged outside, each with a flag stuck into their backpacks. Several other squads had already set off, and it was clear from the size of their campsite that this was one of several locations across the island. They cut through the woods at a steady march, the foliage thick but

marked by paths trodden by Marines of the past. Every so often they would bump into another squad, following their own Instructors down different routes, but they continued onwards, getting closer and closer to the foot of the mountain.

"Instructor!" called out Brett, as Gibbs stepped off the path towards a river. Gibbs looked back over his shoulder, the various other recruits all sweating profusely from the long march. "Yes, recruit?" he asked, stopping to allow a short rest. "Sir, that way might be better," advised Brett, glancing over the others before pointing to a long extension of rock that provided a long slope up the otherwise vertical mountain. "We'll have to backtrack, but sir, even I'm exhausted. I don't think we can climb straight up." Gibbs nodded, thinking to himself for a moment, before readjusting his glasses and straightening up. "Acknowledged Brett, but that route seems a bit... uninteresting, besides we'll have a rest in a moment. Buck up Marines, drink your water and refill your bottles, the real stuff is just beginning!" said Gibbs.

He stepped into the river, the water moving quickly but coming up to only his knees in height. There was a collective groan, but as he started to march upriver nobody elected to stay behind. The riverbed was made of stone, and the water was cold and clear. It was easy to walk in, despite the current, and it wasn't long before they came to a waterfall, descending from high up on the mountain. Gibbs stepped through without hesitation, the others following one by one as the heavy water pounded their shoulders and heads, but they passed through quickly, emerging into a large open chamber.

It was hot, a stark contrast to the coldness of the open air and river. The walls were lined with a dark, swirling rock, the result of solidified magma. "Rest, you've done well," ordered Gibbs, sitting down on a flat rock near the centre of the room. They collapsed, Alara finding herself looking upwards at the inside of the mountain as she lay there on the floor. There were several tunnels leading off into the walls, some out of reach and definitely requiring climbing equipment, but others she reckoned could be accessed with a little bit of effort. She glanced around, spotting Brett looking at the tunnels as well. His nose was still slightly bent, despite the magic used to heal it, and as he spotted her looking at him he pulled a face and looked away.

After Gibbs deemed enough rest had been had, he got up from his seat and headed towards one of the accessible tunnels. "Follow me, don't stray from my route!" he warned. They followed quickly after him, Alara taking up the rear with Violette. The tunnels went on forever, leading from chamber to chamber,

some containing pools of steaming water, others containing pools of bubbling magma, but the entire time Alara could tell they were heading upwards. Despite being underground, the route was illuminated, strange orange crystals marked the walls, providing a faint but clear source of light for them to see. Sometimes these would dwindle, and the squad was forced to take out their torches instead, but eventually Alara saw daylight faintly up ahead.

With a cheer they emerged out into open air, the heat of the caves giving way to an icy wind as they looked out across the island from near the top of the mountain. Large pools of steaming water decorated the top, many recruits already enjoying the natural baths. Gibbs led them onwards and eventually they came across the peak: a large flat surface with stairs carved into the rock. It was covered in flags and the squad embedded their own within the rocks before heading to the nearest hot spring. They stripped off, leaving their armour and equipment neatly to the side and enjoying the waters. Gibbs remained by the edge, sitting down and looking at his watch. "Right," he said after a few minutes. "Time to go back!" The others looked at each other, before collectively sinking into the cloudy waters in protest.

Seize the Seas Tales: Vexx's Vexations – Sense

The seas were calm as The Small Catch sailed north, the members of Jayce's crew enjoying the peace after a chaotic couple of days. Jayce, however, could not relax. His body was in agony, and even after devouring nearly everything on the ship, he still hadn't returned to his previous weight. His colour had returned, and, despite the soreness, he could breathe again without pain. Yuthura had been helping him, but true recovery was still a ways off. "Look," Vexx said at last, as he watched Jayce use the aft deck railing for pull-ups. "It's not going to be instant, and we don't have a cook to put you on a special diet, so just accept it and focus on what you can do."

"Which is what exactly?" groaned Jayce as he hung there. Vexx paused for a second, glancing around at the open air before nodding to himself. "Well, why not practice your Focus. The ones that require a different kind of physicality," he said. Jayce dropped to his feet, looking up at Vexx sat on the railings, one arm resting casually on the ship wheel. "Go on." Vexx rolled his eyes and grinned. "Well, shut your eyes." Jayce sighed and did so, only for Vexx to drop silently to the floor and sweep his legs out from under him. Jayce yelped, opening his eyes to find his head a few inches off the floor as Vexx held him by his shirt.

Vexx dropped him and Jayce smacked his head on the deck. "You asshole! What was that for?" complained Jayce as he lay there attempting to kick Vexx. "Use your Focus, dipshit," replied Vexx, helping him up and stepping backwards. "Focus isn't going to stop me from getting hit with my eyes shut!" retaliated Jayce, brushing himself off. Vexx shook his head. "Actually, it can. You just need to work on your Sense. Try and hit me," Vexx told him, shutting his eyes and turning around. Jayce didn't need to be told twice and he tried to kick Vexx's legs out from under him, only for Vexx to jump over his sweep. Jayce went to push him and Vexx twisted himself out of Jayce's reach, his eyes still shut. "Come on, you can do better than that!" goaded Vexx. Jayce threw a punch and Vexx caught it. "You don't need to see to react to attacks. So, let's get practicing. Your turn." Jayce shut his eyes and Vexx pushed him overboard.

Chapter 25: A Lesson in Leadership

The sun had fallen by the time the weary squad returned back to their camp. As they marched in triumph to their tents, the smell of food - hot pot made from the local flora and fauna of the island - wafted through them. Their mouths dripped as they stared in awe at the other squads eating, and as they entered their tent, the sight of a very large steaming pot sat in the middle prompted them all to drop their backpacks and scour for utensils. "Ahem!" uttered Gibbs, prompting some grumbling as the recruits hurried into a line. Much to their collective horror, rather than inspect them, scold them, or otherwise pay them further attention, the Instructor set down his own backpack, pulling out from within it a large wooden bowl and a spoon.

Gibbs peered into the large pot, his glasses steaming up as he took in a deep breath. He licked his lips, his back turned to the squad as he began to help himself. "Oh yeah, this is the good stuff. You should really try this!" he told them, revelling in the soft revenge after a long day of complaining. Alara looked down the line: tears flowed across Violette's face as she tightly held her bowl behind her; Wulf's mouth hung half-open and a steady stream of drool dripped from his chin; even Witchford, the man who couldn't even think of disobeying orders, stood leaning forwards towards the stools around the pot. "We can take him..." muttered Delex. "You first," added Braze quietly.

Gibbs refilled his bowl, standing up and leaving it on his stool before stepping out of the tent. "This is so a trap," said Astris, holding her arm out to stop Riley as she stepped forwards. "Remain strong, we can do this!" said Alara, taking a deep breath and standing at full attention as her stomach growled and her eyes and mouth watered. A few others nodded, mirroring her, but as the seconds turned into minutes they all felt themselves edge forwards. "Right!" yelled Gibbs, as he stepped back into the tent, every one of them jumping out of their skins and jolting back to full attention. He walked down the line, stopping in front of each member and handing them a large piece of bread. As he cleared the row and sat back in his seat, he let out a sigh and shook his head. "Go on."

They rushed forwards in a rabid frenzy, arguing erupting immediately as they desperately tried to claim their bowls. Both Wulf and Witchford found themselves waiting patiently at the edge of the chaos, whilst Alara and Riley found themselves fighting for the ladle against Brett and Axel. "Ladies first!" protested Violette from over their shoulders. "Tell us when they arrive!" retaliated the other party. Gibbs chuckled to himself, standing up and leaving the

squad to sort out their own problems, but eventually, after a few bruises had been earned, everyone was fed, with Witchford and Wulf ensuring no food was left behind.

The morning came fast, a steady stream of snow blanketing the island throughout the night and the early morning. The air was cold, Alara's breath easily visible to her as she warmed up her body, alongside the rest of her squad, with a light jog. Her armour was insulated and, after switching out some of the inner-linings stashed within her backpack, it was toasty and warm across her body. Her entire platoon had assembled together outside of their tents, all four squads waiting attentively for their orders in the ankle-high snow.

The four Instructors stood at the front, looking over a map whilst talking to a circular device in Instructor Baress' hands, the Instructor of Squad X6. "You're all clear to begin today's activities, section Echo-9-1 is yours," confirmed the device, the four Instructors nodding to each other before turning away to face the squads. "Right," spoke up Gibbs, a large and furry hat covering his head. "Squads, today marks your first real chance to interact and operate between yourselves as a platoon. Play nice, but not too nice as you are all in competition with each other for the next few days, with the victors getting a weekend of leave as a reward."

Eager murmurs perked up throughout the recruits before Gibbs once again spoke up. "For the next three days we will be engaging in several war games. Bouts of 'Capture the Flag', where each squad will be simultaneously guarding and attacking. Each day will have three rounds, each with a two-hour time limit, and a one-hit kill policy. We will be using false rounds for rifles and pistols, and each blade will be dulled and marked using a special sap. We don't want any infirmary trips, but minor injuries are to be expected. Have fun, this is a break from your studies but also a very valuable lesson in teamwork. I expect the best from you!" he concluded, his eyes resting upon Squad W6.

Gibbs stepped back, allowing another Instructor to outline the specific details, but as Alara looked over her squad, she spotted Witchford paying particular attention, so she decided to scout her rivals: Squads X6, Y6, and Z6. Unlike her own squad, she spotted no banes amongst them, but from their staggered and closely packed positions, and from what Alara had heard previously, they were a lot more connected to each other. As Alara looked back to her own squad, the faint sound of bickering emanating from Violette and Delex as well as a somewhat menacing glare coming from Brett, Alara couldn't help but feel

disadvantaged. Riley nudged her. "We've got this!" she said confidently. Alara nodded and turned back to the Instructors.

They were led away from the camp across the island, their backpacks left behind, but weapons to hand, to a rather distinct stone beach. There was lots of open space, muddled by large boulders that looked artificially placed, from the drag marks, with sparse areas of foliage along the way. "This is Zone A," stated Gibbs as he led the squad. Next they came to a river, leading all the way towards the central volcano. A large hill gave the location a considerable slope and log cabins, in various states of disrepair, provided cover. "Zone B." Each area was at least half a kilometre in length, and it was easy for Alara to understand the two-hour time limit.

Alara and her squad were deposited at Zone B; their rivals, Squad X6, had been given the top of the hill after a coin flip, whilst they found themselves in a large roofless cabin. "We need a plan," stated Astris, as the squad assembled around their bright-blue flag, its staff a metre in length. "We'll split into two teams," said Alara, taking the reins as Brett went to speak. "One team will defend the flag, the others will attack." The others nodded, several quickly electing to defend whilst Alara, Wulf, Riley, Witchford, Braze, and Delex led the attack.

The whistle blew and they departed quickly, skirting alongside the edge of the zone from cabin to cabin to avoid detection. They came to an open area, the group splitting up in an attempt to avoid detection. Wulf and Alara rushed forwards, gunfire peppering the grounds around them as they stumbled across a group of three enemies, using a wall to hide from them. They went around either side, glaive and sword drawn as they launched their attack. The enemy squad members fell quickly, the green stains, left by Alara and Wulf's blades, providing quick indicators of their victory. They pushed on, carrying forwards until they spotted the faintest trace of a red flag stood proudly in a visible position on top of a boulder. "Wulf, Battle Action 3A!" declared Alara as she rushed out of cover towards the seemingly undefended flag. Two guards leapt out of the bushes to stop her, only for Wulf to growl and draw their attention. He slashed at them, and she scrambled for the flag, but two loud whistles echoed across the zone, indicating the game was over.

Alara's shoulders slumped as she looked at the object only a few metres away. "Damn..." she muttered, before shaking herself off and turning back towards Wulf. They headed back to the others, the rest of the squad disappointed but still rearing to go. They swapped sides with squad X6, once again using the time

allotted to choose strategies. "We'll try it again, we were close. We can do it!" stated Alara, the others nodding as they split into two teams, this time swapping Riley and Delex with Astris and Soner. The whistle blew and the game began.

Alara and her group charged down the hill, gaining as much distance as possible before they came to the several cabins stationed near the centre of the battlefield. "Guys, Battle Tactic T0!" called out Alara, as she rushed off to the left. Wulf charged right, but the rest of the group faltered. "Alara, we don't know what that is!" called out Astris after her, the others looking equally confused. Alara looked back, a quick feeling of dread rushing through her as she realised her mistake. A series of shots rang out and Astris and the others yelped as they were hit across their armour by painted rounds. They immediately raised their arms, acknowledging their defeat. Alara shook her head, carrying onwards and leaping over a barricade straight into the entirety of the enemy squad, the group carrying their flag with them.

Frustration was building as the squad reunited together under the banner of another loss. "Sorry, I forgot we haven't covered battle tactics yet," Alara admitted quietly, as the members of the away team glared at her. Astris shook it off, crossing her arms and looking over the group. "We can win this one, it's not over yet. Any ideas?" Astris asked. The squad shook their heads, shoulders slumped and eyes to the floor. "Let's change things up, Riley and I will guard the flag. We'll keep moving with it, whilst you guys try to take theirs," Alara suggested to mixed and muted reactions. The whistle blew, leaving little other choices.

It began well, Alara presumed, as every so often a gunshot rang out in the distance. She and Riley stuck to the edge of the map, laying low and attempting to predict where the enemy would come from, but after nearly an hour of ducking from treeline to treeline a shot rang out and Riley yelped as she was hit. Alara looked around, trying to spot the aggressors, only for six members of the enemy squad to emerge from the foliage around them.

Moods were beyond sour as they returned back to camp. The gloating from X6 was insufferable and with every joke, Alara sank further and further into her own frustration. Gibbs called them over, but as he opened his mouth to berate them, he saw their dishevelled looks, their broken demeanour, and, for once, their quiet attitudes. "You did well today, this was your first real experience of combat. It wasn't fantastic and there is no worse feeling than the sting of overwhelming defeat, but there are still two more days. Think on your losses and prepare for

tomorrow. You will do better," he said, his words falling on deaf ears as he dismissed them.

The cold air and the sting of disappointment made sleep difficult, but eventually the morning came, and the second round of war games began. Their rivals for the day was Squad Z6, and they found themselves stationed on the beach of Zone A. "Right," attempted Alara as the others warmed up. "We'll try things again, an away team and a defence team." The response was muted at best, but the plan was accepted with Alara leading the away team alongside Wulf, Astris, Braze, and Witchford. The whistle blew and the match began.

They hurried along the beach, using the foliage for cover whilst keeping their eyes on the beachfront for any enemies. Fog had rolled in from the sea, obscuring the very edges, but despite their best efforts, the enemy squad could not hide from Astris' gaze. "There!" she stated, tapping Alara on the shoulder as they stood behind a line of trees. Alara nodded, holding up a hand before rushing out of the foliage across the beach, beckoning for the others to follow. "Alara, what are you doing?" called Astris after her in a hushed tone, quickly glancing in a panic towards the others before rushing forwards in pursuit.

Alara leapt into the fog, swinging her glaive in a large sweep and catching two members of the enemy squad unprepared. The others quickly pressed her, dropping their rifles and slashing with their swords as they stepped into her reach. "Cover my back!" Alara called out, only to quickly straighten up as she felt the tip of a sword press into her shoulder blades. Her eyes widened as she turned around, Astris and the others were fighting behind a boulder several metres away and she was surrounded and on her own. Another loss.

After the whistle had blown, announcing their defeat, the away team found themselves reunited with the defence team. "What happened?" Alara asked, crossing her arms. The others looked at each other before a crimson-coloured Astris pointed her finger shakily at Alara. "You happened! You left without warning! What were you thinking? We can't read minds Alara! You ran off! We don't know your commands, we don't know your strategies, and I'm sorry, but we can't keep up with you!" she blurted in a fit of frustration. The group fell silent, the various eyes darting back and forth between the pair. "Excuse me, is your squad ready?" asked one of the Marines in charge of running the war game. Alara looked at her and formed a 'T' with her hands, before looking at Astris and beckoning with her head to follow her, away from the eyes of the other members of the squad.

Astris' eyes widened and she took a deep gulp, but she followed Alara, the other members muttering to themselves. Astris looked up at Alara, her arms were folded, and her face was expressionless as they stood in the snow. After a few moments of silence, Alara took a deep breath and nodded, her arms falling to her sides and expression relaxing. "You're right Astris. I'm sorry," she said, meeting her gaze. "Huh? Wait what, you're not angry?" Astris asked, her shoulders lowering and eyes focusing back on Alara. Alara shook her head, reaching out towards Astris and resting a hand on her shoulder. Astris flinched, but made no moves to avoid the contact. "I'm sorry. You are right, I was out of order."

"Couldn't you have said that in front of everyone? Now I have no witnesses, and no-one will ever believe me," asked Astris with a small grin, as she composed herself. Alara rolled her eyes and stepped back. "No. Where am I going wrong? What can I do better?" she asked. Astris paused, thinking to herself for a second. "Stop being at the front. I think. I'm not sure. You're going to be an Officer, so you're the best leader we have, you're our advantage. You know the tactics, the moves. We don't, so, if you're taken out, or not there to tell us what to do, we lose that advantage. Use us, don't make us rely on you. We're a squad, we should work as one."

Alara thought to herself for a moment, but eventually she nodded, accepting the advice. "Okay, will do. Thanks." They headed back to the rest of the group, the conversation silencing as they entered the area. "I'm sorry," Alara stated, the various members of the squad perking up and looking at her in surprise. "I thought I could win by taking the lead. I was wrong. I can't take on an entire squad, and if we're going to win this, it won't be through a single action. We need to work together, as a squad. So, where do you guys want me?"

The second game began, Brett rushing off into the foliage to scout the area ahead. Riley and Braze brought up the rear, standing on the various boulders to get better lines of sight with their rifles. The rest of the group travelled together through the centre of the beach, Alara holding their flag in the middle as they pushed slowly onwards. Brett returned, relaying what he had seen, and a gunshot echoing from behind alerted them to the presence of the enemy as Riley spotted them up ahead, her shot landing true through the fog and eliminating an enemy. They lost, but this time they lost together. "Right, Alara doesn't hold the flag," stated Delex, as he wiped paint off his forehead. The others nodded in agreement.

The rest of the day and the following day passed much more quickly. And by the completion of the final war game, Squad W6 stood proudly in the middle of the river in Zone B, holding the blue flag of Y6 in the air as they cheered their success. They returned proudly back to Instructor Gibbs, a large noticeboard stationed behind him with the total tallies of losses and victories between the squads of the platoon. "Congratulations! You all came last, with a grand total of three victories, but you did so together. So, well done squad," he said with genuine pride, much to the dismay of the squad as they kissed their holiday goodbye. "Dead last..." muttered Alara, several images of the Admiral and Zenobia, both judging her poor performance, floating through her mind. Astris nudged her. "We did good. You did good, squad leader," she said with a smile.

The final morning came quickly, the snow now fully settled in and thicker than any Alara had seen before. It came up to her knees and as Gibbs assembled the squad together in the camp courtyard, she couldn't help but dread what he was inevitably going to say. "Right, listen up squad! Your Crucible is far from over yet. We still have one last task left for us. At the beginning we placed our flags at the top of that mountain, now we need to get them back." There was a collective groan as the cold air bulldozed through them. "It's a tradition and one dear to the Marines - buck up, we leave immediately!"

Without any further warning, he turned around and began marching through the snow in the direction of the island's volcano. Slowly but surely the squad headed off after him, Wulf and Witchford pressed to the front to stomp away the snow ahead, whilst the others fought between themselves to secure the middle of the pack. They pushed through snow-covered bushes, clambered over boulders, and traversed the freezing cold waters to enter the volcano once more, but, for whatever reason, Gibbs decided to lead them a different path once inside. They came to a near-vertical ledge, a well-hidden tunnel barely visible from the bottom of the twenty-metre climb.

Gibbs reached into his backpack, pulling out various pieces of climbing equipment. He then began to free-climb the wall, stopping every so often to hammer a metal spike into the wall. Once he sat at the top, he tied a piece of rope around one of the pitons he had hammered into the wall and lowered it down to the resting squad. "Come on you layabouts, get moving!" he yelled, waving at them to follow. Brett went first, climbing deliberately without the support of the pitons. "Show-off," grumbled Violette, only to laugh as Delex slipped trying to do the same, the rope around his waist catching his fall.

Alara climbed up quickly, using the pitons for an easy route upwards and before long, the rest of the squad stood proudly at the top. "Come on!" called out Gibbs from inside the tunnel, his loud voice echoing down the long path. They left the ropes and pitons behind, heading into the tunnel in pursuit of their Instructor, but eventually they found him. He was stood leaning against a gigantic, glowing, blue crystal, located in the middle of a large room covered in mirror-like walls, a silvery-blue liquid flowing down the edges. The squad stood in amazement at the spectacle as they looked at their distorted reflections in the walls.

They stood there for a while, as they explored every inch of the strange room, until finally Gibbs cleared his voice, drawing their attention to a camera he had placed on a rock. He dragged them over, the squad huddling up as they smiled towards the device, the Instructor standing proudly to edge of the group as Wulf, Witchford, Riley, and Astris crowded around Alara in the middle, with the rest of the group piling in around them. The camera flashed, its central crystal glowing white before dulling as the device crackled with energy. "Onwards squad!" declared Gibbs, picking up the item and leading them through a well-hidden passageway.

They continued the journey upwards, walking past bubbling pools of silvery liquid, giant crystals protruding from the ceilings, walls, and floors, flowing streams of magma, and finally out into the cold air of the mountain top. They collected their flags, bathed once more in the luxurious and steaming waters of the hot springs, and, once ready and refreshed, they began their slow journey back to camp.

They returned back to the Ursus Ultra, the long journey back to the Capital due to lead late into the evening, but this time Alara found herself following Senior Instructor Zenobia around the ship. They eventually settled into the Admiral's quarters, the exhaustion of the previous few days emerging from Alara as she found herself slowly sinking into the chairs around the room's main desk. "What happened to the Admiral?" Alara asked at last, as she took a break from reading a set of mission logs dated over a decade prior: 'Pirate Lord Crach: The Mysts Disaster'. "She was recalled back to the Capital. Did I not say earlier?" asked Zenobia, herself slumped in one of the chairs as she let out a yawn. "Oh right, sorry. How did she get there?" asked Alara, sitting back up and picking up another mission log. "She used her axe."

Seize the Seas Tales: Alchemy

"Ow, ow, ow, I'm dying," whined Wicke, as she paced up and down the lower deck of The Small Catch, the winds blowing loudly up above and small dots of snow flowing every so often into the lower hold. "It's just a cold, you'll be fine!" said Jayce, laying in his hammock, his nose red and dripping as he huddled himself under a thin blanket. "Says you! Mister-I-Don't-Get-Ill," she retaliated, opening her mouth to stick out her tongue, only to quickly close it and grab her throat. "Children! Quiet, please," asked Yuthura, as she sat nearby over a flask of bubbling pink liquid, one hand holding a red stone, the other stirring the liquid with a glass rod.

"What are you doing?" Wicke asked curiously, making a series of rude gestures she had learnt from Vexx at Jayce. "Alchemy. Surely you've heard of it?" replied Yuthura, the circles tattooed on her hands glowing as the liquid darkened into a deep red. "She may have. I haven't," interrupted Jayce as he lay there, shivering. Yuthura shook her head, picking up the potion and handing it to Wicke. "Only half the bottle," she advised. Wicke drank it quickly, the redness from her nose fading and the pain in her throat quickly disappearing. Yuthura took it back, and handed the rest to Jayce. "Thanks Doc, care to explain it to me?" he asked, taking the flask and drinking it.

"Very well. Alchemy is a form of magic that does one of two things." She took her red stone out of her pocket, taking the empty flask and placing on a nearby crate. She held her other hand over it, concentrating hard. The circle on her hand glowed a deep green and faint mist emanated from her palm, the glass beaker crumbling away into a large pile of sand. "It can change a material into another of equal quantity. Or it can imbue magical properties into these materials, for potions or for other effects." She held her other hand over the sand, the pile turning black. She picked it up and blew it, a deep plume of dark smoke covering the entire area around them, by the time it had faded, several seconds later, she was gone. "Damn," said Jayce from his hammock. Wicke nodded, crossing her arms. "Not as cool as Sorcery." A vial shattered by her feet releasing a pungent green gas.

Chapter 26: Glacial Charts

Snow blanketed the deck of The Small Catch as they sailed out of The Keeps, a lone island on the horizon marking the start of a new region. It had been a little over two weeks since Jayce's encounter with the afterlife, and, with each passing day, Jayce had slowly gained back most of his fitness, thanks to Yuthura's watchful gaze, and a detailed workout from Vexx. As they sailed quickly across the sea, boosted by Wicke's sorcery, Jayce stood at the bow, looking outwards at the incoming island of Frozen Branch. It was small, little more than a kilometre across, and snow blanketed the entire island. A few small huts dotted the island, their windows illuminated by the fires roaring within. Beyond the island lay the Ice Floes; colossal icebergs dotted the backdrop, each larger than the island in the forefront and moving quickly across the sea.

Wicke dropped her magic, rushing forwards to stand at Jayce's side as they carried onwards. "We're nearly there," Jayce told her. She nodded, leaning against his arm. "You came through for me. Thank you Jayce." He shook his head. "It's not over yet, but bar your whining, and your laziness, and the mess you make wherever you go- ". Her glare cut him off as she tilted her hat to look up at him. Jayce laughed and she cracked a smile. "It's been fun," he concluded.

She nodded slightly, turning her attention back towards their destination, squinting as she looked at the island up ahead. Jayce followed her gaze, seeing what she saw. "Vexx!" Jayce yelled backwards, leaning closer and entering into Focus. "Yeah?" replied Vexx from above, startling the pair as they quickly turned and looked upwards at a napping Vexx in the crows nest. "Since when... never mind. Can you see those ships docked up ahead? What flag are they raising?" Jayce asked. Vexx let out a yawn, standing up and stretching before looking out at the island still several kilometres away. He activated his own Focus, his red eyes flashing before the sclera on his eyes darkened to black and his irises turned a bright glowing green. He scanned the island, the outlines of the many lifeforms across it glowing brightly as he quickly looked around, before eventually he settled on the four Navy ships docked in the harbour.

"They're Inquisitor ships!" Vexx called down, quickly dropping to the deck below. "Paladins, Sisters, Priests, Navy sailors... the lot," Vexx said as he landed next to them. "Shit," Jayce muttered, "Tell Doc and Bjorn, we're going to have to take this carefully." Vexx nodded, walking away. He was dressed in little more than a shirt and trousers, yet he seemed unbothered by the snow compared to both Jayce and Wicke, who shivered in their several thin layers. "We need new

clothes,” said Wicke. “And the Glacial Charts as well.” Jayce nodded in agreement, turning away from the bow. “Come on, let’s get ready. I need to come up with a plan.”

They docked not long after, stepping onto the wooden planks of the harbour pier, their legs taking a moment to adjust after so long at sea. Wicke, Yuthura, and Bjorn were all wrapped in large cloaks as they emerged from the ship, all keeping their heads down as they walked past several Navy sailors, towards the island. “Good afternoon,” Vexx said cheerfully to a few as they walked past. Most nodded, but one gave a slightly confused wave. Jayce attempted to nudge him, but Vexx just sidestepped, continuing his leisurely stroll uninterrupted.

They headed for the nearest collection of houses: the local village. It was a quiet location, with a large building that looked like a combination of a general store and a tavern as the only remarkable site. The various Navy sailors and the members of the Church were all heading from the harbour towards the centre of the island, bringing a quick moment of relief as the group headed away from them. “Good afternoon!” called a friendly-looking man, with a big moustache and thick clothes, as they stepped inside. “Hello,” replied Jayce, taking the lead as the others headed towards the various chairs near the table closest to the fireplace. “May I get you some food, drinks, clothes, travel equipment? It’s rare that travellers come this way, funny enough, given all the Navy and those folk a few days ago,” he said, as Jayce sat down on a stool in front of him.

Wicke appeared in an instant. “There were others who passed through?” she asked excitedly. He nodded, raising a curious and bushy eyebrow as he looked at her. “In fact, two young women looked almost exactly like you. A strange crowd, lots of similar-looking people.” Wicke’s eyes widened, and she performed a small celebratory dance. “Could we get some food and drinks?” Jayce asked him, interrupting Wicke’s celebration. “Sure, I’ll bring it over to your table.” Jayce thanked him, heading over and sitting down with the others. “They came this way!” squealed Wicke as she bounced behind him.

“That’s great news, Wicke! Did you ask about the glacial chart?” asked Bjorn. Jayce shook his head. “Probably for the best,” muttered Yuthura. The others looked at her curiously as she warmed her hands. “The Navy is here - Inquisitors at that. Why do you think that is? The Nomads have always used magic, they’re after them. And if they’re after them, they need the charts. That’s why they’re here, the same reason anyone else would come this far north. We need to be careful what questions we ask.” Jayce paused for a moment.

"If they heard we were after them too, then they would assume we were going to the Nomads as well," he realised. "Good catch, Doc."

Yuthura smiled faintly as she stared into the fire. "It's what I'm here for!" she said. "So, how do we get the charts?" Bjorn asked quietly. They looked towards Vexx as he stared absent-minded across the bar at the various liquors on display. Jayce went to nudge his foot, only for Vexx to lift it at the last second. "Yeah, yeah. Fine, I'll get them. Food first," he stated. They nodded in agreement, leaning back as the barkeep wandered over with a giant smoked swordfish on a platter, various types of seaweed and vegetables decorating the edges of the dish and a large piece of butter sat melting on top. "Here you go folks, can I get you anything else? By the gods, you must be cold! Can I get you any clothes?" he asked, staring at Vexx, still dressed in very little. "In fact, I think you can," said Bjorn, pulling a long list from out of his pocket.

They devoured the food, Wicke, Bjorn, and Yuthura staying behind to get the supplies they needed, whilst Jayce and Vexx hurried across the snow towards the Navy camp. Several local houses skirted the edge of the temporary camp, and with their new winter clothes the pair looked no more out of place than any of the other islanders. A large observatory lay in the centre of the camp, a strange spherical glass roof sat at the very top of the large tower. Located just next to it, barely visible through the wire fences surrounding the camp, was a large tree, the branches all encased in crystalline ice that sparkled in the low afternoon light.

Jayce and Vexx both walked slowly around the outside of the camp, trying their very best not to draw suspicion. It was quite large, and unsurprisingly there were lots of guards, consisting of Priests, Navy, and Paladins. "We need a distraction," Jayce said at last. "Thanks for volunteering," Vexx said with a grin, taking off his mittens and handing them to Jayce before rolling up his sleeves, and rushing off quickly. "Wait what? Oh, you son-of-a-" Jayce whined, quickly pocketing the gloves and crouching low next to a nearby house. Jayce concentrated hard, entering Focus and trying to spot a means of creating a distraction. One drew his attention as he spotted a supply crate marked with warning signs indicating it was loaded with black powder. He concentrated, drawing magical energy from within himself and beginning a chant Wicke had taught him.

Vexx ran quickly around the perimeter, leaving barely a trace in the snow behind him as he ran. He leapt, jumping into the air to land on top of one of the nearby houses. He took a deep breath; he could feel the many guards around them, he could see their movements, but he couldn't hear anything other the pounding of

his heart in his chest. It thundered inside him, and as he tried to drown it out, it only got louder and louder. He shook his head, trying to focus, but as he slowed his heartbeat, his mind continued to race, the world blurring and a ringing echoing inside his ears. "Damnit," he muttered, taking off his backpack and reaching inside. He felt a bottle, pulling it out. It was empty. He swore, reaching back inside before pulling out a small pouch.

He opened the drawstring, tipping out a small pile of red powder into his palm. Vexx paused for a second, looking around him as he tried to regain control of his body and mind. It refused and he put his mouth to his hand, taking a deep breath of the powder. He put the pouch back in his bag, before leaping off the roof just as a loud explosion echoed from the other side of the camp. He landed silently, the few patrolling guards not noticing him as ran quickly through the pathways created by the many tents in the direction of the observatory. His vision turned a bright shade of red, the many people around him fading into vague shapes within the colour.

Vexx leapt onto the top of a tent, touching it faintly before leaping over a patrol rushing underneath him. "There's a fire!" yelled a Paladin Knight, somewhere to his left. "Get the Priests, it's spreading!" yelled a Navy sailor. Vexx ignored all of them, leaping silently across the air as he headed to the largest tent, stationed right next to the tower. He landed next to the entrance - the footprints in the snow indicating the stationed guards had rushed off to help - and, with no one around, he stepped inside.

The interior was laden with various pieces of equipment, a large map of the region lay strewn across a table in the centre of the room. Several boards decorated by notes on the Nomads were propped throughout, and large supply of crates sat sealed by the edges of the large tent. Vexx walked up to the table, looking at the map; it was tinted red and was a vague layout of the northern territories, but from the lack of directional markings he quickly ascertained it wasn't the Glacial Chart. Vexx ransacked the tent, but he couldn't find one. And as the alarms turned off in the distance he ran quickly out of the tent, heading for the nearest wall in defeat.

Vexx's vision burned red as he rushed through the camp, bumping into tentpoles and kicking crates accidentally as he stumbled towards the edge. A searing headache exploded inside of his head, and he growled as he shut his eyes for a second, stumbling head first into a Priest. They collided, rolling away from each other, the wire fence in sight in the distance. "Ow, what on the seas?" groaned

the Priest, as he clambered to his feet, Vexx sprawled on the floor next to him. "Who? Intruder! Intruder! Help! Help me!" clamoured the Priest, shakily reaching into his robes as Vexx lay there dazed. The Priest began to chant and Vexx bolted upright, his vision encased in red and the Priest a glowing orange figure in his sight.

Vexx roared, pulling back his right arm before straightening his fingers and throwing his hand through the chest of the Priest. The Priest froze, his eyes wide as Vexx grasped his heart in his hand. He crushed the organ, pulling his arm back through the corpse of the Priest before looking around as eight more Priests, twelve Navy sailors, and a Paladin surrounded him, their eyes wide in horror as they looked at the sight. Vexx glanced across them, the figures almost entirely identical in his gaze except for the Paladin, who stood further away, was a woman, and held a large scroll in her hands. "Kill him!" screamed one of the Priests.

The squad stayed where they were, their eyes full of terror as they looked at Vexx, a snarl on his face and blood dripping from his right hand. The head Priest, a Bishop, looked at the others, his legs shaking and a steady bead of sweat dripping from his brow, despite the snow swirling around them. "Do it!" he screamed, starting a chant and raising his small white book into the air in front of him. Vexx tilted his head confused, the Bishop a red smear on his vision, but as the other Priests joined in and the Navy sailors rushed forwards with their swords drawn, Vexx went berserk.

He let out a battle cry, crossing his arms and catching the falling blades heading towards his body. The blades couldn't puncture his skin and he unravelled his arms in a slow, twisting dance. "Get away!" cried the Paladin, but Vexx was too quick. He twisted on his feet, slashing with his hands in a flurry of blows. The Navy sailors came apart as he tore through them, a series of quick flashes of flame and light following as the Priests unleashed their magic. Vexx used his crouched position to leap high into the air before he dropped feet first from the sky like a lightning bolt, crushing the Bishop with his body as he accelerated into the ground.

The Paladin drew her sword, dropping her scroll as she watched the sight unfold before her. Vexx danced across the field of slaughter, delivering blow after blow at the remaining Navy sailors and Priests as they attempted to escape him. She rushed in, yelling in an attempt to distract him as he went to deliver a killing blow to the final Priest attempting to crawl away on his shattered legs. "Please

don't kill me!" he begged, only for Vexx to raise a fist, his eyes cold and vacant and a sinister grin across his face. The Paladin brought her sword down, the enchanted blade buzzing with power as she aimed for his blood-soaked neck.

It hit, landing in Vexx's grip as he caught the blade with his fingers, his body turned away from her. "That's not nice," he said quietly, turning around to face her before delivering a powerful kick through the chest of the Priest behind him. She stumbled backwards, trying to pull the blade from his grip. Vexx squeezed the sword with his fingers, a large crack forming along the blade before he let go. She fell backwards, landing hard on the red snow, her helmet rolling off her head.

He looked down at her, her face a red blur, her eyes glowing with hatred through his vision. He raised his arm. "Vexx!" yelled Jayce, somewhere in the distance near the fence. Vexx blinked, the red fading from his vision as he snapped back to reality. He looked down at her, a terrified teenager with blonde hair tied up into a braid. Vexx let out a sigh, glancing around him at the bloodshed until he spotted his prize. He lowered his hand, the Paladin fainting as he passed by her, snatching up the scroll she had been carrying. He quickly unravelled it, revealing a map of the Ice Floes with the local currents and drawings of large icebergs marked upon it: the Glacial Charts.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Vexx ran quickly for the fence, leaping over it in a single bound before landing next to an awaiting Jayce. "Woah, are you okay? What happened?" Jayce asked, his eyes wide as he stared at the blood-soaked Vexx, his entire body covered from head-to-toe. "It doesn't matter, it's not mine," Vexx said stoically, pushing forwards and running towards the harbour as the camp alarms began to ring once again.

A storm had begun to pick up, a furious blizzard obscuring them as they ran towards The Small Catch. "A lucky break," Jayce said, as they ran past Navy sailors rushing for the camp. "No, it's Wicke. Stay close!" said Vexx, pointing vaguely off into the distance. They stepped onto the pier, vaulting over crates as they ran towards the edge, voices echoing around them. "Let's go!" yelled Jayce as they leapt onto The Small Catch, rushing to stand by the sails. "Aye!" called out Bjorn from by the mooring ropes. Jayce concentrated hard, following the directions Wicke had given him as he tried to mould the winds. No markings appeared on his arms, and Wicke rushed next to him. "Another time maybe, we've got to go. You have the charts, right?" she asked.

The scroll flew towards Jayce, as Vexx threw it to him, as sat resting against the mast. Jayce nodded to him, Wicke's eyes widening as she stared at him. "Bjorn,

get Yuthura. Vexx is hurt, badly!" she yelled, before concentrating on her casting. "Gust!" she yelled, unleashing a blast of wind into the sails. Jayce, and the others who were all standing, grabbed onto something as the ship launched itself away from the island. They sailed north, quickly, the island falling behind them into the distance, the colossal icebergs getting closer and closer.

Jayce stood behind the wheel, the Glacial Chart open on the floor next to him as he tried to steer them, only for Bjorn to rush up the stairs and take over, narrowly steering them out of the way of a fast-moving iceberg. Together, alongside Wicke's magic, they sailed cleanly, following the directions of the map until they came to an area clear of currents. They lowered anchor, reconvening on the deck of the ship where Yuthura and Vexx were waiting.

"You're an idiot. Do you know the damage this stuff does to you?" she berated, holding a small pouch in her hand as she looked down at the resting Vexx. "Look, it's fine. You're making a big deal over nothing," he retorted, snatching it back and stuffing it in his pocket. "What's going on?" Jayce asked, as the five of them reconvened. "Nothing," Vexx said quickly. Jayce raised an eyebrow, looking over at Yuthura. "He's doped up, on something I'm not familiar with." Jayce looked at Vexx, his pupils significantly smaller than normal and a red tinge to the rest of his eyes outside of his iris. "Is this true?" Jayce asked. Vexx nodded, standing up. "Say what you want, I got the map. Let's get moving, they'll start following us soon," Vexx said, walking past them towards the captain's quarters. "Where are you going?" Jayce asked him.

Vexx looked back over his shoulder at them, his hands in his pockets. "To shower. Problem?" he asked, with an irritated look as his eyes flickered over the group. "No. You're free to do what you want... but, don't let it control you," Jayce stated. Vexx nodded, reaching for the door handle. "And Vexx," Jayce added, Vexx freezing in place as he braced himself, "Please be more merciful next time, not everyone needs to die." Vexx unfroze, his shoulders dropping as he opened the door. "You do you Cap', I'll do me... but... noted," Vexx concluded, stepping inside and heading to the bathroom. "Is he injured?" Wicke asked, looking at Yuthura. She shook her head. "Not a scrape on him."

Bjorn led Jayce through the lower deck of the ship, showing off the equipment and gear they had bought, including a brand new set of deep sea fishing rods. Jayce was ecstatic, but Bjorn forced him to act as his navigator as they set off once more, following the route the Inquisitors had so caringly scribbled onto the Glacial Chart for them – it's destination, the current whereabouts of the Nomads.

The seas were rough, the passing icebergs creating huge wakes that toyed with The Small Catch, but together they managed. As they were forced to travel more slowly, Yuthura and Wicke found themselves delegated to the chores they usually managed to avoid, whilst Vexx isolated himself at the top of the mast.

They followed the rest points marked out, stopping in places they were certain they were safe. With no signs of civilisation in sight, the nights were pitch black, lit up briefly every so often by an aurora or the stars breaking through the clouds. Snow kept falling, creating a task for the crew every day as they were forced to sweep away the snow that built up during the night. Ice formed around the rudder, and Bjorn was forced to endure the frozen waters to free it. Every so often Jayce caught Vexx staring at something just behind their ship, but he chose to ignore it, thinking nothing of it.

Finally, after several days of navigating the Ice Floes, they set their sights on solid land far off in the distance. Wicke bounced with excitement at the front of the ship, Bjorn stood not too far away from her as he scanned the horizon. "There!" he called out eventually, pointing towards a large cluster of cream tents, camouflaged against the snow towards the west, and a small fleet of ships resting on the nearby stone beach. Jayce turned the wheel, angling The Small Catch towards Bjorn's directions, but as he looked around him, scanning the horizon, he spotted something else. A lone white tower, one he'd seen before many weeks prior, stood tall to the far east, a large encampment built around it: a Dungeon.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Paladin's Nightmare

Arthuria could kiss the ground as she stepped out onto the solid earth of the island of Frozen Branch. It had been a long voyage, one only made bearable by the kindness, the humility and the hospitality of the Sisters. Every day she had been hounded by the Knights and the Priests assigned to their ship. Paladin, can you critique my form? Paladin, what do think of this battle plan? Paladin, which of the thirteen gods is your favourite? By all that was holy and sacred, Arthuria had had enough.

Still, she was here to complete a quest, and despite her growing concerns of the morality of such an inquisition, she was going to complete it. Camp was set quickly, the locals all too happy to hand over the observatory and the space surrounding it. She left the Priests to strategize, patrolling the camp on their sixth day of preparation, a continued brief respite that she looked forward to each day, as she attempted to escape the many men she was forced to work with. She

carried her personal chart, the latest route marked upon it, to ensure she knew exactly where they would be at all times.

An explosion rang out, followed by the echoes of various alarms across the camp. A fire - probably another bored idiot or frustrated islander, she thought - rushing off quickly to help. By the time she arrived, the fire had already been contained; the damage had been significant, but it was nothing they couldn't afford to lose. "What happened?" Arthuria asked the nearest sailor. The man turned his head towards her, looking down and putting on a grin as he saw her helmetless face. "Hello there, Knight," he said, attempting to put on an air of charm, something Arthuria was neither in the mood for, nor impressed by, given the stench of burning coming from his clothes. "It's Paladin, sailor. Explain," she said sternly, the sailor straightening up as he sensed her tone and authoritative voice.

"Just a minor accident, a black powder keg was too close to a torch. No one was badly hurt," he said quickly. Arthuria nodded, turning around and walking away. "Carry on," she called behind her, heading back across the camp. A cry echoed in her direction. "Help me!" it called out. She slammed on her helmet, running quickly in its direction, several sailors and Priests running ahead of her. She arrived at an open section between several large tents, a small figure standing over the corpse of a Priest, his hands both stained an orange-red colour, with his right dripping with blood.

The Navy sailors charged forwards; the figure blocked their blades, easily, pushing them away before entering into a slow dance, his arms coiling like that of a mantis. His eyes flashed with bloodlust, and a cold feeling ran through Arthuria. "Get away!" she yelled, too late, as he eviscerated the sailors with his sword-like hands. He leapt into the air, crashing into a Bishop before pouncing on the various Priests as they attempted to kill him with their magic. It was useless, but, as he turned on the last surviving Priest, Arthuria charged forwards bringing her holy weapon down on the demon. He caught it, turning to face her, before cracking her unbreakable blade with only his fingers. "What are you?" Arthuria asked before she slipped over, smacking her head hard on the floor.

She looked up at the monster, its face inhuman and eyes murderous as it stood over her. A voice called out from somewhere in the distance and the look in its eyes softened, changed, before it ran off. Arthuria lay back, watching the creature as it ran off before leaping over the fence of the camp, its hands stained with blood. She shut her eyes, opening them to find herself still lying in the snow, several Priests looking over the sight as they checked the bodies of the other

Priests. "What happened?" Arthuria asked, shakily getting to her feet. "Oh, you're alive. Why didn't you die with the others?" said one of the Priests, not even looking in her direction. "Get patched up, we leave in an hour."

Arthuria walked alone across the camp, her body numb as she held her cracked blade. "Impossible," she muttered. Eventually she arrived back at the barracks, a Sister waiting for her inside. "I heard what happened, are you okay?" she asked kindly, taking Arthuria's arm and sitting her down on one of the beds. "I'm fine." "Don't lie Arthuria. Lay down, take a moment. Follow my breathing," she said, large glowing rings surrounding her forearms, before Arthuria felt her eyelids droop. She blinked slowly. "No, I need to... I need to..."

Chapter 27: Crushed Hopes

They sailed quickly west, Bjorn climbing the mast and kicking an irritated Vexx out of the crow's nest, as he began to flash a message towards the camp using a small, hand-mirror-like device they had bought from the Guild. Wicke bounced up and down as a response came from the camp, and they were cleared to approach. "Jayce!" called down Bjorn, now actively performing the duty Vexx should have been doing. "Sail more west, apparently there's a kraken patrolling this region to the east," he said, grabbing the binoculars hanging from the nest and looking in that direction.

Bjorn scanned the waters, eventually spotting a large, fast-moving shape heading in their direction. Several much smaller shapes appeared between them under the water and the larger changed direction, heading away. "We are all good!" called down Bjorn, as he turned his attention back to the fast-approaching mainland. He couldn't help but smile as he spotted a small crowd forming by the beach. The Small Catch sailed in, Jayce following Bjorn's directions to a shallow part of water close to the beach, they weighed anchor and the five of them, and Little Witch who was buried inside Wicke's fur hood, stood at the bow of the ship.

Jayce looked down over the edge, a sizeable portion of water still between them and the actual land. "Why did you want to dock so far away from the beach?" Jayce asked. Bjorn chuckled. "Just watch," he said. Amongst the crowd of fifty or so people, of which at least eight of them were baned bears of varying species, a small woman dressed in thick fur clothes walked to the front. The others parted for her, and she extended a slow hand outwards; the water in front of her began to glow a soft orange colour before small beads of orange floated upwards, collecting into a sun-like ball in front of her. She pushed with her hand and the orb flew forwards, the water beneath it glowing before turning to ice as the orb drained it of its energy. The orb carried onwards all the way to The Small Catch, growing larger and larger until, as it reached the bow of the ship - a sizeable path of ice in its wake - it evaporated, a wave of warm-to-hot air blowing through the group.

They stood there shocked, but Bjorn just leapt off the bow, landing onto the ice with a crash before he bounded forwards across the ice to the shore, the many Nomads charging forwards towards him. Vexx and Yuthura dropped after him, walking at a more relaxed pace as they took in the sight. Wicke remained

stationary, to Jayce's confusion as he stepped towards the edge. "Wicke?" he asked.

Her eyes were scanning the beach, she looked backwards and forwards, snapping out of it as Jayce said her name. "I don't see them..." she said quietly, soft tears forming in the corner of her eyes. Jayce turned around, looking over the collection, all huddled around Bjorn on the ice as they welcomed him home after more than a decade apart. "Maybe they're inside? Come on, let's go," he said, turning back to her and putting on a gentle smile before dropping down to the ice below. Wicke nodded, wiping her eyes before standing on the edge and dropping after him.

Jayce walked across the ice, Wicke walking closely behind him as she looked nervously over the large group. Vexx and Yuthura were waiting a small ways apart from the mass, both looking onwards with small smiles as they spotted Bjorn disappear and reappear every so often inside the huddle. "Well," Yuthura said at last. "We got the big bear home." Jayce nodded, looking at the crew around him as they all appreciated the moment. They waited patiently until eventually the group dispersed, heading back to the children waiting at the beach alongside the small old woman who had cast the spell.

Bjorn followed them across the ice, surrounded by the few other baned within the greater tribe, as well as what was clearly several long-term friends. "Come on! Don't be shy," Bjorn called out to the group, inviting Jayce and the others over. "You heard the man," Jayce said with a grin, stepping forwards quickly, the others following behind. They arrived at the beach, Bjorn kneeling on the ground with his head in the arms of the old woman. She was tiny, smaller than even Wicke, only four-foot and a bit tall, but she held the giant Bjorn in her arms as she rested her head on his. She said something to him, in a language the group didn't understand. She released him, Bjorn sniffing as he wiped his eyes and nose before standing back up. He pointed to the group, saying something in the language before finishing off with: "...Vexx, Yuthura, Wicke, Jayce."

The old woman nodded, the majority of her face hidden within the hood of her fur anorak, but she held her mitten-covered hands out before chanting. Jayce, Wicke, and Yuthura recognised this language as she cast a spell. She pulled from her pocket several bear totems, touching each of them before walking over to the group and handing one each to Jayce and the others. "I thank you, for bringing our lost cub home," she said softly in her own language, the words changing as they entered Jayce's ears. "It has been many moons since Bjorn was taken from

us, and although I'm ashamed to see how different he is, I am glad you rescued him. Maybe in time he will relearn how to change."

Jayce looked at her quizzically. "How to change?" he asked, surprised as he understood her words. She nodded, extending a slow arm out towards the other baned, their forms glowing green before disintegrating to reveal several large men; most with dark skin, but a few with fair or tanned skin tones. Their clothes changed to fit their bodies as well, but no longer had they switched, a few of them turned back into their bear forms. "A gift from our ancestors, but one few ever truly learn to appreciate," she added, before looking up at Bjorn. "Come, it is rude to leave guests out in the cold."

Bjorn extended an arm and she stepped onto his hand, grasping tightly onto his clothes as he stood up, turning to face the others. "Nana would like to invite you all inside," Bjorn said, before turning and leading the way towards the largest of the tents in the camp. Several children observed Jayce and the others from a distance, Jayce spotting a small bear baned amongst them as they passed. Hidden amongst the tents were also igloos: large in size, with enough room for at least several people. The various Nomads observed them passing, a few nodding greetings to Jayce and the others as they passed, a few even bringing gifts of handcrafted wooden totems hanging from necklaces.

They entered the tent, a large fire in the centre, and as Jayce looked upwards he noticed there was a large open flap in the top of the tent. An old tanned man sat tending the fire, but as Bjorn entered the room he promptly stood up, wandering over before transforming into a very old-looking polar bear baned. Bjorn put down the old woman before hugging the other polar bear. "Please sit," invited the old woman, dismissing the other members of the tribe with a soft wave of her hand. They did so, sitting on the rugs lining the edge of the fire, a wall of stones separating them. Little Witch hopped out of Wicke's hood, stretching out next to the fire.

Wicke was despondent and Jayce could see she was on the verge of tears. As he opened his mouth to speak, the matriarch of the Nomads stood up, her hood down and her long silver hair braided behind her. She walked over to Wicke, taking her head in her brown, wrinkled hands and meeting her gaze. "You are Wicke," she stated. Wicke nodded, meeting the silver eyes of the old woman. "Your tribe were here, they left several moons ago. I'm sorry. You missed them," she said gently. Wicke's eyes widened, and she shook her head out of the matriarch's hands. "No, we were told they passed through Frozen Branch barely

a week ago! How? Where are they?" she asked. Jayce moved to stand, but the old baned put a hand out. Jayce nodded, sitting back down as Wicke looked towards him. "We were told they passed through there, we didn't ask which way..." Bjorn said softly, looking down at the fire before over at Wicke.

Tears streamed down Wicke's face as she looked at Bjorn before she turned back to Jayce. "I'm so sorry, Wicke," said Jayce, as she looked away from him, pulling her legs towards her and crying into her knees. The matriarch rested a hand on the back of Wicke's head, taking off her hat, before sitting next to her and pulling her closer. "It is okay," she said softly. "Not all is lost, your family left a message for you. They knew you were coming, and, for one reason or another, it appears you are being tested. Perhaps they did not think you ready for The Frontier."

Eyes widened throughout the group as they snapped their heads towards the matriarch. "The Frontier?" Jayce asked, looking towards the old baned who nodded. "A message?" asked Wicke, a glint of hope reappearing as she focused on the one word. The elder nodded. "It awaits you nearby. Buried on the tenth floor of the Dungeon along with a ship." Vexx flinched, and once more the others looked at the matriarch in stunned surprise. "What are we waiting for? Let's go now!" Wicke demanded, rocking to her feet only to be caught by the matriarch as she took Wicke's arm, pulling her back down. "Soldiers and members of the Church guard the site, emboldened after your group made their way inside. We will help you get in, but we will do so in the morning. You need food and rest."

Wicke shook her head, but she found herself unable to escape the matriarch's grip and her eyes began to droop. The others sat there thinking as Wicke fell asleep on the matriarch's shoulders and - once they were certain she was asleep - they probed for more answers. "The Frontier?" Jayce asked, leaning curiously towards the fire as he looked towards the matriarch. She didn't answer, but the old baned spoke up. "Indeed. A journey that has already been undertaken by the other tribes. We follow tomorrow."

"What?" asked Bjorn. "Isn't that suicide? The stories have always- ". The old baned shook his head. "A world awaits us on the other side, and between the danger of the unknown and the danger known to be growing here, a decision was made. We held out for your arrival, foretold to us by Wicke's clan, but after we aide in your entry of the Dungeon, we depart for the Old World," said the old man. "A war is coming, Bjorn. We wish no part of it," added the matriarch as she stroked Wicke's hair. Yuthura nodded to herself, looking deep into the fire as she sympathised with the feeling. Vexx sat in deep, focused silence.

"Well, I guess we see what awaits us in the Dungeon," Jayce said with a smirk. "Thank you, on Wicke's behalf," he added more sincerely. The matriarch nodded, looking towards the old man who stood up and stepped out. "Food will be arranged, and you may rest among us as friends of the tribe. Thank you all for bringing Bjorn home. My name is Inger, that was my soul-bond Magnus. I am the leader of the Frostbear tribe," said Inger. Jayce nodded, reintroducing the crew to her.

"I thought the animals baned were based on were random?" Yuthura asked at last. The matriarch shook her head, looking towards Bjorn with a scolding glance. "No, it is our ancestor's blood that chooses the blessing. It so happens that bears run within our tribe, of which, variations occur between descendants leading to different types: the polar bears, the grizzly, the brown, the sun, and so forth. Some are naturally rarer. Even amongst the ten greater tribes, there are only two polar bears," she explained, Yuthura and Jayce listening intently.

A gong echoed in the distance, startling Wicke awake. "Food!" declared Inger, standing up once Wicke had leaned away from her. "Come, meet the rest of our family. They are very eager to meet all of you." She led them outside, taking them towards a large bonfire built in the centre of the camp. Little Witch wandered around across the snow, the cat still small, but much larger than when they first found her. After disappearing out of sight, Little Witch returned to them in a panicked rush, vaulting up Jayce's sleeve to stand on his shoulders. They soon saw why, as a rather large and decorated brown bear wandered over towards them. "You have bears?" asked Jayce in surprise, placing a cautious hand on the creature's huge head. Bjorn laughed. "Oh yeah. We have bears."

The food was roasted deer, with a variety of fish as supplements to the main course; there was also a surprising amount of greenery available, as well as a rather unique smelling type of booze for the adults. The entire meal contained a variety of flavours that neither Jayce, nor Wicke nor Yuthura, had experienced before - Wicke wasn't overly fond of the food, but Jayce found himself going back for multiple rounds. Drums, paired with unusual string and wind instruments, filled the camp with music and it wasn't long before several of the local women had dragged Jayce, Bjorn, and Vexx to dance with them, whilst several of the older kids conversed with Wicke, running around the camp and showing off the various pieces of magic they knew. Yuthura sat to the side, talking intently with the various elders of the tribe, whilst sharing a potent-smelling pipe.

Jayce found himself paired with a fair-skinned young woman, definitely older than himself. She hid her hair under her hood, along with most of her face, but, as she twirled, Jayce spotted a large eyepatch across her left eye and a significant portion of her face. He stared for a bit too long and she quickly dismissed herself, disappearing into the crowd. The song ended and they applauded the musicians before sitting down on one of the rugs near the fire.

"This place is amazing, Bjorn!" said Jayce, catching his breath as he looked up to the sky, darkness quickly rolling in. Vexx looked across the camp, nodding in agreement. "I owe it to you that we're here to experience it. Captain," Bjorn said, extending an arm out and wrapping it around Jayce before pulling him in. Vexx sensed it coming and began to slide away only for Bjorn to grab the back of his hood and pull him in too. "And you Vexx." Bjorn laughed as they struggled, but he eventually let them go before sitting back.

"It's been an honour Bjorn, I'll miss you. We'll miss you," Jayce said. Bjorn nodded, remaining silent as he looked at the large bonfire. "Hey, so is that Mr and Mrs Bjorn?" Vexx said teasingly, as he pointed at a pair of polar bears laying near the fire. Bjorn punched him hard across the shoulder, Vexx trying to dodge but still getting caught to his own surprise. "Funny enough, I don't know. We don't really do the whole parent thing. A child is a member of the tribe, so is raised by the Tent-mothers," Bjorn explained, pointing over to a light-skinned blonde woman carrying a very well wrapped baby whilst talking to a small girl with light-brown skin and black hair. "Oh, but you refer to Inger as 'Nana'?" Jayce said curiously. Bjorn nodded. "She's the matriarch, grandmother to all children in the tribe, even if not by blood. When I was young, I couldn't control being a baned very well. Her soul-bond, husband, Magnus, was my mentor. And I guess that put me a bit closer to her than most other kids, but we do all call her Nana."

Jayce nodded, looking over the group. "Any old romances?" he pried, cunningly. Bjorn glared at him. "Oh come on, there must be some." Bjorn looked over the tribe, and he quickly became bashful before looking away. "How do baned... Do people go for bears?" asked Vexx. "I mean, well, uh, um..." Vexx added, blushing heavily as both Jayce and Bjorn gave him a judgemental glare. Bjorn cleared his throat. "Baned can transform, but, uh, yeah," Bjorn stated uncomfortably, both Jayce and Vexx immediately moving to say follow up questions, only for Yuthura to emerge out of nowhere and sit down. "Thank the ancestors," muttered Bjorn.

The night came and went, Jayce and the others sleeping in a borrowed tent on a bed of furs. Wicke woke up several times, each time checking outside to see if the sun was up yet, before falling back asleep. It was surprisingly warm in the tent, and for the majority of them, Bjorn especially, the sleep was very good. The morning was cold, fresh snow falling fast as the camp got up at the crack of dawn. As Jayce and the others dressed and headed back to The Small Catch to prepare themselves for entry into the Dungeon, they noticed the campsite was quickly being disassembled and the pieces moved onto the large longboats resting on the beach.

They filled their backpacks with the healing potions Yuthura had brewed for them, as well as water and food rations and other pieces of travel equipment, before they returned back to the camp, the largest tent and the various igloos the only buildings that remained. The various baned stood waiting for them, as well as several Nomad warriors dressed in armour and holding large spears, mostly hidden under their anoraks. A few armoured bears also sat waiting. They stepped inside, Magnus and Inger talking quietly to a woman. Her hood was down, revealing neck-length light-brown hair. Bjorn faltered briefly as he stepped inside before he continued onwards. The trio looked at Jayce and his crew.

“Ah, good. Are you all prepared?” asked Inger, before she looked at the woman stood with her. Jayce nodded, his eyes flicking to the woman as he immediately spotted her eyepatch, this one smaller than the one she had worn before. She spotted him looking, and her eye flicked towards Bjorn before she blushed and turned away, trying to hide the large but faint burn marks across the left side of her face. “Then, let the assault begin. The battle is in your hands, my dear,” she said, looking at Magnus, who then transformed into his baned form, this one decorated in armour similar to the warriors outside. He nodded, stepping past Jayce and the others to speak with the assault team, the one-eyed woman following suit. Bjorn watched her pass, his attention quickly turning back to Inger. “The tenth floor, no more, no less. You will find what you are after there. Good luck, may the ancestors favour you.”

They left the tent, finding the group awaiting them before they set off towards the east on foot. “Do you know how many there are?” Jayce asked Magnus as he led the group quickly across the snow, the various hills providing cover as they took the long route around. “Twenty, give or take. At least one Priest. We’ll surprise them with a fast and powerful assault, capturing them and locking them away in their own barracks.” He looked behind him at the warriors under his

command, the one-eyed woman walking quietly near the rear, a large spear across her back. "Minimal casualties, no one needs to die!" he ordered, the others nodding in agreement, as they covered their spears with hard-looking sheathes. Jayce looked at Bjorn and the others, silently stating the same. Vexx let out a sigh but nodded, swigging from a bottle in his hand.

They quickly came upon the fortress, a high wall surrounded the square building, with only one entrance. A pair of scouts returned, dressed entirely in white. "Two on patrol, rotating on the walls," they stated to Magnus before re-joining the others. Jayce held up a hand. "We'll draw their attention from the south, you attack from the north," he volunteered, the other members of Jayce's crew letting out a sigh. "Then make it happen, take Marisha with you," stated Magnus, beckoning the one-eyed woman forwards. She nodded, rushing forwards to join them. "She's an excellent scout, if something goes wrong, she'll let us know."

Jayce accepted and they split up from the larger group rushing towards the shoreline before making a straightforward approach towards the fortress. "Why couldn't we have gone the easier way?" Bjorn asked Jayce, as Jayce waved towards one of the guards stood on top of the wall. "Come on, surely you're itching for some action," Jayce said with a grin as the guard rushed off, returning with a Priest. "You're a strange man, Captain," Bjorn said, taking out his weapons. Wicke walked next to Jayce, casting quietly to herself with Marisha on her other side. She stopped chanting. "Ready?" Jayce asked. "Ready!" said the others, before Wicke threw a bolt of lightning from the sky, the entire south wall of the fortress crumbling away as the Priest and guard leapt off the wall to avoid the strike.

They rushed forwards, the devastated wall providing a ramp for easy access; Jayce had both his blades drawn, Marisha had her spear, Bjorn with his usual giant axe and sword, Vexx with his fists, Yuthura with her crossbow, and Wicke with her magic. They leapt from the ruined battlements, the sailors below them scrambling for their equipment. One was holding a camera and as they leapt down through the sky a flash came from the device. Jayce activated his Focus, using his speed and strength to disarm every sailor before they could ready themselves by smacking their blades or pistols out of their hands. Vexx ran from sailor to sailor, hitting vital points and dropping them before they could react. Wicke engaged the Priest, the two flinging spells back and forth until Bjorn pounced on the man from behind. Magnus and the rest of the Nomad tribe assault team blasted their way through the north wall, rushing into the fray.

Less than five minutes later, the battle was won, and every sailor stationed in the fortress, as well as the Priest, was tied up and locked inside their barracks. "That was a lot easier than expected," muttered Vexx. Bjorn glared at him as he sat down on the ground, Yuthura healing a large sword slash across his arm, a small stream of blood dripping from her right arm. "Come on, you must admit it," reinforced Vexx, looking towards Jayce - who simply nodded. A shadow fell over them and the group looked towards the wall; Magnus stood at the top, the other warriors standing there as well. Bjorn stood up, climbing slowly up the broken wall with Marisha in tow.

Jayce turned around, looking towards the Dungeon. It reached high into the sky and was made entirely of white stone. Upon closer inspection, Jayce spotted runes marking each stone, and as he touched the stone it vibrated, his hand buzzing until he pulled it away. A colossal set of black metal doors were built into the tower, several metres in height with a large metal chain wrapped around the handles. Jayce turned back around, Vexx had a look on his face that Jayce had never seen before; Vexx looked afraid.

"What's wrong?" Jayce asked. Vexx shook his head, walking up to the chains and snapping them with his hands before he stepped away. "I'll stay here, ensure no one seals you in. Gives me bad feelings," he said, his eyes not meeting Jayce's as he paced back and forth. "All the more reason for you to come with us," stated Jayce. Vexx shook his head. "No!" he said, a bit too loudly, drawing Wicke's and Yuthura's gazes. "Okay, I won't make you do something you're uncomfortable with. Just stay here, we'll be back. And if something goes wrong... We trust you," Jayce finished, looking upwards towards Bjorn, noticing both him and Marisha looking down at him.

"The choice is yours Bjorn," said Magnus, as he, Bjorn, and Marisha looked out towards the open seas, a small fleet of Navy ships sailing quickly towards them on the horizon. "You will always have a home with us." Bjorn nodded, turning away to look back at Jayce and the others before he settled his gaze on Jayce. He shook his head, turning back to Magnus. "I dreamt of coming home, I longed for it... but I'm not ready. Not yet. I have more to do, more to see, and I've found people I can trust. Someone I can believe in," Bjorn stated. He looked at Marisha, her expression softening as he did so before he looked down at Magnus. "Then you have my blessing. By the stars, the moon, and the seas, we will await your return to us," Magnus concluded, accepting Bjorn's choice as he hugged him.

Magnus then turned to Marisha. "His choice has been made. And yours?" he asked. She looked at Bjorn, a smile appearing on her face. "I have made mine," she said. Magnus nodded, bringing her in for a hug. "You may not have been born one of us, but you will always be a member of our tribe. Good luck. Stay safe," he concluded, moving to step away before faltering. "Oh, Bjorn, since there's a ship awaiting you. Do you think we could take The Small Catch?" he asked. Bjorn nodded. "Jayce won't mind, as long as you leave our things for us to collect," Bjorn stated. Magnus grinned, as well as a bear could grin. "Thank you, safe travels. May the ancestors bless you both."

Marisha and Bjorn watched him leave, as he ran quickly towards the water, The Small Catch already sailing towards them. "That cunning..." Bjorn muttered, before laughing as he turned towards Marisha. "Come on, let me introduce you." They walked down towards the group. "Hey, Jayce. This is Marisha, our new cook. If you'll have her," Bjorn stated, the others all snapping their heads in surprise as they turned towards the pair. Marisha nudged Bjorn, putting on a smile and turning her head slowly towards him. "You asshole, you know I can't cook," she mouthed. She turned her head back towards Jayce, his arm extended out towards her. "You're not going with them?" Jayce asked the pair. Bjorn shook his head, extending an arm as Wicke ran into him. Even Vexx seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "No, there is more I want to see. And... I found somewhere I want to stay, at least for a little while longer. If you'll have me as your quartermaster again, Captain?" Jayce looked at Bjorn, nodding as he met his gaze.

Marisha stood there nervously, until Jayce turned his gaze back towards her, his eyes meeting her single orange one, before he looked back down at his outreached hand. "I can't cook very well, but I'm good at making vitamin pods and finding food. So, if you'll take me?" she said, grasping his hand. He shook it, a signature smirk on his face. "You'll fit right in, welcome aboard Marisha," Jayce said, before letting go and turning around to face the Dungeon. "Right, Vexx - you guard the doors. The rest of you, let's break into a Dungeon!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Unity

The weeks after the Crucible had passed quickly for squad W6, Alara's officer training had only grown harder and harder as she memorised and learnt battle strategy and regulations, after combat technique and maritime law code. It was exhausting, it was the time of her life. Under Astris' insistence, Alara shared the majority of what she learnt with her increased friendship group, the previous group now including Braze, Soner, and Gale, and sometimes even Ryker, Axel,

and Delex joined in. Brett remained distant. The second Crucible had been a complete success; with the entire squad familiar with Alara's techniques, as well as each other's strengths and weaknesses, the squad had decimated their platoon in a nine-to-zero win-loss ratio. Their reward: a single night off.

The squad were not yet allowed to leave the island on their own during free time, although a loose promise was made that they could do so after the tenth week, only a week away. So instead, the squad found themselves wandering the island, heading to the nearest Navy bar to celebrate their victory. The entire squad was in high spirits, even Brett seemed caught up within the swing of the evening as they travelled across the island, with Delex, Ryker and Axel ensuring he wasn't left out.

They made their way inside a rather quiet-looking bar: 'The Admiral's Arms'. It was large, despite the small entrance, with a long bar and plenty of seating. The squad split up, taking up multiple tables, whilst Alara, Astris, Violette, and Riley went to sit at the bar. The bartender looked at the squad of Marines. "Good evening," he said. "What can I get you all?" he asked. Violette pulled out of her pocket a black pearl coin, sliding it across the counter. "Can you set up a tab?" she asked. The bartender smiled, taking the coin. "I can indeed."

The drinks flowed, and with such a high amount available on the tab, the others not even emptying out their own wallets, they were in no short supply. Alara sat nursing her drink at the bar, watching Violette dance across the room with a pair of tankards in her hands. Riley leant next to her. "Everything okay?" Riley asked her. Alara nodded, looking down at her drink before she sat up straight and looked at Riley. "I miss Jayce," she admitted. Riley nodded, leaning over and resting her head on Alara's shoulder. "I would say I get that, but I'm yet to date anyone... so... Although, I bet it's like that feeling you get when you haven't eaten in a week and every day, as you look for money, you pass by that one bakery that smells fantastic," she replied. Alara blinked, looking puzzled. "Besides didn't you get another letter from him only yesterday? That's cute. We all wish we got letters. By the abyss, I've never got a letter from anyone."

Alara turned and looked at Riley. "Are you okay?" she asked. Riley shook her head, before putting on a wide grin. "Nah, but that's okay, I'm not poor anymore and no cult's going to sacrifice me today! Bartender, another for me and my friend here!" she said, the bartender ignoring her before she gave up and wandered off. The door opened to the bar, and a large and already drunk group

of Navy sailors stumbled in, several heading over to the empty seats whilst a few walked up to the bar.

One leant over the bar looking towards Alara with an uncharming smile. "Hello beautiful," he said. "Barkeep, a drink for me and the miss!" Alara smiled faintly. "Sorry, already got one. I appreciate the offer, but no thank you," she stated, loud enough for Wulf and Witchford to overhear, the pair immediately changing their gaze over in her direction. A few of the other sailors had headed away from their group, moving towards Astris and Violette, Riley having already moved herself to the opposite end of the room as soon as they walked through the door.

"Hey now, no need to be that way darling. We've all just been on one hell of a voyage. Say what, how about we go somewhere else, and I'll tell you all about our adventures?" he attempted, getting a little closer towards Alara. She leant away. "No thank you. Please leave me to my evening," Alara stated, standing up and moving to walk away, only for him to grab her arm. The moment he touched her, Riley bounded across the table tops, leaping across Wulf's back before vaulting towards him and throwing a punch. The sailor reeled backwards, the entire Marine squad standing up, ready to fight. "One chance," Riley growled, as she looked up at the much larger man. "Leave!"

The sailor wiped his mouth, looking down at her. "You'll regret that, boys!" he yelled, the many sailors all standing up and raising their fists. He threw a punch at Riley, she easily dodged to the side, wrapping her legs around his arm and throwing him over her through a table, the legs collapsing under his weight. Both sides flew at each other, Witchford and Wulf taking on multiple sailors each as they threw any sailor that came near them. It quickly devolved into a melee, a swarming sea of punches flying between both groups, until one of the sailors reached into his belt, pulling out a small dagger and rushing towards Wulf whilst his back was turned.

"Wulf!" yelled Axel, stepping in front before grunting as the blade punctured his uniform, a patch of red blood quickly spreading from his stomach. He dropped to his knees, both sides freezing as they realised what had just happened. "Axel!" yelled Ryker and Delex, both pushing forwards and grabbing his arms as he slumped to the floor. "We need a medic!" yelled Ryker, looking around at the others as they stood stunned. Wulf turned slowly on his feet, snarling as he looked down at the small man who had stabbed Axel. He pulled back his fist and threw it, the air thundering as it sailed quickly before it stopped as a hand caught it.

All of the Navy sailors backed up quickly, their eyes filled with terror as they looked at a short man holding back Wulf's fist with one hand, his other hand holding up the sailor as he had fallen backwards by the scruff of his collar. He was wearing a blue double-breasted tailcoat with gold markings across the back - it had a pair of epaulettes on the shoulder, with four gold lines leading up to his neck. He wore a black and blue peaked cap on his head, short black hair tucked neatly underneath. His was clean-shaven and his skin was fair. He stared out of the corner of his dark eyes at Wulf, a stern and deadly look on his face as they remained stationary.

He looked at the group, his eyes settling on Violette. "You - what happened here?" asked the Navy Captain, quickly assessing the situation. "These men made inappropriate moves towards one of our Marines, it developed into a fight and one of them stabbed our friend," she said quickly. The Captain nodded, looking towards Axel. "You two, take him to the hospital." He then turned towards the sailors. "Your side?" he asked, the sailors staring at him with terror in their eyes. "Sir, the Marines started the fight, we were causing no such trouble. Riggor was simply defending himself from that beast," lied one of the sailors. The Captain nodded, looking towards Wulf who remained stationary, still with his fist held by the Captain. He then looked towards the barkeep, who shook his head. "The Marines were defending themselves as soon as your boys entered this place." The Captain nodded, dropping the sailor in his hand and standing up tall. "I'm going to release you, baned. Stand down."

He let go, Wulf stumbling away clutching his hand, fear in his eyes. The Captain then looked at the various sailors. "On behalf of my men, I apologise. Rest assured there will be punishment. I suggest you write up a report," he said, turning around and bowing his head, the sailors mimicking him. "Back to the ship," he ordered, the sailors rushing quickly out of the bar. He scanned the group, his eyes widening briefly as he glanced at Astris, her eyes looking anywhere else. "Who's your leader?" he asked. The others, Brett included, all looked at Alara. "This could have gone much worse, I apologise your man was hurt. I wish him a fast recovery, please use my name on the report. Captain Beowulf Kai. Have a good evening," stated Captain Kai, the other Marines all glancing briefly at Astris as she looked down at her feet. He stopped at the door. "Tris, stay safe," he said quickly, before stepping out.

They headed immediately for the hospital, all surrounding Axel as he lay recovering in a bed. They hounded him with questions, before silencing as Wulf stepped next to the bed. "Thank you. You took that blade for me. I owe you,"

Wulf said sincerely, offering a hand. Axel took it with a grunt, his eyes locking on Wulf's. "You don't owe me anything, I'd have done it for anyone of us. We all would have," Axel stated. "We're squad W6, the Wolfpack!" Axel declared, the others pausing before nodding in agreement. "He's right," said Soner, as Wulf looked around the group. "No better name for us, right?" asked Delex. "We're the wolves!" said Violette, patting Axel on the leg. "Right, Alara?" The group turned to look at her, Brett looking at Axel who nodded to him. "We're squad W6, the Wolfpack, let no one mess with us again!" she declared, the others cheering. "Quiet, this is a hospital for gods' sake!" yelled a nurse.

Chapter 28: The Dungeon

The doors were heavy, requiring the combined efforts of both Jayce and Bjorn to push and hold open. They found themselves on a landing at the top of a large set of stone stairs going down. The doors slammed shut behind them with a resounding boom. The group looked at each other nervously before looking onwards in confusion; they had entered a tower, why was it going down? There was faint light all around them, but no source of origin - it was as if the very air glowed faintly. Jayce took a deep breath, taking the first step, both of his swords out and his mind entering into Focus.

The others followed closely, each treading carefully as they descended the stairs. The walk was quick; a large set of black gates lay at the bottom, forcing them to stop. Little Witch, previously hidden within Wicke's hood, leapt onto the floor. She hissed loudly at the gates before she quickly leapt onto Jayce's back, forcing her way deep inside his backpack. "I have a bad feeling about this..." muttered Wicke. The others looked at her. "What?" she asked. Jayce shook his head, stepping closer to the gates to get a better look. Large writing had been etched into the metal, the letters speaking in gibberish. Jayce paused for a moment, reaching into his pocket to pull out the bear totem he had been given before.

An echo of the letters floated above the scripture, changing to register in Jayce's mind. "Salvation Doomed. World we lived," it read, alongside another line of jumbled up words that lay incoherent next to each other. Jayce looked at the others. "Does anyone understand this? I think the translator is misinterpreting this language directly," he asked. They stepped forwards, taking a closer look, before they all shook their heads, stepping backwards. "I think it's Arcanum," Wicke said. "The old tongue?" Jayce asked, prompting the other four to all look at him in surprise; Marisha, Yuthura, and Bjorn all looking especially confused. "What?" he asked. Wicke shook her head, putting on a faint smile. "I think so - only historians should know of Arcanum. So, I'm just surprised you've heard of it. Language changes quickly, so Imperial uses the same letters, but is completely different. My sister would know what this says..." she added.

Jayce nodded, reaching forwards and touching the gate. It glowed bright blue, the flash blinding them temporarily before it was replaced by a swirling portal; not too dissimilar to the one Jayce had seen in the Underworld. The others had all leapt back, but he remained where he was. "Well... If I'm to die today, better to do it heroically," Jayce muttered, before he leapt through the portal. He emerged into a large cave, the ceiling three metres high and a tunnel leading

ahead of him, as well as one to his right and his left. He looked behind him, the gate lay before him, closed, and he was all alone. A series of bright flashes burst before him and Bjorn, Wicke, Marisha and Yuthura fell through the gate.

Marisha said something in her Nomad language, pausing as she saw Jayce's confused expression. "Where are we?" asked Marisha in Imperial, her accent similar to Corina's. Jayce looked at her, confused. "You can speak Imperial?" he asked. She nodded. "I'm an adoptee, Imperial is my native language. I think the totems have run out," she said. Jayce reached back into his pocket pulling out the small wooden totem - the glow in the eyes had faded. "Okay, we stay together," Jayce said, putting the item back in his pocket; Wicke and Yuthura both looked at theirs before discarding the items.

"Can you use magic? Or Focus?" Bjorn asked Marisha. She raised an eyebrow before she shook her head. "Magic? No. What's Focus?" she asked, her eye glancing around nervously down the tunnels, the faintest sounds of movement drawing her attention. "Martial Arts? It can go by other names," Yuthura added. Marisha thought to herself, a faint memory bubbling to the surface. "A long time ago, the rush in the ears thing?" she asked. Jayce nodded, the other three shrugging. "I can try, but I don't think I can," she admitted, once again glancing towards the tunnels, Bjorn doing so as well.

"That's okay, watch our backs and protect Wicke and Yuthura. We move together. No heroics, stay close! We don't have Vexx to rely on," Jayce ordered, turning back towards the tunnel ahead of them. "Right!" agreed the others, Bjorn stepping forwards to stand next to Jayce at the front. A small dog-sized creature scurried forwards into view ahead of them. It was an ant, its shell a dark grey colour, with rather large mandibles. Jayce raised his swords, but it slowly approached, skittering backwards and forwards until it was only a few metres away. It looked at him, its black eyes large and curious. Jayce lowered his swords, slowly approaching it. It got closer, but then it raised its head into the air letting out a loud echoing screech. It pounced at Jayce, Bjorn cleaving it in two with his axe before it could bite. Its body hit the floor, a silvery blood splattering the ground before the body disintegrated in white light, leaving nothing behind but a small, fingernail-sized, purple gemstone.

"Careful. Good thing there was only one," Bjorn said, immediately regretting his choice of words as three swarms appeared from each tunnel, each around twenty in number. "You just had to say something!" yelled Yuthura, as the ants charged forwards. "Bjorn left! Marisha right! I'll take the front! Wicke, burn them!" Jayce

ordered, stepping forwards and letting the ants come to him. The others acted without question, Yuthura standing at the back, ready if something went wrong. Their blades cut through without resistance, Jayce and Bjorn taking out multiple with each swing, whilst Wicke chanted. Marisha lunged with her spear, her mind rapidly trying to remember how to use Focus, a few ants slipping past her. Yuthura's crossbow extended out into a staff, and she hit any that got too close. Each ant disintegrated after it was killed, nothing remaining behind but a purple gemstone.

Wicke finished chanting. "Hellfire!" she yelled, Yuthura grabbing Marisha and pulling her down as the Jayce and Bjorn dropped to the floor. A blue sphere of swirling fire sat in Wicke's right hand, tattoos marking her shoulders and arms underneath her clothes. She extended her hand, a plume of blue fire blasting forwards down the cave to the left, she quickly turned her body, holding her arm down the cave in front and then the right. The flames tore through the ants, their bodies popping as the fluids inside them boiled under the extreme heat. Wicke dropped the spell, and nothing remained but a sea of sparkling gemstones.

Marisha clambered to her feet, her eye wide as she looked down at Wicke. "Well done!" she said. Wicke smiled proudly and the others let out a sigh of relief. "That... was not pleasant!" Yuthura stated. "Anyone hurt?" she asked, checking them over briefly. "All good. Which way?" asked Bjorn, turning to Jayce who was holding one of the purple gemstones in his fingers. "Wicke, do you have any of your devices on you?" Jayce asked, ignoring the question. Wicke fumbled in her pockets before she pulled a small handclock, handing it to Jayce. He turned the device over, embedded in the back of the metal was an identical gemstone.

"Interesting," muttered Jayce, handing back her clock. "These can probably be sold to the Guild, so it might be worth picking them up on our way back," he said, the others all picking up one each and looking at the small items. "Have you heard of anyone going into the Dungeons before?" Wicke asked Bjorn. He shook his head. "Generally the Navy has always deemed them restricted areas, so how the Guild has got access is a mystery," Bjorn explained, pocketing a couple.

Jayce looked down each tunnel: they were all identical, but as he glanced further along with his Focus, he spotted both the left and right tunnels turned in the direction of the forward tunnel. "This way," Jayce said, pushing on ahead. They walked quickly, their eyes glancing around as they walked. A few ants approached them, but without the benefit of large numbers they were easy enough to handle. Eventually, they came to a curved path leading down. "Floor

ten, right?" Jayce asked, looking at Wicke. She nodded nervously. "Then, let's go!"

The second floor was not too much different than the first, the stone walls were of a muted brown, a strange and inexplicable light source providing vision where there should have been only darkness. They pushed onwards, once again presented with multiple paths, but Jayce decided to carry on forwards. Bjorn and Jayce had the front, with Wicke and Yuthura in the middle, and finally Marisha walking backwards at the rear. "Anyone see anything?" Jayce asked, faltering slightly as he walked. "No," said the others, echoing one another. Bjorn stood up to his full height, sniffing at the air as he walked, only to immediately bump into something.

His eyes widened as he backed up: a head-sized bat, with horns curling around the side of its face, was hanging from the ceiling - its eyes were closed. Slowly it extended its wings, its eyes opening as it stared at Bjorn. Echoing it, all along the tunnel ahead were tens of the brown bats, their fur loosely camouflaging them. "Shit!" yelled Bjorn, as they dropped from the ceiling screeching loudly at the group. They flew at them, their screeches blurring their vision before they dove at the group, biting with their sharp pointed teeth before flying backwards. They swarmed Bjorn, covering him entirely as he flailed wildly in an attempt to fend them off, until eventually he gave up, dropping his weapons and using his body to crush the bats beneath his hands and feet in a display of ferocity. The swarm quickly subsided, splashes of red against the walls, their clothes and their weapons, but with a fresh pile of gemstones laying at their feet. Jayce leant down, picking one up and comparing it to one from the first floor. It was larger, only slightly, but it was larger. "They must get bigger the deeper we go. The harder the enemy?" Jayce theorised.

Bjorn stood panting, his blood oozing out of the hundreds of bites - without thick winter clothes like the others he had been a much easier target, not including his size. Yuthura touched his back, his wounds closing quickly, and the blood splashed across his body evaporating in a cloud of red mist. "Thanks Doc." Yuthura nodded, taking a step back, her face pale. Jayce looked at Bjorn, his face full of concern as he handed him his weapons, one at a time due to their weight. "I'm fine, come on," Bjorn insisted, taking the lead. They pushed onwards, coming once again to a passage way leading downwards.

Immediately, an echoing of hissing attacked their ears. "Not snakes, anything but snakes," whined Bjorn, as they stepped onto the third floor. It was snakes. They

moved quickly towards the group, slithering across the ground in small groups. Each snake had two heads, one for spitting, the other for biting, but like the floors above, the group of enemies held little issue. Bjorn and Jayce cleared the route ahead, and they pushed forwards, Wicke casting another fiery wave of Hellfire as a pit of snakes approached them from the rear.

Finally they arrived at the next path heading down. Marisha mumbled something as she held her arm, trying not to draw attention to herself. "Don't be an idiot!" yelled Yuthura, spotting it quickly as she checked them over. She turned on the group angrily as she healed Marisha. "If any of you get hurt, from the smallest of scratches to the worst of poisons, tell me immediately! Understand?" she asked, scolding Marisha and Jayce in particular who had both hidden bites. "Yes Yuthura," they said bashfully.

The next floor was filled with large webs, several large spiders lay in wait in the corners of the ceiling. They spat sticky webs in their direction, but after a scream from Wicke as one leapt at her, followed by a colossal plume of blue fire down the tunnel, they provided no further challenge. The next had a pack of prowling hounds, their teeth curving out of their mouths and eyes glowing red. A few spells from Wicke, plus a few precise attacks from Jayce, Marisha, and Bjorn, and the pack fell away to nothing.

The end of the fifth floor marked a serious change for the group. The dungeon changed in design: the walls changing to an unusual blue stone as the ceiling grew in height, now nearing four metres. The glow of the air had disappeared, replaced by glowing white crystals embedded in the walls. Shadows filled the corridors and where an unnerving feeling had always been present, a sense of terror began to build. "I don't like this," muttered Wicke, as she looked around from the middle of the group. "You think any of us do?" asked Jayce, continuing to lead the group onwards.

A rattling echoed all around them, mingled in with the soft sound of footsteps. It was everywhere, and every so often a strange chatter would fill the air, turning to silence almost immediately. They rounded a corner, Bjorn yanking Jayce backwards as a rusty sword sliced down towards where his face had just been. A skeleton shambled into view, a few of its bones were cracked and faint pieces of old armour covered small portions of its body. Bjorn smashed it with his axe, the skeleton crumbling away with a single strike, but several more took its place, swinging their rusty weapons as they stumbled towards the group. Marisha stabbed forwards, her spear passing cleanly through the ribs of a shambling

corpse. Frustrated, she dropped low, leveraging her spear on her knee to pile drive the skeleton over her - it crashed headfirst into the floor with a crunch.

Bjorn pushed onwards, tearing through the gang until he found himself alone, surrounded by more bones in all directions. One slipped through his guard, a rusty sword finding an entry point just above his hip. He grunted in pain, retaliating quickly with his elbow, before another stabbed him through the knee. Bjorn roared in pain, Jayce immediately charging forwards through the sea of skeletons, clearing a path to Bjorn's side. "Stick together!" he ordered, shouting back to the group he had left behind.

"Sorry Captain, I got carried away," Bjorn grunted, using the flat sides of his weapons to push a group of the slow-moving skeletons away. "It doesn't matter, stay alive!" ordered Jayce. Bjorn nodded, slowly getting to his feet, the rusty weapons embedded in him disintegrating with the destruction of their wielders. His legs gave out and Jayce stepped over him, desperately trying to protect his friend. "Gust!" yelled Wicke from down the corridor. Bjorn swiped Jayce's legs out from under him, pulling him to the ground just as a powerful and condensed blast of wind tore through the skeletons around them, the bodies falling apart as the wind took them.

"You idiots!" yelled Wicke as she and the others raced towards them. She then faltered, glaring at Bjorn. "You idiot!" she added. Bjorn nodded in acceptance, as he rolled Jayce off of him, Yuthura wasting no time as she began to heal his wounds. "You're lucky we've got the Doc, don't be so reckless," Jayce scolded, getting to his feet as he looked around at the various gemstones lying on the ground, now nearing half a finger in size. "Lucky is right," muttered Yuthura, beads of sweat lining her brow and her skin pale. The wounds sealed on Bjorn and he quickly stood up, checking himself over. "Thanks Doc," he said turning to her.

Yuthura nodded, her eyes opening and closing slowly as she stood up. "You..." she whispered, before she stumbled forwards, Jayce lunging and catching her before she hit the ground. "Doc? Doc! Are you okay?" Jayce asked in a panic, laying her down only to open up her coat and find it slick with blood. "Oh gods, when did she get hit?" demanded Jayce, looking up at the others as they stared in shock. "Guys!" Jayce yelled, snapping them out of it. Wicke scrambled inside her backpack, searching for a healing potion, whilst Marisha helped Jayce pull off the heavy coat. They checked her over for wounds, a large one hidden just above her hip and another through her knee. They faltered.

"Doc?" Jayce asked, looking at the large wound on her hip as the skin slowly knitted itself back together. "Yeah," she said, closing her eyes and laying back as her regeneration healed her. "I don't heal so much as I take the injuries myself. Give me a moment, I'm a little tapped out," she admitted, Jayce looking at the countless scars across her body, some fresh, most long-faded. They sat there with her, letting her wounds heal whilst Wicke used her magic to clean Yuthura's blood-soaked body and clothes, until eventually Yuthura sat up, her face still pale, but her eyes much more alert. "I'm good," she attempted, slowly getting to her feet and stepping onwards. Jayce held his hand out to her. "No, you're not. Don't do that again, we'll use other sources of healing," he ordered.

The others all looked at the ground ashamed, but it was Yuthura who told Jayce the truth. "This is my healing - don't like it, tough. You're a long way from home kid, and all due respect, Captain and all, it is my choice to make. And I will continue to heal people, as per the oath I took. Just, now that you know, be more careful and understand that I've got your back, in more ways than one," she stated, take a shaky step forwards and resting a hand on Jayce's shoulder, before she took another, stepping past him, panting as she took the lead. Jayce opened his mouth to speak, but it was Marisha who stopped him, taking his arm and pulling him forwards after Yuthura. "Trust Yuthura. To deny her help is to spit at what she's risked for us. Let's do our best not to get hurt and leave it at that," she said, her own face struggling to hide her conflicted feelings.

Yuthura drank one of her healing potions, the colour returning to her face and her strides becoming longer as she headed towards the stairs leading to the next floor. She waited at the bottom, standing tall and stretching as she fiddled with the various items in her bag. The others joined her, and she pulled out a small thumb-sized vial full of a blue liquid. She gripped both ends, snapping the vial, a blast of blue smoke enveloping them. It faded quickly, the fatigue that had been subtly building in them all fading alongside the smoke. "Your lead Cap'," she said, stepping back towards the middle of the group.

Small fiery wisps lit the tunnels ahead of them, Jayce's sword glowing red as he swiped at one of them, the wisp remaining unaffected. They floated where they were, acting as nothing more than obstacles that floated around. Wicke cast Gust, keeping the spell active as she cleared the tunnels, blowing out their flames with a strong burst of wind. Jayce was beginning to really dislike how much he was relying on her magic to get through the various enemies across the floors, but his relief that she was with him far exceeded it.

The following floor only exasperated this growing concern of Jayce's. As they entered the floor, a large solid object blocked the route ahead. It was transparent, bits of rock, skulls, and old weapons floating in the body of the giant cube-shaped slime. Jayce fumbled inside his backpack, Little Witch batting his hand as he searched around. He pulled out a bread roll, long past its expiration date, and threw it into the slime. The bread remained unaffected for a second, but swiftly it began to effervesce as the slime dissolved it. "Right," said Jayce. "Any ideas?"

Wicke stepped forwards, chanting to herself as she manipulated the winds, concentrating the blast before throwing it down the corridor. The slime swelled as the spell caught it, expanding backwards like a sail caught in the wind, before it exploded down the corridor, the other slimes blocking the route receiving the same effect. Wicke looked at Jayce, a smug grin on her face. "Yeah, yeah. Well done!" he told her, patting her head. "Are you running low yet?" he asked. She thought for a moment, counting on her fingers before she nodded. "I've only got tier one spells left, and I'm not willing to waste them. Otherwise it'll be days before I'm refilled," she stated.

"What do you mean?" asked Bjorn, drinking from his bottle as they took a rest. "The tiers cascade. The first needs to be full for the others to fill. That's why I start with my highest tiers," she explained, before stepping through the corridor and travelling towards the next set of stairs. Jayce stepped in front of her. "In that case, stay in the middle. Rest as quickly as you can, we may need your magic in a pinch," he told her, looking at Yuthura to indicate the same to her. "That's not how it works," muttered Wicke.

They picked up the pace, the next floor completely empty as they travelled tightly together, Marisha watching their backs as she walked backwards. Once the path to the next floor was in sight, Marisha spotted a dark shape approaching them on the floor. It stopped just behind them, a cloaked figure rising slowly out of the ground with a large scythe in its skeletal hands. Its face was hidden - not that it mattered, Marisha impaled the creature long before it could react. The gemstone it dropped was nearing the size of her palm by this point, but she left it behind, running after the others as they carried on ahead. "A dud floor?" Jayce asked, as they began the journey to the next floor. "No, there was... never mind," she said, figuring it wasn't worth mentioning, the others looking at her curiously.

They travelled downwards, the path smooth and at a much sharper incline than before. The corridor opened up, the group emerging into a huge white cavern. The walls and floor were made out of stone, nearly identical to that of the tower

itself and the room was circular. At the opposite end of where they entered was a small gap, leading into a green-lit alcove. Its entrance looked just wide enough for Bjorn to fit through. "Floor ten," said Bjorn, stepping forwards with both his weapons as he looked at the creature between them and their destination. Jayce stepped forwards with him, Marisha standing on his other side whilst Wicke and Yuthura stayed back.

Before them stood a minotaur, a large set of horns extending out to the sides of its bull head. Brown fur covered its body, its chest shaped like that of a muscular man's and its legs like that of a bull. It was at least four metres in height and carried a huge single-bladed greataxe in its arms. It had a large curved blade of a dark black colour, and its handle was a bright gold. The creature stared them down, its eyes a glowing red colour as it blocked their path. "We take it together," Jayce said. "Split up and attack from all sides." The creature didn't like that idea. The minotaur lowered its head, huffing before roaring as it charged towards them, covering the twenty-or-so metres gap in only a few seconds.

They scattered, rushing to the sides in all directions as it charged straight into the wall where they had been next to. It bounced off, shaking its head and rushing towards them with its monstrous axe. Bjorn stepped forwards, drawing the attention of the creature to give Jayce, boosted with his Focus, just enough time to stab the creature in the ribs with the sword he had been gifted by Alara. The blade hit the hide of the creature, stopping as it failed to pierce the minotaur's skin. The creature snapped its head towards him, Bjorn bringing both his weapons down across the minotaur's back as he leapt towards it. Marisha lunged with her spear, stabbing at the back of the beast's knee. Their weapons bounced off, and Jayce stumbled backwards, staring up at the monster as it approached him.

The minotaur pulled back its right arm, swinging it underneath Jayce right into his ribs. Jayce folded, his eyes widening and a splatter of blood escaping his mouth as his ribs cracked and broke, before the minotaur followed through, carrying its punch onwards and throwing Jayce away. He sailed through the air, hitting the ground hard and rolling. "Jayce!" screamed Wicke from across the room. He lay face down, a steady stream of blood drooling from his mouth as he coughed. "Sorry Little Witch," Jayce spluttered, unclipping a healing potion from the side of his backpack, the only one that hadn't shattered on impact. He pulled the cork using the string tied to it, tilting his head to the side, before he rolled over, screaming in pain as he rolled on his broken ribs onto his back, the crimson liquid pouring into his mouth.

Jayce gargled on the potion, as it entered both his lungs and his stomach. His chest burned with heat, the broken pieces of rib moving as his body pulled itself back together. He blinked, his airways opening up and his body restoring itself. "Walk it off, Captain!" yelled Bjorn from across the room as he and Marisha desperately tried to dodge the wild swings of the minotaur, Yuthura and Wicke, trying every trick they could think of to desperately damage the beast with their few remaining spells.

Jayce took a deep breath, rolling back onto his front and pushing with every ounce of strength he had remaining to get up. He groaned, his arms shaking, his body screaming as he fought every instinct in him to shut his eyes and sleep. A piece of paper dropped before his eyes, an open letter addressed to him, pushed out of his backpack by the mewling cat on his back. "Stay safe. I love you and always will, regardless of where we are in this world. Yours eternally, Alara xx"

Jayce shook his head, panting heavily as he stood up, swaying on his feet as he raised his fists looking for his swords. He spotted his sabre, it lay a few metres away. He then scanned for the one he had retrieved from the sunken ship; it lay between him and the minotaur, the tip of the blade dripping with blood. He roared, reactivating his Focus, the waves crashing in his ears before silencing as a droplet stilled the surface of his mind. He scanned the minotaur, a small gash lay across its right forearm. "I'm not dying again!" Jayce yelled. "Not until I see her at least one more time!"

Jayce ran forwards, grabbing the Captain's Blade as he ran. The minotaur turned away from Bjorn, unfazed by his powerful strikes, towards Marisha. It raised its greataxe, Marisha desperately holding the side of her weapon upwards to block the downwards blow. The blade met the staff of her spear, the weapons halting in place, as her reflexes forced her into a state of Focus. She pushed every ounce of her being into her weapon, the two items fighting each other as her knee buckled. She glanced over with her eye at Jayce as he ran towards her. "Go!" she yelled. "Captain!" she added, the shaft of her spear shattering and the blade of the axe carrying down into her armour then into the floor. Marisha slumped, a huge cut through her chest.

Bjorn screamed out her name, lunging forwards and twisting his entire body as he slammed both his sword and his axe into the back of the creature's knee with enough force that both weapons shattered. Although uninjured, the minotaur staggered, its knee dropping just enough for Jayce to run at full sprint across the huge beast's leg onto its back, before leaping with both hands on the hilt of his

sword. Jayce yelled, plunging the blade into the back of the minotaur's neck, the tip of sword passing straight through and emerging from its throat. Jayce carried the momentum, swinging with his body on the hilt of the sword, the blade tearing through the minotaur's neck as it twisted around before coming free, Jayce landing next to Marisha before he lunged forwards, stabbing the creature through its chest.

The minotaur slumped, its half-severed neck folding over to one side as its knees hit the floor before it began to swell, bursting in a flash of white light, a hand-sized gemstone clattering to the floor along with its axe. "Hurry!" yelled Jayce, slotting his sword back into his scabbard, as Wicke ran over carrying his other one and the letter he had dropped. He scooped Marisha up in his arms, rushing for the alcove, as Bjorn grabbed the huge greataxe and the gemstone, the group rushing inside, out of fear of another one appearing. Jayce lay her down, her face pale, and her breathing shallow. Yuthura rushed to Marisha's side, and Jayce stepped back, turning around to spot a stone table in the middle of the room, on it a small leather-bound book and a ship in a glass bottle.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Failed Inquisition

Arthuria awoke in the bed of the temporary hospital on the island of Frozen Branch. The sun was rising in the horizon and the various Sisters who had been sent on the Inquisition were sat around her. "Good morning," said one of them, shooing the others away as Arthuria sat up, her armour missing, and a set of warm clothes and bedding wrapped around her. "What happened? What time is it? The Inquisition!" Arthuria realised, jolting to her feet and rushing to grab her armour, neatly polished and laying nearby, her sword resting, cracked, on another empty hospital bed. "Calm down, Paladin," said the Sister calmly. Arthuria rushed by her, only to lurch backwards as the Sister grabbed the scruff of her under-armour with a brief flash of anger and a surprising amount of strength.

Arthuria stumbled backwards. "Arthuria! They've left, they left three days ago!" she told her, crossing her arms. "What?" Arthuria asked, her eyes widened as she stumbled backwards falling back onto her bed. "You were unconscious. You needed rest. I'm sorry. They've gone ahead, and we've just got to stay here and wait until they return. Okay?" she asked, stepping forwards and sitting down next to her. Arthuria hung her head in shame. "It's okay," reassured the Sister, the others peeking their heads in to see what was going on. Their entire bodies covered in black and white clothes, except for their faces. "Why didn't you go

with the fleet?" asked Arthuria. The Sister shrugged, standing up and picking up Arthuria's helmet. "Wasn't our orders. Nor did we want to." Arthuria looked at her confused, but the Sister waved it off.

The days passed slowly, with Arthuria forced to do nothing but wait until the fleet returned. The Sisters kept her entertained, as best as they could, but each day was cold, wet, and long. Eventually a fleet appeared on the horizon. Arthuria and the Sisters ran to the edge of the island, Arthuria's eyes widening as a large fleet of longboats sailed past, the Nomads sailing quickly south across the seas. The Inquisitor fleet was nowhere in sight, and it wasn't until the following day that one of the ships returned, the only ship to survive the battle, a ship full of Navy sailors. Their Captain was dead, killed by his own blade for deserting the battlefield, but the crew picked up Arthuria and the Sisters, her position as Paladin immediately placing her in charge of the ship. "Men, follow the Nomads! We give chase!" she ordered. The vessel swiftly setting sail south, back the way they came.

Chapter 29: Cold Reality

Wicke and Jayce looked towards the altar standing in the middle of the alcove. A large set of black doors stood beyond it, not too dissimilar in markings to the doors at the entrance of the Dungeon. On the altar sat a book, brown in colour and not particularly big - a diary, Jayce assumed. Next to it sat a glass bottle, not a particularly large one, but large enough to contain a miniature ship inside, covered in green foliage and floating on a small bed of water. Wicke stepped towards the altar, Jayce moving to follow her. "Jayce!" called Yuthura, snapping him back to reality as Marisha lay sobbing on the floor, her chest covered in blood and a large gash cutting deep into her stomach.

He turned around, dropping down next to Yuthura. Bjorn sat kneeling next to Marisha, holding her hand in his as she looked around in a daze. "We need to take her armour off, Bjorn help him!" ordered Yuthura, reaching inside her bag and pulling on a pair of silver gloves. Jayce held her still as Bjorn unstrapped and peeled off her armour, a thin layer of insulating clothing remaining underneath, mostly torn. Bjorn's eyes widened as he stared at the open wound, Jayce glancing briefly before wincing and turning to look at Yuthura. "Okay, what next?" Jayce asked. "You let me save her life," Yuthura told him, pulling out a vial before inserting it into one of the syringes inside her jacket. She tilted Marisha's neck, sticking the needle into her skin, before injecting the golden liquid. Marisha quietened, her eyes rolling back in her head as she fell unconscious.

Bjorn opened his mouth to speak, but he quickly closed it as Yuthura pulled out her red stone, pushing him to the side as she began to draw a large circle around Marisha using the blood pooled beneath her before etching runes into it. Bjorn backed up, gritting his teeth as he looked away. Jayce rested a hand on his arm. "She'll be okay?" Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded, the pair watching Yuthura as she held the small stone over her other hand as it hovered over Marisha. "She'll be okay," Jayce said.

The circle around Marisha glowed a bright green colour, transforming into smoke that enveloped her. Marisha then floated, a green ghostly copy rising out of her body to rest above her. She was transparent, her organs and bones visible in a manner not too dissimilar to what Jayce had seen of himself in the underworld. He could see the cut inside her body, see which organs were damaged, and as Yuthura reached inside the projection she pulled out a map of the many veins and arteries in Marisha's body, golden markings showing where they had been damaged.

Yuthura nodded to herself, dropping to her knees and reaching inside her jacket. She pulled out a scalpel, looking at the pair as they watched. "This isn't going to be pretty," she warned, before she cut open the wound. Yuthura cut wide enough to see inside the already large gash, pulling away the skin to get a better look. She then reached inside her bag, pulling out a needle and some blue string, as well as some gauze. Yuthura cleared away as much of the blood as she could see before she began to pull the injured organs closer together. She then reached inside with her hands, holding her stone over her hand, familiar smoke transferring from Marisha into Yuthura as she transferred the damage.

Yuthura groaned as she clutched her stomach, looking up at the avatar as she decided what to fix next. Bit by bit, piece by piece, Yuthura worked, manually aiding before using her magic to transfer the damage to herself. "Yuthura!" Jayce said, Bjorn grabbing him and putting his hand over his mouth as Yuthura yelled in pain. The arteries knitted together, the organs regenerated and finally the open skin on Marisha's stomach sealed. Yuthura swayed, folding over as she hit the floor. Bjorn let go of Jayce, rushing to grab a healing potion from his backpack. Jayce grabbed Yuthura, rolling her over to lay in his lap. She looked younger, despite her sweaty and pale face. She slowly reached up, patting Jayce's forehead. "I'm good. She'll be fine as long as gets an immunobooster," she said, looking down at the huge wound now located on her stomach. "Maybe me too," she groaned, the skin slowly zipping together.

Bjorn handed her a potion, but she waved it away, until he forced it into her mouth. The wound closed much faster and Yuthura glared angrily at him. "What a waste of more than an hour's brewing," she grumbled, reaching weakly for her backpack. Jayce leant over, Yuthura's head slipping from his lap and bouncing on the floor. "Oops, sorry!" Jayce immediately said, handing her her backpack. She swore at him, before she reached inside. "No respect for the elderly, or the dying," she scolded.

Yuthura pulled out a small bottle full of black spheres, she grabbed a handful placing one inside her mouth before handing one to Jayce and Bjorn. "Only the gods know what kind of diseases lay dormant in here - take one each. It'll help your body fight against any pathogens. Give one to Wicke," she ordered, sitting up and crawling over to Marisha, a small syringe full of black liquid in her hand. She opened Marisha's mouth, spraying the liquid into the sides of her cheek. "She'll wake in a few minutes, but we should probably have a rest regardless," Yuthura advised, slowly sprawling out on the floor and shutting her eyes, her loud snoring following quickly. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. "One hell

of a doctor you found," Jayce said with a faint smile, as he struggled to stay on his feet, a single sphere in his hand.

Bjorn nodded, looking past Jayce and raising an eyebrow. Jayce turned around; Wicke stood next to the altar, the small book held tightly in her hands as she stared at the doors ahead. He approached her. "Wicke?" he asked. There was no response. He got closer, leaning over the altar to look at her face. Her mouth was open slightly, her eyes wide and glazed over. "Wicke?" Jayce asked again. There was no response. "Wicke! Wicke!" he called out to her, her hair slightly blowing in an invisible wind and his hands unable to reach her.

Whilst Jayce had headed over to help Yuthura, Wicke had stepped forwards, slowly approaching the altar. She looked back over her shoulder as the others worked on Marisha. She turned away, looking down at the small book that lay before her. Wicke took a deep breath, picking it up in her arms before she opened the front page. A pair of glyphs had been drawn on the inside. They glowed a brilliant orange before a bright white light covered Wicke's vision.

She blinked. The Dungeon was gone, Jayce, Yuthura, Bjorn, and Marisha were all gone, there was only white around her. A set of soft footsteps echoed behind her, and she turned around. A tall woman stood before her. She had long orange hair, bright at the edges, darker near the roots. Her eyes were a brilliant amber and she had pale, fair skin. A soft set of freckles ran across her pointed nose. She was voluptuous, wearing a long red dress with a brown cloak across her shoulders. She was barefoot, the nails on her toes and hands painted dark red. She looked in her early twenties and, as Wicke recognised her face - one nearly identical to her own - she recognised her eldest sister.

"Flare!" Wicke cried, rushing forwards to hug her older sister, only to pass straight through her. She carried on a few steps, slowing down as she opened her tear-filled eyes to realise as she turned around that it was only an image. Flare smiled sadly at her as she looked down at herself. "I'm sorry Wicke, I'm only a memory of your sister. I am as close to me as anyone or anything could ever be, but I'm not really here," said the copy of Flare.

"Why? Why aren't you here? Where are you? Why did you leave me?" Wicke demanded, approaching the image. Flare looked down, shaking her head softly before she met Wicke's tearful gaze. "We are on our way to The Frontier, to go beyond into the Old World. I've been watching you. Ensuring that you are safe, and, where and when I couldn't, ensuring that you made it out okay. I'm sorry.

Your sister and I decided you weren't ready, so we've left you behind," Flare said. "Why? How is that fair?" Wicke demanded.

Flare shook her head, taking a step forwards and leaning her head as close to Wicke's as possible. "It isn't, my little flame, and I'm sorry for that, truly, but where the Nomads can and will protect each other, our circle cannot. Not where we are going and not against what we are searching for. You're not ready for it. Maybe you never will be, but where Torch and I cannot be there for you, your friends can be and will be. You're the flame to bring about a new age, one I know you will become. You are younger, better than we are, and where we have failed, I know you can succeed."

"I don't understand..." Wicke said sadly, looking up at her sister. Flare nodded, taking a step back. "During our travels, we found a ship. An old one, from before the end of the old era. It can take you wherever you desire; to us, eventually. I want you to solve something for me, to learn something unobtainable to me - what lays at the end of the Dungeons," she told Wicke. Wicke stepped back, shaking her head. "What do you mean? I don't understand you!" she cried. Flare looked at her sadly. "I know, I'm sorry. Take the ship and travel with it, alongside your Captain - Jayce - and whatever crew he creates. Explore the New World. See what's at the very end of the Dungeons. When you've done that, come find us. Can you do that for me?"

Wicke looked at her. "Promise me you'll do it. Please, little sister," she asked. Wicke wiped her eyes before she nodded. "I will do it." Flare smiled, straightening up and spreading her arms, the white around them disappearing to reveal a colossal library with shelves that carried on forever in all directions. "Thank you. I have a gift for you," she said. "This is the Infinite Library. It contains a copy of every book that has ever been written. In it are books in Arcanum and even Grimoires in Demon's Tongue. But, to take a book out something must be exchanged. Something new or something old, but it must be of similar value. So, I give you this," she said, pointing to the book held tightly in Wicke's hands.

Wicke's eyes widened as she opened it. It was a diary. "It's my life. From the day I awakened, to the day I met our sister, to the day I met you. It is me. Everything I have ever been. So if I forget again, you will hold my life. I know you stopped with your diary, but, for as long as we are apart, I hope you know you will always have me by your side, ready for when you need me in your darkest days. So, this is it, dear sister. Choose a Grimoire and start your journey as the Wizard you

always dreamt of becoming," she said, a circle of twelve columns rising up around Wicke, each one holding a thick tome with a different coloured leather cover. Wicke rushed forwards, but Flare remained distant no matter how far she travelled, the columns remaining around her.

"When will I see you again?" Wicke asked. Flare shrugged, but she smiled. "Every night when you go to sleep. You will be in my arms again, in our bed. You will be holding Torch's hand as we walk across the lands of our home," she said, walking closer. "You will be in our dreams, as we are in yours," she continued, stopping just in front of her. "We love you Wicke. We always will. Burn bright my little candle Wicke, my little flame," she finished, leaning forwards and kissing Wicke's forehead before she faded away into nothing.

Wicke's shaking knees gave way and she fell to the floor, tears streaming from her face as she sobbed into the ground, surrounded by the books of the Infinite Library. She cried until she could cry no more, her heart thumping in her chest as she slowly put one foot beneath her, following with another as she stood up. Wicke wiped her eyes, looking around as she stood in the centre of the circle. There were twelve books, each a different colour and all of different sizes.

She walked to the red one, the podium burning slightly with the word 'Pyromancer' written upon it, the book floating above. Wicke moved clockwise to a light-blue book, the podium was made of ice and the word read 'Cryomancer'. She continued her loop: a podium sparking with lightning with a yellow Grimoire reading 'Electromancer', a blue one dripping water reading 'Hydromancer', a brown one made of mud reading 'Geomancer', a light grey Grimoire with a podium made of contained air reading 'Aeromancer'.

Each podium was made up of an elemental force: sound, time, gravity, dreams, death, and finally life, before the loop continued. Each Grimoire was coloured: purple for sound, dark grey for time, dark blue for gravity, pink for dreams, black for death, and green for life. 'Echomancer', 'Chronomancer', 'Gravomancer', 'Telemaner', 'Necromancer', 'Biomancer'; each podium held a name for each school of wizardry. Wicke paced around the circle looking at each podium, trying to choose. She gave up, sitting on the floor in the circle, holding her head in her hands. "How do I choose?" she asked herself. No answer came.

The room vibrated, a resounding pounding echoing around from all directions. She jolted to her feet, her mind racing as she sensed time running out. She faltered. "I can exchange books, I don't need to make a permanent choice!" she realised. The pounding continued to echo, and she clutched her ears. "Sound...

Sound!" she yelled, rushing towards the purple tome, the podium vibrating as she touched it. "An Echomancer, screw it!" she said, grabbing the Grimoire and placing her sister's diary down on the podium.

The room flashed and Wicke blinked, Jayce yelling in her ear. She turned her head to look up at him. "What? Why are you yelling?" she asked, as he stumbled backwards. "You were... never mind, did you find the message?" he asked. Wicke looked down, her eyes watering and lip trembling before she realised she was holding a large purple Grimoire in her hands. "What is that?" Jayce asked. "My mission," Wicke said softly as she held the tome in her hand. She opened it up, a letter was stuck to the front page, a copy of the two glyphs that had been inside the diary. "Write in a book when you want to enter!" read a scribble underneath. Wicke flicked through the pages, they were blank, all except for one written in the Demon's Tongue, the letters moving around on the page. Wicke focused hard on the writing, the movement denoted the tier - it was third. The letters dictated the incantation.

She was out of tier three magic, so she shut the book, placing it inside her backpack. "So?" Jayce asked, presenting a small black sphere to her. She looked at it confused. "Eat it - it's to fight off disease. Doc's orders." Wicke sighed, taking it and swallowing it in one. "My circle has left for the Old World, something too dangerous for me. They want me to train, grow into a powerful Wizard and find out what's at the end of the Dungeons," she told him. Bjorn looked at her from across the room. "Oh, an easy task then!" he said sarcastically, as Marisha and Yuthura slept next to him, his new axe resting against the wall. "It's certainly something," Jayce admitted. "Anyway, we should get back to the surface," he said, reaching over and picking up the ship in the bottle.

There were a pair of glyphs etched into the glass and as Jayce went to press it both Bjorn and Wicke leapt towards him. "No!" they both yelled, Jayce jolting in surprise, the bottle flying into the air before bouncing on the floor. The ship inside remained upright the entire time, and the bottle was undamaged, much to their shared relief. "Maybe don't try to get the ship out of there whilst we're inside the Dungeon," Bjorn advised. Jayce picked up the bottle, placing it inside his backpack, Little Witch looking at him curiously from inside. "Ah, right," he said bashfully, as he realised his near mistake. "My bad."

Marisha woke up quickly, she leapt to her feet, remembering the battle, before she realised it was over. She let out a sigh of relief, before she sat back down, eating some of the rations they had brought with them. Yuthura remained

groggy, but she too awoke once the rations were brought out. "Are we all good?" Yuthura asked, as she dug into the cheese and bread. "Yeah, mission complete. We just need to get out of here."

Marisha and Yuthura nodded in acceptance. "Doctor," Marisha said, turning her body to see Yuthura who was sat on her blind side. "Thank you." Yuthura waved it off, but even she couldn't hide her smile. "It was nothing. My duty as a healer," Yuthura said. Marisha shook her head. "You saved my life, that was more than nothing. Truly, thank you." The Doctor blushed slightly, turning her head away. "Yeah, well- ", she croaked, coughing as she choked on a piece of cheese. "You're welcome. I'm glad we finally have someone with manners in this crew." The others immediately started to complain, but eventually they just broke into wide smiles as they sat there victorious.

"Right," Jayce said, packing away his backpack and standing up, the others doing the same. "Let's leave this godsforsaken place!" he declared. The others nodded in agreement. "Aye!" they declared, giving the room one last look around before starting the long walk. "Why do you think Jayce's sword worked on the minotaur, but the other weapons didn't?" Wicke asked Bjorn, as he hefted the gigantic greataxe onto his back. "It's probably enchanted," butted in Marisha, as they turned to face the alcove. "Like the totems were enchanted, but permanently. The monster was probably resistant to normal weapons, but some enchantments can get through armour and tough hides as if it were paper," she explained. "How do know that?" Wicke asked curiously. Marisha blushed, but her red face quickly turned into a faint expression of sadness. "Something I overheard when I was your age."

They entered into the large white cavern, Bjorn taking the lead as they walked casually out into the open. Bjorn stopped, Jayce bumping into the back of him. "Oh no," Bjorn muttered, as he twisted around throwing Jayce to the side as another minotaur carrying a greatsword charged into his back, throwing him into the alcove, his greataxe flying across the floor. Bjorn hit the stone pedestal, crumpling on top of it. "Bjorn!" yelled Jayce, scrambling to his feet as he stared at another minotaur. He looked at the others, their eyes wide in shock. "Run!" yelled Jayce, the others scrambling back into the alcove as the minotaur swung at Jayce with its sword. He slid underneath, sprinting towards the gap, the minotaur charging after him. Jayce dove through, the minotaur wedging its horns and reaching inside with its arms in an attempt to grab Jayce. He rolled away from it, the creature roaring at him before pulling itself free and returning to the centre of the cavern, its eyes in their direction as it paced back and forth.

Yuthura rushed over to Bjorn, the bear groaning as he held his arm, the bone clearly broken. Jayce looked outside of the alcove, turning back to the others. "If only enchanted weapons can hurt it, that means we have my sword and that axe. And Bjorn's out," Jayce said, trying to think of a plan, none coming to mind. Yuthura opened her mouth to speak up. "No! Not yet. You've only just recovered and we're out of potions," Jayce told her. The minotaur roared at them. "Fuck," muttered Jayce, a heavy realisation settling in that the other floors had probably respawned as well.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Assassin

Vexx was getting restless as he sat huddled around a fire in the middle of the fortress. It had been a few hours since the others had gone in, and he didn't like it one bit. The sounds of battle had long faded in the distance and the snow was continuing to fall. He looked up at the tower, the building growing in height as he did so. He shook his head looking back down at the fire. "They'll be fine, they've got to be fine," Vexx muttered to himself as he sat there. A clang came from inside the barracks, it had been over an hour since anyone had made a noise in there.

Vexx let out a sigh, standing up and shuffling across the snow towards the large metal doors that lead to the barracks. He kicked something as he crossed the snow - a Navy sword, there were lots scattered around, taken from the numerous prisoners. Vexx paused at the door, listening closely, he heard nothing, just the usual shifting from inside. He shook his head, walking away, only to jolt as a gargling scream filled the air from inside. Vexx ran to the door, pushing it open and looking in.

A huge mass of flesh stood in the middle of the locker room, legs and arms and heads sticking out in all directions of the giant blob formed from the twenty or so Navy sailors imprisoned in the barracks. The heads on the abomination all had their mouths open in an eternal scream, their eyes rolled back into their skulls as the huge creature stood where it was. The Priest stood next to it, he turned his head to face Vexx, a sadistic grin on his face, a pair of eyes emerging just above his normal set - all displaying the numerals for four, 'IV', in red on his pupils. "Kill him!" ordered the Priest, pointing at Vexx. The mass screeched, charging forwards at terrifying speed.

Vexx slammed the door shut, pushing every bit of strength he had into the door. It buckled, the metal bending as it repeatedly charged it, until finally it gave way, Vexx flying across the snow. He rolled, sliding across the ground to get into a

standing position as he turned and faced the abomination and its master. The creature stepped forwards, the many arms across its ball-shaped body picking up the swords scattered across the area. "Now that's cheating!" complained Vexx.

The creature lunged at him; tearing across the small space in the blink of an eye, it swung its many swords at Vexx. He swayed on his feet, twisting like a drunkard as he danced through the swarm of blades. He pivoted on his feet, twisting and throwing as strong of a punch as he could into the mass of flesh. The body rippled, but the creature just screeched, swinging its blades at him. Vexx vaulted away, grabbing three swords from the ground. "Kill him!" ordered the Priest as he stood and observed. "You're getting on my nerves!" Vexx yelled, stepping away as the blades came down on the spot where he was standing. He threw one of the blades, the sabre flying quickly through the air at the Priest. He yelled, but the abomination rushed to rescue him, slashing the sword out of the air.

He let out a deep exhale, the second pair of eyes closing and his eyes rolling around to reveal a normal set of pupils. The many eyes of the abomination rolled forwards, the many faces twisting in a horrific collection of terrified and angry expressions. The creature turned to face him. "What are you doing? Get him!" he screeched, screaming as the creature picked him up between a pair of overgrown arms, one huge hand wrapped around his chest, the other his legs. The creature pulled, a sickening tearing sound echoing across the area as the Priest unravelled. The monster threw both halves away, turning to face Vexx.

"Kill me!" begged a head, tears streaming down his face as he looked around in panic. "Die! Die! Die!" screamed another. The body lunged forwards, but Vexx just shut his eyes. Closing off the cacophony of voices and entering into Focus. He felt the creature leap into the air, rolling as it brought its blades down towards him. Vexx sidestepped, the blades impaling the ground next to him. He opened his red eyes, a grin on his face. "My turn," he said. Vexx lunged forwards, twisting around in a barrage of piercing stabs as he reached into the creature, sensing the location of its many hearts. He landed on the other side of the creature, crouching low before Vexx leapt, impossibly high, into the air. He angled his body, his head pointing down towards the creature below and he crouched once more, pushing off the very air itself and diving with his blades in front of him. He twisted, falling like a drill from the sky as he dove straight towards the final cluster of hearts buried in the creature.

He struck like lightning from the sky, his blades piercing with so much force that the body folded underneath him, the blades passing all the way through and pinning the monstrosity to the floor. It squirmed before the body fell still. Vexx let go of the handles, the wooden grips cracked and bent in his hands. Vexx then stepped off the creature, walking towards the tower. He hadn't been expecting a fight that was actually challenging, not here of all places. A sinking feeling rose up inside him. "What if they can't handle it yet? What if this one is different?" Vexx said to himself, his heart racing and his breathing becoming shallow as he paced in front of the doors. "What do I do if they die?" he asked, images racing through his mind of him old and alone on this island.

Vexx shook his head, looking at the tower. He yelled out, grabbing his head and squeezing it as he tried to calm himself. He took a deep breath, straightening up and looking upwards again. "What would Jayce do if the roles were reversed?" Vexx asked himself. "Fuck!" he yelled. "Why's he so self-sacrificial? Think of someone else! Bjorn? Dammit. Doc? Wicke? The cat?" Vexx asked. "They'd all try... the bastards. Then that is what I need to do! Come on Vexx!" he yelled, stepping forwards towards the door.

He turned back around, crouching low and holding his head. "I can't..." he muttered. An echo rumbled in his mind. "We fight together, we look after each other. And if someone tries to kill one of us, we kill them first. Or we avenge them like no tomorrow!" echoed an old voice in Vexx's mind. He stood up, looking at the mass of flesh as it lay on the floor, an arm twitching. Vexx reached into his pocket, pulling out a small pouch full of red powder. He poured a small amount into his hand. He looked at it, pouring a sizeable amount more on top before he inhaled the pile, his vision turning a dark red.

He turned away from the abomination, stepping towards the Dungeon. The heads on the creature screamed as it launched its not-so-secret surprise attack. Vexx twisted on his feet, throwing a punch straight into the body of the creature. The ball of flesh stumbled backwards, its body continued to ripple around the fist imprint left behind by Vexx. He turned away walking forwards towards the doors, pushing one open with a single hand as the back of the abomination burst outwards, spraying the courtyard with its insides, the shockwave of the punch causing all of the heads protruding from the outside of the body to explode in a colourful display of gore. "I'm coming!" Vexx roared, rushing inside.

Chapter 30: The Rising Aces

Vexx leapt through the portal, sliding out across the stone of the first floor before he broke into a full sprint. His vision was little more than a deep red blur, but every time he blinked, as he vaulted, punched, and kicked the ants in his way, his vision cleared, replaced by the ghosts of his past. A body half lay on the landing of the stairs, their eyes unblinking, mouth slightly open. It was a corpse of a young girl. Vexx carried onwards, jumping off the wall to dive down to the next floor.

He ran onwards, the bats unable to unfurl their wings before he had torn his way through them. He stopped at the path to the next floor, glancing to his right. A pair of shoeless feet lay twitching next to him, the rest of the body obscured by a swarm of bats feasting on the body. He blinked, it disappeared, and he carried onwards. He raced through the snakes, the creatures lunging at him before disintegrating as he hit them first.

Vexx grabbed a handful of gemstones, throwing them at the spiders before they noticed him, their abdomens exploding outwards as the gemstones pierced them. He ignored the bodies wrapped in webs. He came to the hounds, his vision flickering as they charged him. "Help me!" cried a voice, a body of a teenager getting dragged away to his right. He blinked, it was gone, a ghost long dead. The corridors blurred together, Vexx losing track of himself as he gave in to his body.

His vision cleared and he found himself facing a near-transparent wall. The slime slowly slid towards him, a wide-eyed boy melting away inside. Vexx lunged forwards, punching the surface of the slime, the body rippling before it tore itself apart from the vibrations. He carried onwards, heading quickly to the ninth floor as he vaulted from wall to wall, searching around for traces of Jayce and the others through his crimson vision. He slowed as he traversed the floor, sensing the predator on this floor choose him as its prey. He ignored the severed corpses around him, the sprays of blood and gore dripping from the walls and ceiling, pushing forwards as it stalked him from the shadows, until finally it launched its strike, rising out of the floor silently.

Vexx stepped backwards, reaching his hands above his shoulder as he grabbed the surprised creature's skeletal head, its glowing green eyes wide as he pressed his palms together, the skull crunching in his grip. Vexx caught the magic stone as the body disintegrated, running onwards towards the tenth floor. The path

ahead opened up, his vision flickering between a battlefield full of broken weapons and corpses, and a minotaur glowing red with its back towards him.

The minotaur turned its back towards Jayce and the others as they watched Vexx sprint into the cavern, his eyes wide and face cold with a vacant look upon it. It roared as it leapt across the air towards him, bringing the blade of its greatsword high before smashing it downwards towards him. Vexx twisted to the side, punching the blade as it hit the floor. The weapon shattered, the minotaur leaping backwards in surprise as it clutched the handle of the broken sword. Vexx stood up straight, slowly walking towards the minotaur, the magic stone from the floor above in his hand as the creature peddled backwards, fear in its eyes.

Vexx blinked, the red in eyes fading as he willed his body to purge the product inside him, the memories of the past disappearing as the creature he had feared for so long tried to run away from him. He swayed on his feet, throwing his body forwards into a sideways flip, twisting as he vaulted before he carried the momentum of his arms to launch the stone across the room. It passed straight through the snout of the minotaur, the creatures head exploding outwards before its body dropped to the floor, exploding into a cloud of white particles.

Jayce and the others watched as Vexx approached them, his eyes vacant, blood once again dripping from his body. "Vexx?" Jayce asked, still in shock from the ease that Vexx had killed the minotaur. There was no response, but Vexx continued walking, right into the alcove and straight up to Jayce. He stopped, his head a few inches away from Jayce's chest, before he slowly looked up. "Can we please get out of here?" Vexx asked with an apathetic look. The group let out a sigh of relief. "Yeah, thanks for the rescue," said Jayce, putting on a faint smile as he looked at Vexx. Vexx just nodded, walking over to Bjorn's new greataxe and picking it up. "I'll lead. Pick up anything left behind," he said, hefting the colossal weapon over his shoulders as he started the long walk back to the surface, the others limping along behind him.

They arrived at the gates leading out of the dungeon, their backpacks full of gemstones and bodies exhausted. Vexx touched the metal and it transformed into a swirling green and blue portal. He looked at the group, faint smiles across their faces as they stumbled forwards together, looking towards him. He tilted his head towards the portal, and they leapt through one by one until only he and Jayce remained. Jayce faltered and Vexx looked at him curiously. "You good?" Vexx asked.

Jayce looked behind him before looking back at Vexx as he leant on the giant blood-covered axe. "Without you... We'd have died," Jayce said softly. Vexx nodded. "Not the first time, and it's not going to be the last." Jayce smiled faintly. "Definitely, but that needs to change. We can't always rest our hopes on you," Jayce said. "Maybe, but without you I wouldn't be here. So, think of this as my way of paying you back. Come on, let's leave this place," Vexx said, offering a fist. Jayce bumped it, stepping past him and through the portal.

The others were waiting for them, but they asked no questions, stepping to the side to let Jayce and Vexx lead on once again. "Are the guards still tied up?" Jayce asked, as they started the climb. "No, they're dead," Vexx stated casually, the others stopping in their tracks. "Vexx..." Jayce said quietly, the others all looking at him and shaking their heads. "Hey! It wasn't me this time, I swear!" Vexx said immediately, holding up a hand and looking back at them. "The Priest turned them into some abomination. A ball of flesh, it was... nasty," he added. The group looked at each other before looking back at Vexx, all the while Yuthura looked at the floor grinding her teeth. "A Warlock," she growled.

"A what?" asked Jayce, stepping past Vexx to continue the climb, the others following closely. "A cultist, a member of one of the factions in the Church," she explained, shaking her head. "There are five groups. The Sisters and, potentially, the Paladins are the only good ones among them. The Sisters are simple pacifists, healers who wouldn't harm a fly. The Paladins are either xenophobic butchers or protectors seeking to take magic away from those who will misuse it. But the other three, rotten to the core, the lot of them. We've already met the Priests. I don't know much about the Witches, just that they're called the Daughters of Shade. The Warlocks, if you come across one, kill on sight!" she growled.

"Yuthura..." Wicke said quietly, as the others stared in shock at the doctor, the long professor of minimising injury, even to their worst of enemies. "I mean it, they're monsters who I've long suspected are the main instigators behind the hunts and lynching. Cultist bastards who hold no regard for life, not even their own. They only care about appeasing that monstrosity they call a goddess," she stated, her eyes towards the steps in front of her as they climbed. Vexx opened the doors leading to the outside and the group stared in horror at the brutalised corpse of the monstrosity that lay before them. Wicke turned to the side, emptying the contents of her stomach, as Jayce stepped forwards towards the display. "By the gods," he muttered, before glancing towards the Warlock, the body flung to two separate ends of the courtyard. "You killed that thing?" Jayce

asked. Vexx nodded, Jayce ever more grateful Vexx was there for them. "What I said earlier, maybe we can push that back a while longer."

They climbed the destroyed wall, making their way towards the top. "Let's get back to the ship," Jayce said, Bjorn clearing his throat and turning his head away. Jayce slowly turned and looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "Bjorn, something wrong? Bjorn, is something wrong with heading back to our ship? Bjorn, what did you do?" Jayce asked. Bjorn shifted on his feet, muttering something unintelligible. Jayce crossed his arms, glaring at the giant baned. "I gave it away," he repeated much louder, pulling at his collar with his good arm. "You did what!"

Tears swelled in the corners of Jayce's eyes as he glanced over towards the shore, a large pile of their things stacked neatly under a large cloth cover, but what lay beyond drew all of their immediate attention. A giant ice spike sat protruding from the sea, the faint remains of at least two ships shattered and impaled upon it, the majority of the vessels frozen within the colossal shard of ice. The waters were filled with debris, all bearing the colours of imperial warships. "The fleet from Frozen Branch," muttered Wicke, as they stared at the remains of the battlefield, not a single casualty of the Nomad fleet among the devastation. "You're people really know how to handle themselves," Vexx said impressed. Both Marisha and Bjorn stood taller with pride.

"We might want to get moving, sooner rather than later, Captain," Vexx added, pointing beyond the devastation at a surviving warship sailing in their direction. "Crap! Looks like it's time to test our new ship. Come on!" Jayce called, running towards their things by the beach, reaching behind him and pulling the glass bottle out from within his backpack. They checked over their items; the Nomads had taken all but their personal belongings, a sizeable portion of food and water, and a pair of small boxes containing samples of sponge and algae for renewable water and source of cooling. Jayce held the bottle out towards the sea, bracing himself as he uncorked the end. Nothing happened. He pressed the runes, again receiving no response. Wicke grabbed his arm, running her fingers across the runes towards the open end. The ship launched out, landing in the water a few metres away from the shore with a huge splash.

It was large, a little over fifty metres from bow to stern with three masts, two on the main deck and one at the rear, each laden with white sails. It was covered in vines, making the ship difficult to analyse, but it had at least four decks, not including the aft deck where its wheel was located, or the captain's quarters

hanging off the back of the ship. A ladder had been built into the side of the ship's hull, a means of climbing up onto the vessel directly from the sea. "Get swimming! Let's get onboard!" Jayce ordered.

"What about our things?" Wicke asked, the others moving quickly to get on board. An idea popped into Jayce's head, and he turned around aiming the empty bottle towards the collection of things; Vexx still rummaging inside the pile. He ran his fingers backwards across the runes and, with a rush of air, Vexx and the items disappeared, along with a significant portion of snow around the area. Jayce looked inside; the items were sat in the bottle on a large pile of snow and dirt, alongside a miniaturised Vexx stomping around angrily, making obscene gestures in Jayce's direction.

Wicke nodded in satisfaction, hurrying into the water and swimming towards their new ship, Jayce in quick pursuit. He climbed the large ladder, stepping onto the deck of the ship. It was overgrown with plants, and with the anchor already raised and the sails lowered the ship had already begun to move. Jayce aimed the bottle towards the centre of the deck emptying out the items and Vexx onto the deck. Vexx yelled and rushed towards Jayce, wrapping his hands around his neck and shaking his head. "Don't ever, ever, ever do that again without my permission," Vexx ordered, Jayce gasping for air as he tried to escape. Vexx dropped him, rushing up the aft deck towards the wheel. "Good to know you can breath inside the bottle," Wicke said, as Jayce caught his breath.

"Captain, where to?" Vexx asked, turning the ship away from the land. Jayce reached inside his bag, Little Witch vaulting out now that they were safe, and pulled out his map. He unfurled it, looking at the layout of the New World. With the Navy blocking the south, they had little choice. The currents of the New World lead towards the centre, but on the outskirts it travelled in a counter-clockwise direction, forcing them west. "West!" Jayce ordered, following the route to their next destination. "We sail to Deadman's Run!" Jayce commanded. "Aye!" yelled his crew, Yuthura using her magic to fix Bjorn's arm before he and Marisha headed to ensure all the lines were tied.

"Wicke, can you give us a boost?" Jayce asked. She shook her head, looking back at him. "I'm out of magic," she answered. A purple gemstone sailed across the air, landing in the grass next to them. "Use the stones, they can be used as a substitute since they're pure, concentrated magic!" Vexx yelled from behind the wheel. Both Jayce and Wicke's mouths fell open as they realised their error. "I'll

take the front sail!" Wicke told him, picking up the stone before rushing off. "You handle this one!"

Jayce reached inside his backpack, pulling out two handfuls of the smaller stones as he stood behind the mast looking up at the sail, the faintest sounds of cannon fire in the distance. "Here goes nothing," Jayce muttered, the ship lurching as Wicke finished her incantation. Jayce began his chant, repeating the unusual language Wicke had repeated over and over again. Markings spread across his fingers, then spread across his hands as the stones melted in his palms, before evaporating in a purple-red mist. "Change Wind," translated the words in his mind as he understood what he was saying. Jayce reached into the cold winds of the Ice Floes, pulling it to him before pushing it into the sails. The sails caught the wind, ballooning out beyond what he had been expecting, catching more wind than The Small Catch had ever before. The ship charged forwards, the icebergs drifting quickly behind as they sailed towards new horizons.

With Bjorn guiding Vexx with the Glacial Chart, they sailed west, stopping early into the evening in an area clear of glacial currents. They collected on the main deck of the ship, stomach's rumbling as they looked towards their Captain. "Well, we're alive and I don't think they're pursuing," Jayce said. "What now?" he asked. "Food," moaned Wicke, her stomach growling loudly. Jayce looked at Marisha. "Well, Cook, what do you need?"

Marisha's eye widened as she remembered the role Bjorn had placed upon her. "Uh, fish? Yeah, fish," she confirmed, thinking of something easy to cook with the limited supplies they had available. Jayce smiled, reaching inside his backpack and pulling out a pair of collapsible fishing rods. He threw one to Bjorn, the bear nodding and walking to the edge of the main deck, whilst Jayce headed to the other side. The others sat down, taking a rest from sailing amongst the long grass on the deck, as snow continued to fall.

It didn't take long for Jayce's rod to bite, the force almost pulling him overboard as he wrestled with the fish. "Bjorn, Vexx! It's a big one!" he yelled, the pair rushing over, Bjorn grabbing the rod to help whilst Vexx peered over the edge. The pair struggled until Vexx finally decided to help, the trio pulling a huge fish out from the water. It was massive, a beautiful tuna with silver scales and fins that sparkled in the light. "A diamondfin tuna!" cheered Bjorn, as Vexx killed it with a chop of his hand. "This thing goes for at least a thousand pearl in the Capital, what a catch!" he stated, the others all wide-eyed and bellies growling as they pictured the feast they were going to have. "I leave this to you, Cook!"

Jayce said with a smile, not noticing the sheer terror on Marisha's face as she looked at the giant fish. "I'll try my best!" she squeaked, as she reached inside her backpack to pull out a variety of pieces of simple cooking equipment.

"We should explore the ship, find somewhere to sleep until we can give the ship a proper overhaul," Bjorn advised. Jayce nodded in agreement, before the group of them set off to explore the ship. There were six decks in total, the main deck – the majority of which seemed to hold grass beds, the faint remains of old vegetables growing in the dirt, the rest overgrown with grass – with three decks beneath that.

To the rear of the ship was the main quarters; the remains of a living room, a map room, a kitchen and a pantry sat covered in dust. A door led outside to the very rear of the ship where the deck narrowed. Two large indents had been made into the sides of the hull, cluttered with the faint remains of a pair of hoists that had long since become derelict. The deck then widened again to create a rear-view platform. A faint circle of glyphs sat etched on the floor on the starboard side; the group noticed glyphs all throughout the kitchen as well as in the bathrooms across the ship.

On top of the main quarters was the aft deck, a pair of curved stairs leading up to it. A wheel connecting to the rear rudder of the ship sat on top with a large mast located just behind. Beyond the aft deck was the captain's quarters: it hung over the rear of the ship, providing cover to the small isolated area, with a huge glass window looking towards the stern. Furniture sat inside, long-degraded over the many years the ship had sat untouched. Another pair of curved stairs led up to the top of the captain's quarters, providing an easy connection to the rear sail for magic to be cast straight into it, whilst also providing an open view of the surroundings.

As they made their way to the front of the ship, the smell of cooking wafting their way as Marisha fried large pieces of tuna over a small fire conjured by one of Wicke's devices, Bjorn pointed out the many cannons scattered across the deck. They were covered in rust, unusable like the majority of the objects they had come across. The two masts on the main deck both held crow's nests, the climb up there rickety to say the least. Near the bow, they came across the faint remains of a hoist hovering over a set of bay doors that when opened, led to the floors below. "An elevator?" Bjorn asked with surprise. "That should make hauling cargo a breeze if we can fix it," he said, Jayce nodding in agreement, his thoughts along similar lines.

At the front of the ship sat a colossal cannon, runes were traced throughout its barrel, but like the rest of the cannons it was long unusable. They made their way back to the middle of the ship, Marisha rapidly fanning the food as it began to smoke. They headed down the stairs leading to the second deck: it was the crew quarters. A second map-table sat near the stairs for quick access and navigation. There were rows of rooms, covered in dust with faint traces of the crew's old furniture, but most curious were sets of doorways that lead nowhere, with glyphs etched into the frames - quite a few seemed to have been worn away with time, creating an incohesive collection of symbols.

The third deck had more doorways that lead nowhere, but it was clear from the rooms that this deck had been used to house the utility roles of the ship's crew, as well as house various kinds of animals. There were pens, quite large, with doors that opened outwards to the sides of the ship for entry and exit. There was also the remains of a doctor's room - judging from the centuries old equipment, as well as a library from the rows of empty bookshelves, and even what looked to be a quartermaster's station from the large supply lockers. The bottom deck was entirely dedicated to cargo space, the faint remains of the ruined elevator sat at the bottom. The ship, although much in need of an overhaul, was fantastic and held everything Jayce and the others could imagine they needed. "A proper clean, a bit of work from a shipwright and this ship will be amazing," Jayce declared, the others nodding in agreement.

They returned to the top deck, Marisha holding her hands in her face as the remains of the tuna sat mostly butchered, with their meal sitting on plates, black as coal and decorated with a desperate display of herbs. Their faces fell as they looked at the meal from behind her, the group exchanging silent words as they looked at each other. "Smells good!" Jayce said with a wide smile, as he walked around her sitting down and picking up a plate with the charred tuna steak sat upon it. The others sat nearby taking their own plates. "You don't have to eat it, I ruined it. I'm sorry," Marisha said sadly. Jayce looked at the unappetising sight in his lap. "Thank you for the food," he said with a smile, cutting off a piece and putting it into his mouth.

Jayce had never tasted anything so foul, it was burnt, yet undercooked, but he kept a smile on his face as he chewed the lump, the others, even the ever-complainer Wicke, ate their food contently alongside him. Jayce finished it quickly, reaching over and taking a second helping. "It's not that bad?" she asked, her face in sheer shock. "It's disg-", attempted Vexx with brutal honesty, only to receive an unnoticed elbow in the ribs from Bjorn. "It's great," he retried,

almost eating the entire thing whole. Marisha's expression changed, a faint smile re-emerging as the group ate her food.

She picked up her own plate, cutting off a piece of the dry, charred meat and putting in it her mouth and chewing. She got about three chews before she bolted up and ran for the edge of the ship, spitting it over the side. "Stop eating, it's terrible!" she cried, holding her hands to her face. Jayce took another piece, Bjorn, and Vexx doing so as well, tears in their eyes as they continued to eat. "It's something you cooked. It may not be great, but you took the effort to make it. Thank you Marisha. I look forward to what you make us next," Jayce said with true sincerity. Marisha stared at the fools as they poisoned themselves, but she nodded, standing tall. "I will try my best to make something worthy of you, Captain. I promise, my next meal will be better." It wasn't.

They cleared the main quarters over the following few days, turning the large space into a temporary sleeping space until they could properly overhaul the ship. After a deep dusting and cleaning, it was actually quite pleasant. The group then set themselves the task of cleaning up the main deck. Vexx wandered around the edge of the ship, removing all the vines that hung over the edge, whilst Marisha and Wicke used a set of gardening tools the group had found in a cupboard to trim down the grass. Yuthura then used her alchemy to transmute the trimmings and ruined furniture into pieces of wood or metal that Bjorn could use to make minor repairs. It wasn't perfect, and their ship was far from finished, but the changes were significant. As they cleared the Ice Floes, the cold snowy weather disappearing into a warm near-summer heat of Deadman's Run, the group found themselves laying down on the freshly cut grass, dressed in their old outfits.

Bjorn lay next to Jayce, sneezing every so often as the grass irritated his nose, the pair looking towards the clear sky. A whistle called them over, the pair lazily rolling onto their fronts to see who was beckoning them. Wicke stepped down from the aft deck, a few sheets of paper in her hands as well as a quill and ink. "Since we're sailing together as an official crew, we should probably figure out everyone's roles," she said as the group convened, before she stepped inside the main quarters, the group following her. "Makes sense," Jayce said, leaning over the table as Wicke lay down a few pieces of paper. Wicke looked towards Bjorn. "When I said we should do this, I didn't necessarily mean today, Wicke," Bjorn said with a sigh, taking the quill from her.

"From the six of us, we have Jayce – our Captain," he said, passing the quill over to Jayce. Jayce looked at the others and they nodded in agreement, looking at him. "A Captain is only as good as his crew," Jayce said. "So, I need you all to do your best. Bjorn – our Quartermaster. Wicke – our Scholar and librarian. Marisha – Cook." Marisha sighed but nodded in acceptance. "Yuthura – Doctor. Little Witch – Cat. Vexx – Cabin Boy," Jayce finalised, hovering his quill next to Vexx's name. "I will kill you, and it will be painful," Vexx threatened with a calm and real sense of menace. "Vexx - Master of Arms," Jayce said, writing it down and looking at the group. "Better," Vexx said.

"There are some roles we should get filled as soon as possible," Bjorn chimed in. Jayce nodded, writing beneath the group: 'Musician', 'Shipwright', 'Navigator', 'Helmsman'. "Of course you'd put Musician before Shipwright or Navigator," Yuthura muttered, rubbing her head. "Next, I guess we need some rules. For us all and anyone else we recruit," Jayce said. "All crew will receive equal pay and will have equal say," Jayce began, looking to the others for their opinions. "Everyone must clean," Wicke said, glaring at Vexx. Jayce nodded, writing it down. Little Witch meowed. "Little Witch must be petted and fed," Jayce added. "No one will be left behind," Vexx said, the others nodding in agreement. "No one will be forced to stay," Jayce finished, signing off the bottom of the page with his signature. The others repeated, Wicke adding a little squiggle as she misunderstood what they were doing before she dipped Little Witch's paw in some ink and pressed it to the page.

"We should add birthdays," Jayce added, thinking passively to his own coming up in the next few months. He wrote his down: the twelfth day of Vermis, the third month. Marisha wrote hers and Bjorn's down: eighth of Hyrum, the eighth month, and the eleventh of Fragaria, the sixth month. Yuthura's was the twenty-eighth of Flos, the fifth month. Jayce wrote down Little Witch's, the group deciding the day they found her as her own: the twenty-first of Messis, the tenth month. The group paused, looking towards Wicke and Vexx as neither member made any moves to write anything down. "What's wrong?" Jayce asked, as Wicke avoided eye contact.

"I... don't have a birthday," she muttered. Jayce frowned, tilting his head in confusion before looking towards Vexx, who stated the same with a bit more gusto. "Why don't you have birthdays?" Bjorn asked, Marisha elbowing him before glaring at him. Wicke smiled at Marisha, shaking her head. "It's okay, no parents, so no way of knowing," she said. Vexx nodding in collaboration.

"Then both of you choose a day and we will make those your birthdays," Jayce said with a wide smile, handing the quill over to Wicke.

She beamed widely as she thought deeply to herself before choosing the fourth day of Caeruleum, the seventh month. "The summer solstice!" she stated proudly before handing over the quill to Vexx. He smirked to himself, writing down: the eighteenth of Frigis, the thirteenth and last month of the year. Wicke rolled her eyes as she took back the quill. "Copycat," she stated, sticking her tongue out at him as Vexx chose the winter solstice.

The pair bickered as Jayce took the piece of paper and plastered it onto the noticeboard nearby for all to see. "Then I guess that just leaves coming up with a crew name," Jayce said, as he turned to face his crew with pride. A slew of ideas flew at him in an instant, drastically varying in quality from person to person to person, but a tapping at the door stunned the room into silence. They looked at each other in alarm before pointing at Jayce to go and open the door. He pulled out his swords from his belt, slowly pushing open the door with the hilt of his weapon only to reveal a giant bird stood in front of him.

It was a beautiful blue and white, a large signet shape on its breast, a signet albatross of the Guild. It trilled at him, extending a large wing to present a satchel full of paper. Jayce let out a sigh of relief, putting his swords away and placing a pink pearl into a pouch tied to its leg before removing a can of fish from inside. Jayce took the paper from within the satchel, a newspaper as well as the latest letter from Alara, before he opened the can, tipping the fish into the open mouth of the bird. It presented its other wing, but Jayce patted it on its head instead, the bird lowering its wing before waddling away towards the edge of the deck, jumping off and taking to the winds, its job complete. "Mail," Jayce said, walking back inside as the others began a fresh onslaught of ideas.

Jayce pocketed the letter, saving it for later, and instead he sat down, opening the newspaper. A small collection of posters fell out from within, the latest bounties of note from across the New World, a rare but not unfamiliar sight. What was unfamiliar was Jayce's own face staring up at him, a grin on his face and a pair of swords in hand as he leapt through the air towards the photographer. "Oh no," Jayce muttered, as he flipped over the other posters. There was one for each member of the group, Marisha included, with each photo taken from a group action shot as they leapt from the battlements of the Ice Floe fortress. Even Little Witch had a cameo, the small cat peeking out from Wicke's hood. The others

stopped their arguing as they glanced towards him, a mixture of pride and horror among their faces.

"About time you got one!" Wicke beamed proudly as she stood over him, looking down at the collection, Yuthura sharing the sentiment. Bjorn dropped to his knees with a crash. "My reputable reputation... ruined," he whined. Marisha stood in shock next to him with her hands over her face. "Alara is... My mother is going to kill me..." Jayce muttered as he looked at his bounty, a significant amount at five-hundred pearl. It was twice the amount of Marisha's, but Bjorn's sat at seven-hundred and fifty pearl. Both Wicke and Yuthura's had increased to a thousand pearl each, but compared to Vexx their bounties were insignificant. Vexx wandered over, picking up his poster off the floor, his bounty sitting at a huge two-thousand five-hundred pearl. "Hmm, not bad," he said with mild pride as he walked over to the noticeboard and hung up his poster, Wicke and Yuthura copying his action before hanging up Bjorn and Marisha's.

Jayce sat there stunned as he held his poster with one hand, reading through the accompanying article in the Guild newspaper: The Ocean Tide. The group hovered over him, Wicke taking it upon herself to read it out aloud. "The group has made several daring attacks on multiple sites across the Capital, The Keeps, and even the Ice Floes, with local sources stating the group has entered and exited the northern-most Dungeon after assaulting the garrison guarding the area with the aid of a nomadic group. The group is led by a man who recently defeated the champion of the Imperial Arena: The Rising Ace, AKA Jayce Exarga, son of Admiral and Vice-Admiral Exarga. His motives are unknown, but local figures in the Navy advise to stay away from these Rising Aces if spotted. What this young man and his crew have planned for the people of the New World is anyone's guess, but for certain, this crew and its Captain certainly has this reporter's curious eye. This has been Pandora Flewin, with a special report on the latest bounties of the world. Happy Hunting! Rising Aces – Watch out!"

Jayce grinned as he looked up at Wicke's horrified face. "The Rising Aces... hmm. I like it," Jayce said, standing up and carrying his poster and the quill towards the noticeboard. He plastered his own poster to the collection, writing on the wall above it: The Crew of The Rising Aces." He turned around to his crew with a big smile. "Well? What do you think? It's a great name, right?" Jayce asked. He was met with nothing but utter disdain.

Seize the Seas Tales: Graduation

The snow had well and truly fallen across the Capital as Alara sat there in her final exam. She had already passed the basic Marine written exam, the same exam the rest of her squad was taking at that exact moment, instead she was concentrating hard on the officer's exam. It was mostly about scenarios - choosing the correct outcome based on a series of conditions. The clock ticked away high on the wall, too early in the morning for Alara's approval. She glanced through her work, nodding in approval over her answers before making a quick correction and raising her hand. She handed in her answers, standing up and walking out as the other candidates stared at her in surprise, given there was still plenty of time available. Alara wasn't concerned, her squad had helped her memorise each scenario backwards by this point.

She left the hall, heading back to the barracks with her head held high, a confident smile on her face as she stepped across the snow. A series of bell rings echoed in the distance, several of the wandering Marines all stopping around her as they turned their attention towards the sound. They rushed off, Alara's eyes widening as she realised it was the warning of an attack. Alara ran back to the barracks, grabbing her glaive before she rushed outside, following the large cluster of Marines towards the dock.

The perimeter cannons fired in the distance, resounding booms echoing across the entire island as they fired on an approaching fleet in the distance. "What is it?" asked a Marine nearby, as Alara ran with the group. Another spoke up, just as Alara spotted three Navy ships sail out of the docks, all raising the Inquisitor flag. "Nomads," answered a fellow Marine, as they looked towards the horizon with a pair of binoculars. Alara frowned, she wasn't familiar with the Nomads, but it didn't matter. All the Marines around her froze in shock, Alara crashing into one of them before she glanced past them as a colossal spike of ice emerged from the seabed, throwing the three engaging Navy ships into the air, back towards the harbour. A shadow fell across Alara and the Marines, the group rushing backwards as Alara dropped to the ground, knocked over by the stampede.

The three ships crashed into the nearby dockyard, shattering on impact and sending a shockwave across the island. She stared in horror, the Nomads continuing their migration right past the Imperial Capital, destroying any vessel that moved to engage with ease, but it was over in an instant. The Nomad's ignored the Capital, sailing straight past the Navy island and fading quickly into

the south. She returned to the barracks, the rest of her squad arriving in mixed but happy moods as they announced they had all passed basic training, the conversation immediately turning to a discussion about the Nomad attack.

Instead Alara sat there deep in thought; she was stunned, in shock by the sheer ease the Nomads had destroyed several warships. "Hey, you okay?" Riley asked, sitting down on her bunk next to her, snapping Alara back to reality. "Yeah," Alara replied, blinking and refocusing. "Are you nervous about your results?" Riley asked, not accepting the answer. Alara shook her head. "No, uh, I'm just a bit out of it," she answered. Riley nodded, standing up before offering a hand. Alara took it and Riley pulled her to her feet. "Well, whatever it is, it can wait. Come on, it's time to graduate!" she said with a smile, the others letting out a cheer.

Gibbs entered the room, a proud look on his face as the squad assembled into a neat line before him without prompt. "Wolves," Gibbs said, walking up and down the line, "it has been a privilege to be your Instructor. All of you have been through your own challenges and struggles and have risen to the occasion. I am proud of you all, and you all should be proud of yourselves and each other. It is now my duty to march with you, one last time, as your Instructor, but this time also as your colleague. I wish you the best with your careers, and I look forward to hearing about the exploits of the Wolfpack. Marines! Let's go graduate!" he yelled. "Oorah!" they replied, a few tears appearing as they all saluted, banging their knuckles before them and raising their heads.

Gibbs lead them outside, joining the other squads in their platoon before they joined the rest of the passing recruits as they made their way across the island, eventually coming to a colossal courtyard before the Navy headquarters. The many Marines stood in formation, all three thousand of them, as they looked forwards towards a large podium overlooking the regiment. Alara looked upwards from her position near the front, her platoon being the nearest to the podium itself. Zenobia stood proudly in full uniform once again before the regiment, Admiral Exarga to her right. The pair looked serious, but every so often they locked eyes with Alara.

A very tall figure stepped in front of Alara, a soft gasp of horror escaping Wulf from behind her as she sensed him shrink away. He was huge, taller than Wulf, and dressed in a golden uniform, a long gold and white cape attached to his shoulders. His hair was golden blonde, a tightly kept beard on his face, and his eyes were a deep brown. He looked over Alara, looking directly at Wulf before

he nodded and continuing walking onwards, stepping onto the podium to stand next to Admiral Exarga, his uniform a golden version of her own. Wulf shook with fear behind Alara, his eyes wide in terror.

"The Beast Butcher," Wulf whispered with absolute horror. Alara looked over her shoulder at him. "Who?" she asked, turning back to look at the man next to the Admiral. "Admiral Truth," Wulf stated, his eyes glancing around nervously. "I knew it was too good to be true. He's going to take me," Wulf said in terror. "Calm down, why are you so afraid?" Alara asked him, extending a hand backwards and taking his own, whilst keeping her eyes forwards. Wulf gripped it tightly. "He's got the highest baned fatality record in the entire empire. His entire crew is made up of normal people, but he takes the most baned out of anyone. They're never seen again Alara - he kills them. He's going to take me."

"That's not going to happen, okay? I promise you, that's not going to happen," Alara told him as various high-ranking Marines assembled before them. "You're a member of our squad, you're not going anywhere," Alara stated, as Admiral Exarga took to the podium and began a speech. Wulf didn't let go of her hand, and he continued to shake throughout the entire speech, until eventually graduation ended. Alara let go of his hand, taking her beret in her hand and throwing it into the air alongside the other recruits, her eyes focused the entire time upon the Admiral of the West.

The regiment left the courtyard, but Gibbs instructed the squad to remain, the thirteen of them all stood nervously in front of the group of Marine leaders. "Relax Marines," said Gibbs, turning to look at them before looking at Alara with a smile. He stepped to the side, Admiral Exarga walking over to the squad, along with Admiral Truth and his Commander, and Senior Instructor Zenobia. "Alara Vanathur, step forward," stated Admiral Exarga, the rest of Alara's squad all staring wide-eyed as Gibbs subtly rearranged them to get a better view.

Alara stepped forwards, taking a deep breath as she did so. The Admiral looked at her, a proud smile on her face as she extended a hand. Alara looked at it, before looking back at Admiral Exarga. "It's for you to shake, Alara," she said softly. Alara reached out, grasping the hand with her own. "As Admiral of the red fleet, and as the Supreme Commander of the Marine faction, I am proud to grant you the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Congratulations Marine, you have worked hard and more than exceeded our, and my, expectations. Your parents would be proud," Cassandra added, Alara's chest tightening as she gripped Cassandra's hand, the pair exchanging a thousand silent words. Alara let go, saluting, tears

falling quickly down her face. Cassandra saluted back to her, Zenobia doing the same as the Wolfpack cheered behind her.

Cassandra stepped back, looking across the squad before nodding in approval and walking away. Gibbs looked towards the other Admiral, the pair locking eyes before Admiral Truth stepped forwards. Wulf stepped backwards, his body acting on its own as he stared up at the Admiral. "Marine Wulf," he began, Alara immediately stepping in front of him. "Admiral, I would like to make a formal request for Warrant Officer Wulf to remain with the Wolfpack - his squad - for the remainder of his, and our, on duty education," Alara attempted, looking up at the giant. The Admiral slowly closed his mouth, looking down at her before looking at Wulf, the baned still cowering behind her. "Are you sure?" he asked, locking eyes with her. "Yes, Sir."

The Admiral nodded, turning away to look at his Commander before looking back at Alara, Wulf, and the rest of their squad. "Hmm, very well," he said, much to Alara and Wulf's stunned surprise. "Permission granted, take care of him. I have my eye on you, Lieutenant Commander Vanathur. We will meet again," he concluded, turning around and walking away with his Commander in tow. Wulf dropped to his knees, wailing loudly before embracing Alara tightly. "Thank you! Thank you!" he proclaimed. She held him tightly, the other members of their squad all staring in shock at Alara, only snapping out of it as Gibbs gave Alara the final scolding of a lifetime for interrupting an Admiral.

"Well done Vanathur, congratulations and good luck," he added before looking over the rest of the squad. "Squad, my job is done. You have been assigned to the Lone Wanderer, enjoy yourselves and work hard. Head back to the barracks and then make your way to the Marine docks, your ship should be waiting for you," he concluded, hugging each member one by one before saluting and leaving them alone with Senior Instructor Zenobia.

"Marines, Alara will join you at the ship. Good luck, happy hunting!" Zenobia stated, dismissing the squad. The group departed, leaving a few nervous glances in Alara's directions before disappearing out of sight. Alara braced herself for another scolding, only for Zenobia to rest an arm on Alara's shoulder and pull her in for a tight and unexpected hug. "This is from the Admiral, she's been wanting to give it to you ever since she saw that you passed. It's also from me. I'm very proud of you. And you should be extremely proud of yourself."

Alara didn't realise she was crying until Zenobia held her at arm's length and wiped away her tears with her metal hand. "Unfortunately, her role as Admiral

limits how much she can express herself in public. So I apologise on her behalf.” Alara shook her head, smiling at Zenobia. “Tell her I understand, and thank you Instructor. For everything over these last three months,” Alara said with utmost sincerity. Zenobia nodded, smiling at Alara before pulling her back in for another hug. “You’ve been the best, and most stubborn, student I could ask for. Now come on, you have a ship to catch. I’ve already arranged for your things to be transferred.”

They headed straight to the docks, the conversation casual and on equal terms as friends, and it wasn’t long before they arrived at their destination. The Lone Wanderer was a large ship, a standard Marine warship with a grey and blue hull. Many Marines scurried around moving cargo to and from the ship, a few members of the Wolfpack counted among them, already set to work. A slender woman stood issuing orders near the gangplank that lead up to the ship. She had a pair of round glasses on her face, fair skin with freckles across her nose, hazel-coloured eyes, and long blue hair split into two tails beneath a blue and black beret. She wore an outfit similar to traditional Marine dress, but her coat was white with blue highlights. She also wore white trousers, with a pair of blue boots. “Commander Vao,” stated Zenobia, the Commander saluting as she looked towards them. Zenobia returned the greeting, before pointing to Alara. “This is your new Lieutenant, Alara Vanathur. Treat her well and work her hard.”

The Commander looked Alara up and down, nodding as she did so before looking back at Zenobia. “Has she been warned about the Captain?” Commander Vao asked. Zenobia chuckled to herself. “No, I leave that to you. Good luck Alara!” she said, turning on her heels and walking away. Alara looked at the Commander with concern. “Warned?” she asked, the Commander sighing before turning on her heels and walking up the gangplank. “Let’s just say the Captain is an unusual man. I hope you have thick skin.”

Alara was not sure what she had been expecting, but she was mortified by the description of the demonic deviant she had apparently been placed under, according to Commander Vao’s description of her superior. They knocked on the door of the captain’s quarters, a voice instructing them to enter. He was a man of ordinary height, with medium-length brown hair that hung a little over his right eye. His eyes were brown, and he had a thick set of stubble across his jaw. The Captain’s outfit was identical to Commander Vao’s, only his was black. “Alara was it?” he asked, stepping towards them, only for Commander Vao to step in front. “Lieutenant Commander Vanathur to you, Captain Onasi,” ordered the

Commander. He looked at her aghast. "Yes, yes, is there any particular reason why you're standing in my way from greeting our new Lieutenant?" asked the Captain.

"You've not got the best track record when it comes to people. I don't want another inappropriate incident," snapped the Commander with a glare. "I'm not some sexual deviant!" protested Onasi. "And to be fair..." he attempted. "No!" stated Vao, Alara watching the pair with startled curiosity. "It is entirely your fault that you were demoted. You should have known better." "How was I to know the Vice-Admiral was married, and to a brute at that?" Alara raised an eyebrow with extreme curiosity. "You're an idiot, Captain. A moron who I wouldn't be surprised has a thousand children across the New World. It was Vice-Admiral Exarga, what were you expecting?" Vao stated with a very long sigh. Onasi looked away. "I sensed a connection..." he muttered. "You'll sense a connection with my fist if I get any more sexual misconduct reports."

Alara cleared her throat, the pair both expressing deep shame as they bowed their heads. "I apologise for the behaviour of my overzealous Commander, Lieutenant Commander Vanathur. She's a little tightly wound since we got demoted," said the Captain, extending a hand. Vao slapped it away. "He got us demoted, just as I got comfortable as the Commander of a fleet, because he can't resist anything with a hole." The two began bickering again, but Onasi eventually held up his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry, okay? Anyway, Alara, on that table is a stack of bounties. The Lone Wanderer is a hunter, it is our mission to track down criminals and bring them to justice. So familiarise yourself and then we'll get you acquainted with your role."

Alara nodded, walking over to a nearby map table, several pieces moving around on top of it on their own. There was a thick pile of bounty posters on top and Alara quickly began to flick through. She faltered, her eyes widening as she stared at the picture of a redheaded girl, a cat in her hood. She flicked over the page, an old woman. The next, a one-eyed woman. The next, a giant polar bear baned. A small man with red eyes and blonde hair. She gasped, turning it into a quick cough as she shakily held the pile in her hands, the top poster reading: "Captain of the Rising Aces - Jayce Exarga."