

Jack 1

“Spirits be damned.” I swore.

“Hey! Watch yer mouth!” said the man in line behind me. I turned to look at the pale figure glaring at me. While he was imposing, about a foot taller than me, biceps about as big as my head, and tattoos all up and down his arm depicting various slaughtered mermaids, I just scoffed. I turned back around, ignoring him.

“To the deeps with you,” I muttered. Probably not the smartest thing to do, but hey, we were both dead, what more could he do to me?

It was the third time I had died that day. Now, I had had bad days before, but this was taking it to a whole new level. The first time was understandable. I had been bragging in the market about how I had just saved up enough through odd jobs to buy my first ship. Jack was graduating from swabbing the decks to real full time pirating. Captain Jack. I liked the sound of that. Anyway, it was a childish mistake really. Idiotic. It wasn’t going to be anything that Central ships would be running from anytime soon, but, hey, everyone needs to start somewhere. My first mistake in Beluga was talking like I had money on me. As soon as I had left the market they jumped me. They being a few men, and possibly a woman too. All he knew was that one minute I was alive, and the next I was filled with daggers, a few balls of lead, and the leg of a broken chair¹. It had taken the Revivers all morning to fix up my body.

As soon as I left the body reclaimer building² I made my second mistake in Beluga – I ran into the Belugas. Specifically I ran into Bruce Beluga. Not that it was difficult to run into the man, or have the man run into you rather, seeing as he was always drunk, and always fat. Now, normally his older brother, Rictor Beluga, wouldn’t even care if anyone had killed his younger brother, let alone simply that someone had knocked him over, but daddy was there. Good ol’ daddy Beluga. Some said that he was even more vicious now that he was dead – not that dying usually changes anything, but they never did find poor old Beluga’s body after his scuffle with the Pirate King. People say that he was lucky to stay on the Council of Nine, let alone keep control of Beluga after trying to challenge the Pirate King to a fight. Well, not to say that people

¹ A nice looking leg made of pine, probably a victim of a recent bar fight. Those poor stools are always the first to go. They die so young. Anyway, I digress.

² The BRB, or burb, as the hip in crowd calls it.

didn't try to wrest Beluga from his now see-through hands, but he had trained his two boys well. What they lacked in brains they made up for in meanness and drunkenness and general textbook pirating. Anyway, they were always on their best behavior when daddy was around.

So daddy watched as Rictor stepped up and defended the honor of the Belugas and impaled the poor ruffian who had accosted his precious brother. Thankfully, I was only a block away from the BRB, and the wound was pretty clean, so my second revival didn't take long at all. However, I didn't let this minor setback get me down. Today was going to be a good day, no matter what. I knew that by the end of today I would be the proud captain of a ship, and I wasn't letting anything or anyone take that away from me. Today was a day that called for celebration damn it!

And so I made his third mistake in Beluga. I went to a bar. I had barely touched the handle of the door to "Peg-Leg Pete's Bar," a name I had always found odd, considering the owner Pete didn't even HAVE a peg-leg, and was briefly wondering who would when they could simply get revived at a BRB when the door was forcibly opened the wrong way as a chair³ was hurled through it. And as luck (or misfortune) would have it, at the precise moment I was getting up, and folks were looking out of any and all establishments on the road, someone from inside the bar shouted, "Kill the damn mermaid!" Now I wasn't sure who the man inside was talking about, but my stomach dropped. Seeing as how all eyes were on that poor sod who just got hit by chair and door rubble, and the word mermaid was heard, a crotchety old man peeking out of his window across the street put one and one together and arrived at lemon, simply unable to be bothered about the details of how he got there, pointed at me and shouted, "Dat's dat dere mermaid, git 'im!"

And that was how I was beaten to death by an angry mob, bringing my total death count to three that day. So here I am, for the third time, in the off-white building known as the BRB, in a sea of floating ethereal men and women, all waiting rather impatiently to get back to doing whatever it was they were doing before they were so rudely interrupted by the inconvenience known as death.

"Next," the lady at the counter in the relatively white outfit said. "Name and location of body," she continued, looking down at her paperwork.

³ It was at this point I started to wonder what this damned city had against chairs. We never had this problem in Sloop. A relatively normal city, compared to Beluga, and that is saying a lot. Sloop is built around one immense galleon that got marooned in a bay. It's practically a tourist attraction for pirates all over, and yet over the course of a month one bar in beluga manages to destroy more chairs than my entire hometown's bars combined. Maybe it's something in the water.

"Hello again Nancy." I said, "Body's around the front of Peg-Leg Pete's."

"Jack Klipp, I didn't see your body brought in, so what in the deeps are you doing back here already?" She scoffed as she put her hands on her rotund hips, "Can't you go an hour without mistreatin' yerself? You keep this pace up and your Final Death will be on ya faster than merman on beer."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. And my body was being beaten on by a few dozen people, so it's probably no wonder you didn't recognize me."

"Ah, so that lump of meat that just came in is probably you then."

"Oi! That's still me we're talking about."

"It will be soon enough, after you fill out the paperwork again."

"Uh, about that, hey Nancy, listen, would you me a favor?"

Nancy raised her eyebrow, "Is this going to be another one of your 'I owe you ones'?"

"Look, come on, you've already got my previous death record right? Just change the time and location and you've not my new one!" I grinned and motioned outside the window to the setting sun, "I've got an appointment I really really can't miss today."

Nancy sighed and glanced behind him at the line. It was long, about twenty or so others now, and it had been a relatively busy day, "Well Mister Klipp, I simply can't jump though a hoop every time you want me to and you still haven't repaid me from that that time when I-"

"Thank you Nancy!" I shouted, already halfway across the room to the revival wing, "For you Nancy, I would even find Death!" I apologized inwardly and spun about, hearing a harrumph from behind, and floated full speed towards the new arrivals. She'd forgive me sometime, and hey, I would try to pay her back somehow.

Some found it hard to maneuver while they were spirits, but not me; I had a lot of practice at being a spirit⁴. I drifted through the sea of white Revivers busying about rejoining

⁴ Not that I was unlucky by any stretch, I just happen to be better than most at pushing what luck I do have to its logical extreme. That just happens to result in death sometimes. Ok, it manages to happen a fair amount.

souls with bodies looking for... well... me. Down the hall I spotted a group huddled together looking down and doing a lot of shaking of their heads. I had a feeling that's where I would be.

"Spirits, I've seen worse in my day, but honestly not much worse," Said the one in glasses –henceforth referred to as Glasses.

"Like I told you, never a boring day here," quipped the other.

"I don't think we'll be able to identify this sorry bastard. What did the guy say who brought him in?"

"He was beating beaten on account of being a mermaid, but that one fellow had enough sense to realize that all that red was, you know, human blood, and brought him here after the fact."

"He didn't stop them?"

"Have you ever tried to stop a bar fight in Beluga?"

"Point taken"

"Excuse me," I said, arriving behind the two men and 'tapping' them on the shoulder, which was really more of a swipe, seeing as how my hand went through their shoulders. This caused both of them to shudder a little bit – the touch of a spirit isn't really unnerving as much as it is simply cold. "I can help you identify that fellow. Well, seeing as he's me," I looked down at his body. "I hope." Nancy was right to have called it a lump of a meat at this point. I could barely see any of my beautiful features. My lovely black hair was still there, but I winced when I noticed patches missing (regrowing hair was one of the more painful sensations during a revival). My usually bright blue eyes were closed, my chiseled (okay, more just roundish) jaw hanging open, and I noticed my forearm was bent directly backwards from its normal position. That was certainly a weird sensation when it happened. I shook my ghostly head – this was not going to be an enjoyable hour.

"Huh, well that makes it easier on us. We'll get started right away then." Glasses said as he adjusted his glasses. "So for the procedure you need to lay within your body, and simply relax, we do the rest. There may be some pain–"

"Pain and discomfort as the rejoining occurs, yeah, yeah, I know the drill." I interrupted.

"Well, that makes this easier." Glasses nodded to me, and I floated down into my body.

Knowing the drill doesn't make the process any more comfortable I lamented. Feeling every bit of sinew reconnecting and bone mending is what they call pain and discomfort, it should be called agony and torture. However, being alive is far preferable alternative to being dead. I briefly reminded myself to recruit a Reviver for his crew later, they were quite useful really. A flash of white interrupted this train of thought as I started to feel the pain of owning my broken body again. The two men above me worked to simply pump magic into me... Revivification is a simple process really, the spirit has the memory of the shape it wants to be, and the magic the Revivers give is more assistance that the spirit uses to heal and reform the shape it once had. But again, knowing it doesn't make it any easier.

My spirit groaned, and then my body followed suit. I had to meet Schmitt at the shipyard before sunset. I had to. This ship was the simple but necessary first step to achieving my dream. I could almost see it now, Jack Klipp, pirate captain on the Council of Nine. I smiled and decided that was a good thought to hold on to as everything went black.

Reynard 1

"So who are they sending out?" the voice determined to be Petrelli said.

"I hear its Reynard," Said the voice that must have been Vincent. Petrelli and Vincent never went anywhere without each other. There were rumors that they had something more going on than just being best friends, but Reynard didn't care enough about them to ask about it.

"That heartless bastard?" Reynard briefly wondered if the two realized that they were in fact talking outside his office, as well as the fact that he had surpassed them in rank simply because of the fact that he was a heartless bastard.

He grumbled. He was simply not suited for field work. Well, technically his skills were, but he despised it immensely. A youth of lying and stealing in Treasure Bay, which allowed enough of a life and living to get to Carnage, which led to a years as a teenager hunting Sellakai and Nacentians, or as the hunters in Carnage put it, "fucking filthy mermen." Then, after finally gaining enough money to finally travel to Legrand, home of the Central Government, he had had enough of the rough and tumble life and could finally retire from a life of excitement and get a simple desk job.

Simple and boring, that was how Reynard wanted it. That was how it was supposed to be. It was soon discovered that Central told more lies than his childhood held, stole more than any pirate known, and were more vicious hunters than the most famous heroes of Carnage. Needless to say, he was impressed. Many idealistic people said that Central is the start of a new era of peace and order, doing things the right way. But when you're trying to wrest order from pirates who use lying, stealing, and violence, the most efficient way to win is tell bigger lies, steal legally, and use bigger weapons. While

Reynard knew that Central was full of power hungry bastards and bitches, he firmly believed in the mission of the government. He hated their methods – not because of any disagreement with them, but because they reminded him of home. Peace and order at all costs. He was a realistic idealist or something like that.

He smiled at his little joke. Peaceful was how it was supposed to be, but he knew now that the peace he wanted simply could not exist in a world split between pirates and Central, humans and Sellakai. From the Darkest Crevasse to the lands beyond, Calypso was a world not meant for peace. The corners of his mouth returned to neutral as I shook my head slowly and sighed.

Sighing was second only to swearing for how natural it was for him at this point, with breathing coming in third. On particularly bad days he could count how many times he had sighed. The current record was sixty-two. There had been many speeches given that day by people who if you described them as retarded they would say something akin to ‘oh, you’re too kind.’

He looked at the paper that had been delivered earlier, short and with simple instructions, and re-read it anyway.

“Reynard Marcion, you are hereby ordered to report to the briefing room at one o’clock for your new assignment. That is all.” He didn’t even have to read the last line, he knew it by heart; the motto of the Central Government. For Order, For Central.

He opened up my desk and dropped the note inside, pausing only a moment to nudge an inkwell back into its proper position. He stood up, adjusted his uniform and hat. He really appreciated uniforms – mostly the fact that they eliminated the possibility of lying about who you were. A uniform in Central was an ally, and you could instantly tell if you had to be respectful, say your ‘yes sir’, or if you could be a straight up dick to them. No dancing around with words, wondering if you cross the man or woman in front of you if you’ll have to watch all the shadows for the next month. One thing Reynard took pride in was learning, and learning fast, and death is an excellent teacher. He had only died once, and was proud of that. He avoided that unpleasant experience from that day on. He always wondered at how some people could die over and over and not go insane from the experience. Or at least lose some brain cells in the process. Which beggared the question – is it the stupid ones that die repeatedly, or is it the fact that they die frequently that makes them stupid?

He shook his head. That was not his main concern now. He stepped out of his office, and simply stood for a moment, staring at the two leaning on the wall to his right. When they saw him, Petrelli stopped mid-sentence and Vincent shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Good afternoon sir, I hope you’re doing well.” Vincent started, attempting to cover up the previous conversation.

"I'm doing about as well as heartless bastard can be doing," there was an audible sharp intake of breath from Petrelli at that point. "Although I must admit Vincent, I haven't seen someone go from shit-talking to ass-kissing that fast in a long time. However, you might find it prudent to stop up Petrelli's mouth with something to prevent this from happening again. I hear you muffle him every night with your dick, perhaps we could cut that off and stuff his mouth with that?"

He spun on his heel and walked away from the two, who at this point were too taken aback by the tirade to speak. They hadn't known that Reynard's hobby was finding new ways to insult and tear down people. What they did know was that he had quickly found a spot in the 'special operations' division of Central. Because of that, he only had to answer to a select few. He considered keeping up the pretence of kindness to be exhausting.

Reynard mused to himself as he walked through the halls of Central in the city of Legrand. He was quite impressed by Legrand, both the city and the now ex-pirate, this place was nice. Nice was putting it a bit too lightly. Marble, quite hard to come by these days, lined the walls, high ceilings and archways were everywhere. There were some rooms which simply consisted of marble columns for spares, just in case one got damaged. How you turn from being a pirate to becoming the prime monetary backer of the government was beyond Reynard, but he would bet his entire salary it was thanks to him that Central had the power to even form a truce with the pirates at this point in time. Going from an idea of a government to having the largest fleet of galleons in less than 100 years was a feat only achievable through the marvel of money.

He decided to take the roundabout way to the briefing room; after all, it wasn't too far away. He climbed up the stairs to the second floor, and before too long found himself at his favorite place in Central, a balcony overlooking the main courtyard. People in blue suits hurried papers here and there, argued over courses of action, and freaked out over things that their bosses freaked out about. He enjoyed this view. Being above the bustle and chaos felt like the place he should be,

He stood for a minute or two, simply watching, before looking at the grand clock in the courtyard. He sighed and started on his way to the meeting once more. It wasn't long before he came to the entrance to the briefing room – it wasn't far off from the central courtyard. He paused for a moment and grumbled to himself before he passed through a doorway far too ornate for his liking.

"Good, everyone is here then," Mr. Lampert said as Reynard stepped through the door, "then let us start then."

The others present all gave nods as Mr. Lampert motioned Reynard to a seat. Mr. Lampert was Reynard's superior with the title of Chief of Social Relations, and also happened to be the Chief of Special Operations, but really, who would openly call a division of a Government "Special Operations", a title which was just a fancy way of saying that he was always keeping an eye on the pirates, Sellekai, and any other beings that could pose a problem to Central's dealings. He had face with entirely angular features. It was almost as if he had been chiseled out of marble himself by an amateur sculptor who

could only work with basic tools. Reynard liked to imagine that he used that spike he called a chin to open his letters. No matter how you looked at that face it seemed it was just always out of place. It was a face you could respect - just not one you could like. Out of all bastards in positions of power in Central Reynard respected Mr. Lampert the most, but also hated him the most. It was strange how often the traits he respected were also the traits that he despised, even in himself, but he shook himself back to attention.

"All right gentlemen, let us not waste any time here today," Mr. Lampert started up, "Mrs. Harris, if you would please explain the situation?"

A woman that Reynard didn't recognize stood up and nodded. "Certainly, sir. Now, I would hope that most of you are aware of the man known only as the Pirate King," enthusiastic nods came from around the room, "as well as how our efforts to discover his identity are currently for naught. This information had not mattered in the past; however, recent discoveries that have come to light have now pushed this to a high priority matter. We can no longer sit idly by as he runs amok around our oceans. Thus we have chosen one of our top operatives to infiltrate the Council of Nine." At that she directed their attention to Reynard. "Reynard Marcion has accomplished numerous missions for Central, and embodies the central tenant greater than any other man. It is because of this that we are choosing him for this mission." With her spiel concluded, she took her seat once more, quite elegantly Reynard noted.

A man with an impressive handlebar moustache and even more impressive muscles pounded his hands on the table "Now hold up just one moment here Lampert!" he shouted, "You keep telling us that this is of the utmost priority, and yet you only pick one operative, from your department, and refuse funding and help from all of our departments. Either discovering this man's identity is piss poor unimportant to you and this is just a move to keep those who wish to know placated, or there is something more going on here!"

Reynard had to agree with him, either this was a suicide mission because he had pissed somebody off, or he was a sacrificial lamb so that his superiors could say 'our top men are working on it' when asked about the situation. Unfortunately at this point he was in no position to refuse. All he could do was watch as these men in suits argued about his fate.

"Mr. Hubert. I first of all would hope that you have not forgotten that we are of equal rank, and as such deserve to be treated with the respect that you would treat yourself. And your accusations are completely baseless," Mr. Lampert smiled a crooked smile. It seemed as if only one side of his face obeyed the command to smile, while the other side just kept watching. That was just one more reason Reynard couldn't stand this man. "We selected dear Reynard here because we had the utmost faith in his abilities, and know that he won't fail us." Mr. Lampert was satisfied with his explanation, and his eyes nearly shouted to the room that everyone else had better be satisfied as well, otherwise...

The other men present grumbled to each other for a few seconds, before Mr. Hubert harrumphed and stood up violently, nearly knocking over his chair. "I don't know about you gentlemen,

but I came here for a briefing, not a circus. I'm leaving, and even if you come crawling to me for assistance Mr. Lampert, there will be none found." With his final words said he spun on his heel and stormed out. The other's present saw Mr. Hubert's good choice of actions and imitated him – albeit with less force. A few of them even turned and muttered quiet "For Order, For Central" on their way out.

Reynard watched the door shut behind the last coattail of the men who had left and turned his attention back to the others. Mr. Lampert, Mrs. Harris, and Reynard were all that were left now. Mrs. Harris idly played with her glasses and seemed to be waiting for something. Mr. Lampert simply kept smiling that smile of his. Reynard wasn't sure if he was being played with. Mr. Lampert liked to do this to people – simply watch and gauge their actions. It was always as if you were being evaluated. Reynard hated being evaluated.

Reynard sat. He was good at this thankfully. Back in his youth one thing he learned early was patience. There is a right moment for everything. Mr. Lambert's smile faded. Reynard wasn't sure how long they simply sat in silence, but he felt as if he broke it, then he would be the loser. Reynard also hated losing. Unfortunately it seemed as if his boss had the same thoughts as him.

After what seemed like ages, Mrs. Hubert coughed. Mr. Lambert looked slightly surprised at this, or at least Reynard believed that his two eyebrows arching to create a point in the center was his way of showing surprise. Mr. Lambert chuckled to himself.

"Dear dear Reynard, I am always so impressed by you."

"I didn't do anything special sir." Reynard responded.

"Oh but that's precisely it!" he nearly squealed with glee, "So many others would have spoken in that situation. But you have it! That tact, that serenity, that ability to keep... well, to keep secrets. Are you not curious as to why I'm sending you on this mission alone, with no resources, backup or anything of the sort?"

"Curiosity has nothing to do with it sir. I know that there is something more to this, but I know that you won't let me set off either until you tell me that reason, so I'm in no rush."

That smile worked its way back onto Mr. Lampert's face. "Yes yes yes, I knew you were the right fit for this! Didn't I tell you he was perfect for this?" He nudged Mrs. Harris. Reynard assumed her to be his new aide. He seemed to go through those at an alarming pace.

"You certainly did sir. You were correct, as always."

"Now now, flattery will get you nowhere." He smiled at his joke, if it could be called that. "But yes, back to the matter on hand. You see, I can't let this information out – nay, WE can't let this information out. There would be a panic you see, chaos and anarchy if you will. Central wouldn't survive the backlash if we failed to do something about the situation, and unfortunately, unlike the other nitwits

here, I believe that failure is always a possibility. You wouldn't believe the things that muscle mass Hubert suggests, believing that there is no chance of failure. Only two ships to investigate Sellekai appearances in ruins near Alabast? Madness, they'll be dead before you know it, and then—"

"Sir, the matter at hand?" Mrs. Harris piped in.

"Aha, yes yes, I apologize there, nearly got off track. So, dear Reynard, I trust you are familiar with the Pirate King?"

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him sir." Reynard said.

"No no no, of course not. But you are familiar with the rumors? Reportedly nine feet tall, can use his voice to level a town, rides a giant sea monster into battle, and capable of stealing a man's soul if you stare too long into his eyes. Yes?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, the issue of his identity isn't really a problem. The Pirate King has been around for centuries, so logically one can deduce that it is simply a title being passed on. Once the Pirate King becomes the Pirate King his identity is no longer that of his old one, so it's pointless to discover it, he is no longer that pirate of old, even if you discover who he is, what does it matter? Are you going to blackmail the Pirate King? Not likely. When you see the Pirate King, you know it is him, so having a name is worthless. But I digress. I am sending you there not because his name is important, but because the rumors are."

"I beg your pardon sir? You're sending me because of a rumor?" Reynard was rarely surprised, but this was one of those times. Mr. Lampert was not one to put any stock in rumor. Facts, logic, and numbers were all that moved this man. Reynard felt uncomfortable. Something was terribly off.

"Reynard, as supervisor of relations between pirates and Central you must understand that I am privy to some information that... has not yet graced the ears of those who would not know what to do with it. We've had spies on the crews of those in the Council of Nine for a long time now, but what we need now is confirmation. None of our spies are let into the Council or have met the man, so they can't substantiate this rumor with facts themselves."

"Sir, you're dancing around the subject again." Mrs. Harris chimed.

"Yes yes, you're right. Our informants have recently informed us that the Pirate King does in fact have the ability to steal souls."

Reynard sat for a moment. This was absurd. This had to be some bad joke. Steal a soul? That just wasn't possible. Only Death could take someone's soul away. Reynard tried to come up with a sentence highlighting just how absurd that notion was, but the best he could manage was, "What?"

"I understand your incredulousness," Mr. Lampert nodded solemnly. "I was certain my men had gone mad after spending so much time with pirates, but when it came from five separate men on different crews, all with the exact same story, well, I'm afraid that was a bit harder to ignore."

"Still sir, you want me to go out based on a rumor?"

"It isn't only that. I have also received word that there is an opening on the Council of Nine. This opening occurred at around the same time that the new rumor about soul stealing came out. Well if you put one and one together..."

"So you're telling me that the Pirate King killed one of his own council members? Permanently?"

"That would appear to be the case. It could have been a disagreement, perhaps the other pirate captain challenged the man for the title of pirate king, but the result is the same. There is an opening, and there is this rumor, and frankly, this opportunity is too rich to pass up."

"Sir, I'm afraid to say that I fail to see the opportunity here." Reynard scoffed.

"Aha, that would be because I'm leaving out a crucial bit of information. The current Pirate King apparently is looking for someone young to fill the empty position. Apparently he's a bit tired of old ways of thinking. So the opportunity to get someone from Central into that Council of Nine is simply too rich to pass up. The fact that you could also substantiate this rumor would be a great asset to me."

Reynard nodded. The part about getting someone on the inside of the Council made sense, but one thing didn't really add up. "Sir, if this is the case, why did you not tell the others that you were attempting to get someone on the council as an informant? They would have been behind that idea rather than the very weak identity one."

"That's simple, dear Reynard. It's because I don't want any of them finding out about the Pirate Kings ability. Because after you infiltrate the Council, I want you to steal the method he is using. Whether it is a procedure, an item, or anything else, I want you to bring it back to me. I simply can't trust those other fools with the knowledge of this."

Reynard absorbed all this information slowly. Reynard respected Mr. Lambert. However, he did not like him. But most importantly, there was a feeling that Reynard couldn't put into words before, but finally realized what it was. Most importantly, Reynard couldn't trust Mr. Lambert. While he did put the tenants of Central first anytime he was in public, this whole briefing had been off. No support, no information, too many secrets, and Reynard was positive there was still more to this that he hadn't been told yet. But that would be something he could deal with at a later date. As of right now, he just wanted to get out from under Mr. Lambert's smile and out of range of his speech.

"I'll leave right away sir." Reynard nodded.

"Excellent! I knew it, I knew you were the right man for this. Oh yes."

"Just one question sir."

"Yes?"

"How exactly am I supposed to get onto the Council of Nine?"

"Simple. Find a young up and coming pirate legend and get in good with his crew. You don't need to start your own crew, in fact I'd advise against it. People are very curious about captains, who they are, where they're from, who they really work for, which we just couldn't have. But becoming a first mate, well, you'd keep everything in line, and first mates also have the privilege of going to the Council. With your personality I have no doubt you'd ascent to the position of first mate in no time." Mr. Lambert said coldly.

Reynard slowly nodded his head. He still didn't like this, but he knew he was in no position to argue at this point. Mr. Lambert's voice was starting to hold a tone of finality, and he knew this meeting was coming to a close. Not sorry to go, he stood up and started making his way to the door.

"One more thing," Mr. Lambert motioned something to Mrs. Harris. She stood up and pressed something into his palm. "You were a bit incorrect in saying you had no resources or support. Wear that. My resources will know what it means, and you will get anything and everything you ask for. Just find another person wearing it. At the docks there is a ship waiting, it will take you to around the island to Beluga, which would be a promising place to start. A change of clothes and all you will need are on it. For Order, For Central."

"For Order, For Central," Reynard mimicked.

He burst out the doors at a brisk pace, still frustrated from this encounter. He looked at the pin Mrs. Harris had handed him. A shark's fin with a gold tip. Reynard noted that both Mr. Lambert and Mrs. Harris both had them on as well. He briefly wondered how useful it would be, but sighed and pinned it to his shirt anyway. At this moment he wasn't quite sure how this was going to play out, but there was only one way to find out.

He headed for the docks.

Jack 2

Light flooded into my eyes like a flood of beer into a fat man. While not unwelcome exactly, my brain couldn't help but put every siren and alert on full blast. I sat up in the bed, in the outgoing area of

the BRB attempting to fight through the fog to figure out what exactly it was that was making me feel so anxious.

"Well, looks like you recovered just fine," Glasses said as he walked over to the side of the bed, "I'll admit, I was worried there may have been some scarring or disfigurement, but it worked out alright. You must have quite the strong soul."

"What can I say; I've had practice at this." I quipped back. Glasses started going off about paperwork and what a remarkable recovery I had made, but I ignored him as I worked out my worries. The light was orange. Orange, why was the color orange making me so restless? I had my daily dose of fruit... Did I lock my door when I left? Why did I have to lock my door again? To keep the money I had been saving safe. Why did I need that money again? What was it for? A moat? No... A goat? What would I use a goat for... Come on, I could do this. What was it exactly?

"The process took a few hours, but you're good to go anywhere now, and if you'll excuse me, I've got a fishing boat with my name on it and I'm now off duty, so—"

"A BOAT!" I blurted before I could stop myself, "Spirits be damned!" I swore.

"Hey! Watch yer mouth!" the man in bed next to me said. It was the man who was in line behind me earlier. "Hey! I oughta teach yer a lesson right now boy for insulting meh earlier." He said as he started climbing out of his bed.

I looked at Glasses, then at Tattoo man⁵, then back at Glasses. Glasses backed off – understandably so. His job ended after they came back to life, and he was getting out so he wouldn't have to work overtime at the result of this. Normally I would have said something witty and or disarming to get out of this situation, but I had to get home and get to the docks. Crazy Schmitt wasn't exactly the most reputable merchant, but he had agreed to let go of a sloop for cheaper than normal. Or as he liked to say, "I'm so crazy I'm practically giving this away to you!" He would then proceed to take a bite out of a raw fish, but that was just one of his quirks that made him so endearing.

"Uh... Gotta go!" I said and leapt out of bed.

"Hey! Git back he-whoa!" Tattoo man said as he tried to get out of bed and fell to the floor. I thanked my lucky stars that he wasn't used to post revival dizziness. I dodged and weaved through the crowd of Revivals and beds as best I could (even for all my experiences with dying, the dizziness that results from revival was no slouch either) and was proud of myself for only knocking two Revivers, one person, and one bed over.

⁵ I just came up with this name for him. I kind of like it.

I charged through the hallways and burst into the main atrium. As I turned, probably looking like a madman, charging towards the exit I heard a familiar voice.

"Jack Klipp! You get your sorry excuse for an ass back here right now and fill this paperwork out properly! You didn't even fill out—" Nancy started.

"I'm sorry I'll do it later! Please cover for me this time! I'm late oh spirits be damned! thank you thank you so much Nancy! I'll make it up to you!" I managed to get out before I charged through the crowd and burst through the double doors. I could feel my heart pounding. I made a mental note to get out and exercise more. I stumbled through crowds, shouting sorrys, excuse mes, and get out of the ways as I went. I risked a glance at the sun. Setting already. I had scheduled the meeting for before it had touched the waves. I would have set a meeting time, but the clock in the clock tower hadn't worked for a few years now, and no one cared enough to fix it.

I skidded to a stop in front of my humble abode and pulled my key out of my sock and slammed it into the lock. I clambered in, fell on all fours next to my bed and pulled a lockbox out from under the mattress. I tucked the box under my arm, charged back out of my shack, and didn't even stop to shut the door. I would have liked to conceal the conspicuous box I held under my arm a bit better, but I didn't have time for that. I hoped that if I put the face of a madman in a rush (which I technically was) no one would stop to bother me.

My footsteps started pounding as the ground underneath transitioned from tile to wood. I had made it to the docks, now the only question was if Schmitty was still here. I ran through all the shops to the more decrepit area (where Schmitty had taken up shop selling ships that had stayed in his dock too long and people were not quite sure what had happened to the previous owners)

I rounded the final corner and came upon a crowd standing at the end of the docks. Five people forming a semicircle around a potbellied man dressed with red frilly pants and a poofy white shirt.⁶ The man in poufs was talking to Schmitty. Those poofs could only mean one thing. That man was a merchant and a trader. And that meant he had money and that meant he was going to buy things. LIKE MY SHIP.

I let out a small rumble that turned into a rising aaaaaAAAAAA as I redoubled my efforts and charged towards the end of the dock. By now they had seen (or heard) my arrival, and stopped to watch the spectacle unfold in front of them. Unfortunately, a few feet before the crowd I lost my footing on the uneven dock and tumbled to a stop in front of the crowd. Not my most elegant entrance, to be sure,

⁶ The normal clothing of citizens and visitors to Beluga were various assortments of cloth, leather jackets, hats of all sorts, but nothing poofy. Any embroidery or frilliness on your clothing basically meant you were either a merchant or a lady of a certain persuasion. One was an honorable profession, and the other was a merchant. No one really liked merchants in Beluga. They had managed to learn the fine art of stealing things without killing the victim. For the usual Beluga pirate, no blood meant no fun.

but I hadn't dropped the lockbox and I stopped before I had ran into anyone, so it could have been worse.

"I got da money." I said, winded and bruised, as I pushed up the lockbox into good ol' Schmitty's hands. Fair Schmitty, who would never sell the ship I had worked so hard to buy to anyone else. Or so I hoped.

Schmitty nervously grinned his toothy grin. The man in poufs let out a quick scoff and exchanged a look with his men. I could tell. They all knew something I didn't.

"So this must be the man you mentioned earlier then?" The pouf man asked.

"Aye, dat be him." Schmitty said still grinning nervously. "Serry Jack."

"Well then, allow me to be the bearer of bad news," I already didn't like pouf man, and I felt that what he was about to say would only make me like him less. "Mister Crazy Schmitt here was holding out to sell you one of these sorry excuses left here, I'm afraid that is no longer a possibility ."

I stood up slowly and put one hand on my knee to help support me. I raised my other hand in the air with a finger pointed up at the sky to indicate them to give me a moment to catch my breath. No one wants their dreams shattered when they can't breathe.

"Ah, but where are my manners. My name is Alabrect Rockwell the Second." The pouf man said.

He paused, obviously waiting for his name to sink in, though he didn't really need to. I recognized that name. It would be hard not to. Alabrect Rockwell, a merchant turned pirate from Alabast that had made it onto the Council of Nine. He had been controlling trade routes from Alabast to Carnage many years ago when a fairly well known pirate nicknamed Nobeard⁷ attempted to ransom a fleet of his ships. The fight was bloody and long, and somehow Rockwell had triumphed. His merchant ships and hired thugs had not only managed to beat off the attack, but he himself led an attack on the main Galleon and killed Nobeard himself. He then somehow got her to join him (most likely with the promise of even more money, and negotiations always go pretty smoothly when you're holding someone's body hostage), and the rest is history. Now Rockwell and his first mate Nobeard⁸ control most all of the trade out of Alabast. And apparently they had settled down to make a family together (Love works in the strangest ways. Although telling your kid that on your first meeting you tried to kill each other probably made for a good story).

⁷ On account of her being a lady, and not being able to grow a beard. I must admit, while I wanted to be a famous pirate, I loathed the day I would discover what they called me. For some reason most people just had no naming sense.

⁸ I mean seriously, what in the deeps kind of name is Nobeard?

I grumbled something unintelligible. I was having the worst luck with meeting the offspring of famous pirates today.

"Now, my father is a very firm proponent of the idea that a man goes out into the world and makes his mark, and his progeny is no different. With that in mind he gave me a small amount of money to get started in starting my own business, if you will, in which I form my own pirate fleet. Thus I have bought the ships here."

"You bought my ship?" I said weakly. More like a squeak really. I really wanted to get angry, but I just couldn't. I was too tired, and this day was just not going my way.

"Incorrect my dear boy. I have bought all the ships. And technically it wasn't ever your ship, since you never did buy it. However I am willing to make you a deal. Mister Crazy Schmitt here really did want to sell you your ship, but I figured that 300 gold was a bit cheap for such a noble ship like that, so I purchased it and the rest for 10,000 gold pieces."

"Ten... thou-" I couldn't even bear it to finish saying that. That was more money than I'd ever seen in my entire life, and this man had just tossed it out like it was chump change. A small amount of money to this man was 10,000 gold pieces. I wanted to punch him in the face to keep calm.

"The deal, as I mentioned previously, was that you come work for me, and buy the ship you were going to purchase from me for half of what you were going to pay previously, and I would let you be in charge of that small ship. You could be captain of a small crew, and report to me. Now doesn't that sound marvelous?" Alabrect Rockwell II said with a flourish as he spread his arms into the air.

This guy really knew how to make trampling on someone's dream sound like a good deal. "Frankly, I'm insulted you would even think that I would work for someone who doesn't know the value of work. Of dreams. I worked for all the money I was going to use to buy my ship. You asked daddy. I look forward to the day when I hear that your body rests at the bottom of the ocean and your spirit wanders forever." I said with every ounce of venom I could muster. It may have been a bit harsh, but I couldn't help it. Dead three times, lost my ship, and I could only imagine what was going to happen next.

With that Alabrect laughed wickedly?. His mood visibly shifted from mildly friendly to outright vicious. I was pretty sure it was a skill merchants learned early. Once you realize that a man can do nothing for you, they are simply an obstacle in your way. His laugh was a whiny high pitched annoying laugh, it pierced the eardrums and shook the soul. The things that were making me dislike this guy were just piling up and up, "I could tell from the moment I met you that you were a two bit low life. You keep mentioning dreams, but you seem like the type to blame everyone else for your dreams not coming true. And compared to mine, your dream is probably pitiful. It was just your fate to have your dream swallowed up by mine. I will be chosen by the Pirate King to sit on the Council of Nine next, and you'll just be drowning your sorrows at a pub somewhere."

"You're not a pirate; you're a man in a dress!" I retorted. Not my best, I know, but today was full of these moments where I wasn't at my best. "I'll show you what a real dream is. I bet I can get onto the Council faster than you can, and without relying on my 'daddy.'"

"STOP CALLING HIM DADDY. HE IS MY FATHER AND HE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU EVER WILL BE."

I paused for a moment. I had been just saying the first thing that came to my mind, but I had struck gold here. "Oho, sounds like someone's got a few daddy issues. What, did he not pay attention to you when you were young? His son is easily pleased by just handing him money to get out of his hair? Too busy parading off with what's her name probably. Neckbeard was it?"

Alabrect was visibly shaking at this point.

"I should kill you where you stand!" He shouted, which came out more as a shriek.

"Bah, you would just make your men do it, seeing as how daddy's little girl wouldn't want to get his nails hurt."

Alabrect moved up to me and poked one of his stubbly fingers into my chest faster than I expected. He took a few deep breaths and then said with more calm than I expected out of him, "Well, Mr... sorry, I didn't catch your name." He said as icily as possible.

"Jack Klipp." I said, trying to match the chilliness in his voice.

"Well Jack, I believe you have made it clear that you do not like me, and I have made it clear of my certainty that you are going to amount to nothing in this life, but at the end of the day I am a man not an animal. Animals fight senselessly, thus I propose we settle this as men should. With a wager."

"What kind of wager?"

"Simple really, one with our honor at stake."⁹

"The conditions?"

"My father has informed me that there is a vacancy on the Council at this very moment. It turns out the owner of the seat had some old fashioned ideas about pirating and how we should deal with this

⁹ I had to admit, I really didn't like this guy, and he wasn't really all impressive with his potbelly and all, but he knew how to sound cool when it counted. I should have taken some notes, my ability to give impromptu badass speeches had dwindled recently. I suppose at the end of the day this guy still was a kid of one of the Council of Nine, and that isn't to be taken lightly.

upstart government,” he spat the word government as he said it, “and the pirate king killed him, stabbed him right through the heart.”

“So?” I asked failing to see what was so special about that. Pirates had disagreements which resulted in death all the time.

“He killed him and took his soul.”

“Well, it must’ve been a convenient time for his Final Death to occur...”

“I’m afraid not, this pirate had paid Death Hunters¹⁰ to postpone his demise. But that was not the case here.”

I pondered this. I had heard the rumors, but my mom had always taught me that rumors were spread by the evil merfolk to stray people from the right path, so I hadn’t paid attention to them. But here it was – a credible source informing me that the Pirate King did in fact have the ability to steal a soul. “So what if he’s dead now? The Pirate King is gonna just pick some other famous pirate to get on the Council.”

Alabrect smiled that smile he did when I first saw him, the one where he knew something I didn’t. “My father has also informed me that the current king is sick of these ‘old-fashioned’ pirates and their ideas. He wants a fresh new perspective. So he’s looking for... a rookie pirate of the year, for lack of a better term. He will choose a few candidates near the end of the year, and from them the next one to sit on the Council will be chosen.”

“And what are we wagering?”

“If you are selected as to sit on the Council I will become your personal financial backer, I will throw away my pirating career and become a full time merchant. If I lose to someone like yourself, then

¹⁰ When I was a child I had wanted to be a Death Hunter. Travelling the world, using whatever resources they could at their disposal to track down Death. I had the good luck to meet a Death Hunter when I was very young, and he taught me so many things. Contrary to popular belief, Death was not invisible, but just constantly travelling the world, working to collect souls. It was theorized that the reason Revivers even have jobs is because Death can’t get everywhere at once, so people can die as many times until he finally arrives in time for their Final Death. Death Hunters had the awesome job of being paid loads of money to track him down and bribe him to postpone the Final Death of their sponsors. That was another popular misconception about Death that he was all business – if you’re living for hundreds of years it’s practically impossible to be all business and stay sane, he was actually quite laid back. Death had no use for gold, so the Hunters had to be innovative in their bribes. Apparently if you could make him happy enough, he’d delay both you and your sponsors deaths, but if it was a bad bribe, he’d take your soul right then and there. That was enough of an incentive to switch to the safer dream of becoming a notorious pirate.

I don't deserve to be called a pirate. I would then finance anything you asked of me – a fleet, munitions, whatever your heart may desire."

"Impressive... You make it sound like you're going to win this already." I scoffed.

"That would be because I'm already a candidate for the position. Unlike yourself." Alabrect responded smugly.

"And what would be in it for you?"

"When I am selected to sit on the Council–"

"If."

"WHEN I am selected to sit on the Council of Nine, I will find you, and you will become my cabin boy¹¹."

"Deal." I said as I took his hand soundly. I probably should have considered this more, but stopping to think about things wasn't really my style. I was confident that this pompous twat could never get chosen in a hundred years, and he had just given me the motivation needed to get myself back up and running. The Pirate King was looking for a rookie pirate. I had nearly a full year left. I had totally got this.

"Well then, if that is all," Alabrect motioned something to his goons, "my ships and I really must be off. We have a reputation to make. Farewell Jack, low class scum."

"The pleasure was all mine Sir Alabrect Rockwell the Second, daddy's boy." I said with a mock bow.

I watched them as they walked away. The sun had long set by down, and the nighttime stars were coming out. It looked like my day was finally turning around. It had taken it long enough. I jumped a little bit when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I had forgotten about Schmitty.

"Serry bout dem derr ship Jack. It were just... I mean... da monies." Crazy Schmitt muttered.

I put my hand on his shoulder as well, "Don't worry about it Schmitty my man, I would have been hard pressed to turn down ten thousand gold pieces." I smiled just to make sure he knew I wasn't mad about the situation.

¹¹ Cabin boy, noun, singular, the bitch of the crew. If a sea monster were to come, they are the first to be tossed over as bait. Not an admirable position.

"Heehehe. I cen finally get dem dere teef and bite dem feesh with none dose bones poking my mouth bits." He said chuckling to himself, "I CEN BUY ALL DEM FISH." He said, eyes widening at the sudden realization.

"Yes you can Schmitty. You sure can." We stood there for a moment, staring out to the ocean at night. A beautiful sight to be sure. So beautiful that it wasn't even ruined when Schmitty reached into his pocket and pulled out a small mackerel. With a smacking of his lips he brought it up to his mouth.

I sighed, today had really had its ups and downs. Dying three times, getting the ship bought out right from under me, challenged to a wager where if I lost I lost all of my rights and dignity. But it wasn't a completely terrible day. The Pirate King is looking for a new, up and coming pirate. I knew it could be no one but me. I stood there peacefully smiling for a moment, listening to the sounds of the bustle of the city behind us, the slapping of waves against the dock, and Schmitty's chewing next to me.

Reynard 2

Reynard stepped off his ship. It wasn't a long ride to get to Beluga from Legrand, they were on opposite sides of the same island, with a mountain range in-between the two, so it was simply more practical to sail around to get from one to the other, but it was long enough for it to be nighttime now. While on the ride he had thought about his best course of action. He had received ridiculous assignments before, but this was taking it to a new level. The last time he had felt lost was when he had been tracking a Sellekai and his cohorts from Carnage had played a practical joke on him – namely stealing his map and compass and leaving him adrift at sea. He felt lost now. He appreciated having a direction or plan, but Mr. Lambert had basically tossed him out and said "good luck."

He was supposed to use any means necessary in order to infiltrate the Council, but all he had currently was a vague rumor and a shark fin badge. In order to get into the Council, he would have to get on the crew of a pirate on the Council, in which case he would have to work his way up through the ranks to be able to get to a position which could possibly visit the Council. He could certainly do that, he had the skills to remove those above him and rise quickly, but that could also make him suspicious. He had briefly entertained the thought of starting his own crew. According to the helmsman of the ship that he was just on, that pin would allow him any resources he needed if he went to any of a few places in Beluga, he had been sure to write them all down. Mr. Lambert's reach was further than he expected. However, he himself was against that idea – standing out too much could be problematic as well.

He shook his head, the more likely path would be to try and find out which pirates were in a position to be chosen by the Pirate King. Either way, the first thing to do would be to find a crew where he could simply start obtaining this information. And the best way to do that would be to go to a bar. He looked around momentarily. Any direction would work in beluga.

He sighed. This was going to be a long assignment.

Jack 3

"Oh come on Shteve! Just gimme one more." I was able to say finally.

"You'll get your next drink when you can remember my actual name and find your money." the mean bartender man said back.

I mumbled something I hope sounded offensive, but I couldn't tell what it was myself, and headed back off into my crowd of my friends. Making friends came easily to me and even more so once I had bought them all drinks. They couldn't get enough of Jack Klipp, future pirate captain on the Council of Nine! After going home and making sure my small fortune was safe and sound, I had headed off to The Rusty Harpoon, a friendlier place to be than Peg-Leg Pete's. The people there were always up to have one more drinking buddy, and more importantly didn't accuse you of being a merman when you definitely weren't a merman.

"I propose a toast," a man said as I got back to the table I had previously been drinking at (maybe that was Steve? Everyone looked like a Steve right now.) "To beer and how it solves all life's problems!"

"Hear hear!" Everyone shouted and took a swig of their drinks. Cept for me, though I threw in a cheer. Or at least I think I did.

"Why does beer solve all life's problems?" Another man who possibly could have been named Steve said ponderously while staring at his drink.

"I got dis one," I said, thrusting my finger towards the sky. "So there's that whole thing, where the sick and weak fish die so the bigger stronger ones live and make more fish, right?"

"Survival of dem strongest or something." Possibly Steve chimed in.

"Yeah that!" I nodded, "And when you drink beer you get good ideas and smarter n' all right?" They all nodded their assent at this. "So obviously that means that the beer is getting inside your head and playing survival of dem strongest with the stupid ideas, leaving only the smarts and good ideas!"

A roar of laughter and agreement erupted from my newfound friends, they agreed that this was the most likely case.

"Oi Jack! You didn't finish tellin' ush about how you got beat outside Peg-Legs earlier today." A girl whose name I was pretty sure was Mary said with a laugh and a slight slur, but at this point names seemed to not matter as much.

"I've already told you that twice now," I said back, as coyly as I could, but it came out more sassy than anything. At this point I decided the table was most likely the comfiest pillow ever and let my face lightly come to rest on the table with a giant bang. There was a vague thought in the back of my mind that I would regret that, but those small voices are easily ignorable after your fifth cup of whatever passed for beer around here.

I decided that while I rested my face it would be a good time to observe people, pick out people for my future crew perhaps. My eyes were drawn to the man sitting in the back drinking alone. A fairly impressive, but not imposing figure. Every bit about him sort of shouted authority, but in a strangely classy way. Tall, dark, and handsome where words that stuck to this man like barnacles on a ship. I decided that while he could make a good first mate, he was liable to take all the women and be more of a leader than I could, and that just would not do for a pirate captain.

I closed my eyes and started imaging the other vacancies. There was the bartender – Notsteve. Every good ship needs a bartender I decided. Drunk pirates are happy pirates, right?

Right, I agreed with myself. He would do. Once I got my crew going I would get Notsteve on it. I would need some muscle as well. Perhaps someone like Tattoo man from earlier today would do. You can't have a respectful pirate crew without a muscly man to lift things and be imposing. Missing that crucial element simply would not do either. A navigator was a must. A cook? Probably a good idea if you don't want to be eating dried rations all the time. A raid leader, when the time came to board another ship. You always needed some crazy sumbitch to lead the charge, I was pretty confident that it wouldn't do to be first off my ship – just in case a quick escape was necessary. A Reviver would be useful as well, specially out on the open ocean. But all these could be dealt with later. The biggest problem would be finding a first mate. Someone he could trust with his life, and had enough authority to help control the crew without usurping it from him. He could go back to Sloop and talk to his old friends, but they had mostly scoffed at his pirate dream. He needed to find someone trustworthy enough to, well, trust, but not charismatic enough to be a leader himself.

"...Pirate crew." I opened my eyes when I overheard the words and looked around to locate the source. I noticed that the room had finally decided to be cooperative and stop moving around at its every whim. There was a fairly well dressed man (no poufs, thankfully) talking to another man at the bar. He could be a friendly looking man, but only if he remembered how to smile, I mused. Everything about him seemed to be a bit too clean. He probably was a visitor from outside Beluga. I could show him the ropes! If I could find my feet. I decided that it would be better to just listen to what he was talking about for now.

"If yer lookin' ta join a crew mister, I dun think yer gonna find much luck with a face like that. What are ya gonna do, serious someone ta death? Not likely." A man he was talking to said.

"Wasn't that kid in town today? I heard Rocky was getting some crazy gold from that dude on the docks to follow him and look intimidating? That Alabrock guy or something." Another said.

"Alabrect Rockwell was here?" The stern well-dressed man asked.

"Naw, twasn't him, it was his son, same name I think, fuckin' gotta keep the legacy going, or whatnot."

I couldn't sit by idly as this happened. This poor fella had come from some upper class life, never having a day of adventure in his life most likely, and these brutes were suggesting he go work for that snob Alakazam or whatever, where he would probably stand around and do nothing and then call that pirating. That simply would not do!

I worked my way over to the group with great difficulty and finally reached them. "Dun go werk for Mr. Daddy's boypants." I smiled at the clever nickname I had come up for him. "That jerk stole my boat!"

"Well isn't that what pirates do?" Stern man asked.

"Not this way," I shook my head and hand in what I hoped was a very stern refusal. "If he had beat me up and taken it, it would have been on par with the rest of my day, but he stole it with money! No self-respectful...ing pirate would do that!"

"Feh," one of the other men said, "I knew them merchanting types were too sissy to do proper pirating."

"I know right?!" I exclaimed, glad to know that there was sense in the world after all. "Its alrighty though, I'm gonna show him once I win my bet with him. Once I'm chosen for the vacant Council seat, he'll have to eat all his words! That and I'll take my boat back."

"What vacant Council seat you nitwit? There ain't none now." The other other man said.

"That's what you think! I have it from a very creidbla... cradib... trustworthy source that there is in fact a seat open." I said with authority. The small voice in my brain noticed that it was quieter for some reason, and that this could be a problem for some reason, but I was still pretty good at ignoring it.

"Just because there's a seat open don't mean you gonna get it kid." The first other man said.

"Yeah!" The other other man felt it necessary to add.

"It's just gonna go to Morton the Merciful¹², or that Grimm fella from Uprising up north."

¹² Again with pirates and their terrible naming sense. Morton was famous for taking those who even mentioned the M word (mutiny) on his ship, and doing terrible things to them. He would hang people from the main mast upside-down for days on end, toss them in the ocean in sea monster infected territory, and the worst I had heard

"But that's just it!" I exclaimed, noticing I was a bit louder than before, but that wasn't a huge issue. I was good at being loud. "I also know that da King is looking to put a relatively rookie pirate on the Council, he wants a fresh new per-spec-tive." I stumbled over the last word a bit for some reason. I couldn't fathom why, I was feeling incredibly intelligent and proud of all that I knew at this point.

"Stop being ridiculous you little brat." Other other man said.

"Your face is ridiculous!" I retorted. (Oh yeah, back on my A game for insults. I high fived myself in my head.)

"Gentlemen, I believe we were talking about the Pirate King selecting a newcomer?" the stern man pushed.

"I don't want to talk about no ridiculous notions with this crazy fool. And what's with that way yer speaking like anyway? So proper and formal. I bet you're just a fool from Legrand or something!" First other man shouted at Stern man.

"You're a drunk bastard, and I'm not. That's why I sound proper and formal to you." Stern man retorted.

I was about to say something philosophical about how inside every sober man is simply a drunken bastard trying to get out, but stopped when I realized that something was very wrong. I have pride in many of my skills, and one of those was the ability to sober up quickly. For some reason that kicked in at this point. I realized for the first time that the entire bar had quieted down to listen in on our conversation. I also realized that people from Beluga did not appreciate those from the other side of the island very much and the simple accusation could be enough to start a bar fight (cue flashbacks to this afternoon with the merman incident) and I had no intentions to die a fourth time today. I looked around and could visibly see people coiling to spring at the notion of a punch being thrown.

I decided to start saying something, maybe a joke, to defuse the situation when an arm draped over my shoulder. I look over to find tall, dark, and handsome there smiling brightly at everyone. "Hear hear!" He shouted, I just wish he hadn't done so in my ear. "Bartender, another round for the chap with the hilarious notions in his head, and another round for the entire bar! We all need our dreams, don't we?!" He said with a smile and a wave of his hand. The entire bar erupted in cheers and went back to their own businesses. I knew that this guy would be a bad choice for a first mate – simply too much leadership in those shiny teeth and loud voice of his. The crowd cheered and gladly took their new

was he had a Reviver revive someone with a dagger still in them. Reportedly when the flesh had healed around the weapon it caused inconceivable pain, as well as leaving a pretty disfiguring scar. Merciful my ass. Thankfully they did a better job with Grimm, fucker had skulls adorning all his ships in his fleet.

round while they shook their heads, laughing that they believed for a moment the drunken fantasy of a man in beluga. I was impressed.

"Three cheers for Buck!" One of the men in the bar shouted.

The man called Buck smiled and gave a very gentlemanly wave while he started pushing me towards the table he had, along with Mr. Stern man. Can't say I wasn't thankful for the save from Tall-Dark-Handsome-Buck. I bet this guy was already a captain. I had to take some metal notes from him. I thankfully had enough presence of mind to pick up the round he had bought for me before I left the bar too. It looked like my day wasn't completely ruined after all if I could meet nice people like this.

Reynard 3

Reynard was inwardly punching himself. He had forgotten how eager people in Beluga were for a good brawl for no good reason. He silently rebuked himself for not modifying his speech, it would be simple enough to mimic the lingo from Carnage, but it had slipped his mind. Too much thinking about the politics behind this mission had him distracted, and distractions led to mistakes, and mistakes were not something he could afford to make. Being killed would be one thing – unfortunate to be sure – but if he had been identified as someone from Central he would have been dumped into the bay in a matter of seconds.

He truly was thankful for the assistance from Buck, but it seemed he wasn't quite finished with him yet. Reynard was being led to a table in the back corner of the bar along with the impudent fool which almost incited this whole mess. He assumed that Buck was going to rebuke the two of them for causing a scene, Reynard planned to tune him out and move on as soon as possible, although the vice-grip he had on his shoulder was preventing that for the moment. After a fiasco like that, a change of scene would only be helpful. He also reminded himself that he would have to find lodging for the night, sleeping on the streets in Beluga wasn't an intelligent idea by any stretch.

Reynard had just formulated his excuse that would allow him to extract himself from the unfortunately literal clutches of Buck when Buck nodded slightly, probably judging them to be far enough in the back and spun on his heel with a face that would make even Mr. Lambert possibly worry that he had done something wrong. Reynard half smiled simply out of the shock of that image.

"Where did you learn that information?" He said, pointing an accusatory finger at the drunkard. Reynard raised his eyes. That was an interesting choice of words. Words usually chosen by another who wished to keep something silent. Perhaps he would delay his exit after all.

"Wha-?" The drunkard eyes widened, most likely not expecting to be rebuked in this manner.

Buck simply kept his finger and eyes locked on the drunkard, waiting for a satisfactory answer.

"Well... uh... I mean, like I said, Alabaster Rockwell—"

"Alabrect." Reynard corrected.

"Like I said, Alabrect Rockwell was a complete ass earlier to me, and I was putting him in his place like the rogue he was, and then there was this wager, and he told me about the Pirate King and his magical poof he did."

"Magical what?" The man asked. Reynard was curious too. How much exactly did this drunkard know?

"He made one of the Council go away. Alabrect was all bragging that he took his soul but I bet that can't be it because only Death can do that so he was obviously lying trying to look impressive but I didn't buy it because he was just trying to make me seem like a two bit low life not fit to be a pirate but I said I'd show him because I am fit to be a pirate I'm going to be on the Council of Nine and if I don't make it now I'm gonna be his cabin boy and I'd rather run away to live with the mermen before I'd subject myself to that and—" At this point it seemed he remembered that he hadn't breathed in a while, and sat down abruptly and took a few deep breaths.

"To the deeps with that man's son," Buck cursed, "I'll have to give him a stern lecture when I get back."

Reynard couldn't resist. "If you'll excuse my questioning – get back to what exactly?" Although he was fairly confident he knew the answer. He just couldn't believe it until he received confirmation. Always make sure you have the facts straight before launching into anything.

"The Council of Nine of course," Buck said slyly. Reynard was silently impressed by how wide the drunkard's mouth opened when he heard that.

"You'll forgive me if I don't quite believe you," Reynard said. He had to choose his words carefully. Something in his gut told him that the authority this man presented made him the real deal, but if he asked straight out the questions he had he would get nowhere. "Any swindler hiding in bar could claim to be from the Council."

"True," Buck nodded, "too bad you guys have nothing I want to swindle from you."

"Then why intervene there?" Reynard asked, "You could have simply watched as both of us got beat to a pulp in the middle of a bar brawl."

"Wuldn't be the first time towday." The drunkard mumbled to himself.

Buck ignored the comment from the drunkard, "You misunderstand me. I couldn't care less if you two got stabbed, robbed, or anything of the sort. However, I'm fairly confident that my captain

would prefer that the information that a Council seat is open remain confidential, as well as the fact that he was the one who created that opening. Half of Beluga's population is up and coming pirates trying to make a name for themselves. You light a fire underneath all their asses and you have chaos. Believe it or not, chaos makes things harder for my cappy to keep things under control."

"Wait just a tick," The drunkard piped in, "You're *hic* saying that your captain made the opening. Ala...whatever said that the Pirate King was the one who killed the man. That would make you a crew member on the Pirat-!" The drunkard shouted, or at least until Buck's hand clamped over his mouth.

"Yet another piece of information I would prefer to not be spread about." Buck said. Reynard could tell he enjoyed the near worship he was receiving from the drunkard. "But since we're already at this point, there's no harm in spilling the full story." Buck wiped his hand on his pants and extended it to the drunkard first. "The name is Buck, and I'm the current Pirate King's first mate."

Reynard almost couldn't believe it. Earlier today had he met anyone claiming to simply be on the Council he wouldn't have believed them, but this man seemed to be armed with the knowledge that only those on the Council could know, the air he carried himself with, his authoritative manner, and slight smugness all told Reynard deep inside that this guy was telling the truth – as incredulous as it seemed.

"Jack... Jack Klipp." The drunkard managed to stumble out as he dumbfoundedly took Buck's hand.

"And you are?" Buck asked, now extending his hand to Reynard.

Reynard took the hand, "Reynard." He blurted, still stunned by the recent revelations, and instantly regretted it. Being distracted led to mistakes, and telling your actual name was one of the largest mistakes he could have made. Even larger if this man was actually the first mate to the Pirate King.

"So I get his story," Buck said, motioning to Jack, "He's an idiot."

"Hey tha-"

"But what's your story?" Buck said, ignoring the interruption, "You're way too prim and proper to be from Beluga, and someone like you wants to join a pirate crew? Sorry, but I just can't see it."

Reynard actually stopped and thought for a moment this time, realizing that any more mistakes would cost him dearly in the long run. "There isn't too much to tell. I'm from a large family from Signia." He nodded slightly, sort of affirming to himself that this was a good lie to tell. Signia was far from any central pirate towns, and had a reputation as one of the few orderly and reputable towns. Since he had already been accused of being 'proper,' reinforcing the stereotype couldn't hurt. "I didn't want to be

sentenced to a life of simply running the family business, so I left. I decided anything would be better, and pirating seemed to be a life full of adventure, or the like.” He concluded with a shrug, as if he didn’t know himself what it was truly like.

“Hal!” Jack burst in. “I knew I had you pegged as the adventurous sort!”

Buck leaned back, thankfully accepting the tale with a nod. “By the way Jack, out of sheer curiosity, what was this wager you mentioned with Alabrect?” He said.

With that Jack launched into the tale of his day. Reynard was taken aback at simply how awful his luck had been, but noted that this added perfectly to his deaths make people stupid – stupid people die more often loop theory. Buck simply laughed at the conclusion of his tale. Reynard wasn’t quite sure what the point to all this was, and was eager to attempt to lure the conversation back to the Pirate King. Any information he could glean would be helpful. If he could even get on the good side of Buck, maybe he could get into the Council through that avenue. A slim chance, but a small possibility was still a possibility.

Jack took a deep swig of his drink once he had finished his tale, and then slammed it on the table with a bit more force than he expected, judging by how he had jumped from the action. He shook it off quickly though, “So Buck,” he continued, “Mr Fancypants Reynard and I told you about ourselves, but you didn’t tell us what your story is.”

Aside from being called fancy-pants, Reynard wanted to cheer for Jack right then and there.

Buck laughed out loud and shook his head. “Fraid I’ve already told you two fellows a bit too much already.” He suddenly leaned forward and Reynard could almost feel the air change around him. “But I do have an idea that I believe you two perhaps would like to hear.”

Reynard was slightly bummed that he diverted Jack’s question so easily, but simply raised his eyebrows while Jack nodded vigorously, murmuring his assent. Finding out more could wait; this he had to hear.

“Simply put,” Buck said, “I’ve recently had a slight… disagreement… with Alabrect Rockwell. The father, not the son,” he added as a swift afterthought, “Although the son sounds like a right asshole as well. Additionally, my captain is blind to certain issues that have recently come to light, so it is up to me to make things right. So here is my idea – I help you,” he motioned to Jack, “build up your crew and fleet, to give you a push to just get my captain aware of the fact that you exist. Getting into the selection is going to have to be through your own power, but you sort of remind me of myself when I was younger so-”

Before he could finish that sentence Jack erupted with a noise that could only be described as a high pitched squee.

"Never make that sound again." Buck said.

"Yes sir."

"As I was saying, you get yourself into that selection and win that bet with Alabrect and make him your financial backer. Complete child's play, right?"

"Right." Jack said, surprisingly brimming with confidence now.

"All he has to do is beat out every other pirate out there for the position." Reynard mocked, not really feeling the same confidence that Jack and Buck seemed to have going for them at the moment.

"You forget that you'll have my help along the way." Buck added.

Reynard thought for a moment. "I fail to see how this helps you, and more importantly, I fail to see what this has to do with me."

Buck leaned back with a knowing smile. "Well every pirate captain needs a first mate – someone who can hold things together, and keep track of the things the pirate king is too... preoccupied to deal with." Buck slowly said, trying to get the right words out. "An impulsive pirate captain with a prim and proper first mate from Signa. I can think of no better combination to get the rumors spreading faster than a ship running from a storm."

Reynard had to admit – that wasn't a bad idea, although for different reasons from the other two. Having the first mate of the pirate king back the captain of a ship he could become first mate on. Not a bad start at all. The fact that this Jack appeared to be a blithering idiot could be dealt with. Idiots are good at chasing bait, a fact that Buck seemed to be taking advantage of as well. If things started to go sour, he had another option – to find Alabrect and join his crew. He could probably invent some story that he was swindled by Jack and wants to get back at him, and thus would do anything to make sure Alabrect would win. From what Reynard knew of his personality so far he assumed that he would eat that story up. Either way got him closer to his goal of getting into the Council.

"And as for what it has to do with me," Buck continued, "well, my captain provides me a certain amount of freedom, but alas there are things I am not able to do without arousing suspicions. I find myself in need of a fleet for certain... reasons. Once you have Alabrect's funds at your mercy, you can use them to amass a large fleet at which point you turn command of them over to me."

"It seems a bit fishy." Reynard said.

"Oh please," Jack dismissed the concern with a wave of his hand. "If he helps me- err... us get there, then it's only fair we repay him somehow."

"Why would the first mate of the Pirate King need a fleet other than the one he already owns?" Reynard mused.

"For a moment when the captain's and first mate's views differ, usually the fleet will obey the captain's commands, not mine."

Reynard was still a bit wary of the secrecy surrounding Buck's words, but couldn't rightly use that feeling as a legitimate reason to turn down this chance.

"This sounds quite impressive and all, but where exactly do we start?" Reynard asked.

"I'll tell you where," Buck said, taking a deep breath, "First things first we..."

Jack 4

I woke up with one of those headaches you get when you have too much excitement the night before, but nothing could keep me down today. That could all wait. I leapt out of bed and charged towards my dresser – a bit too eagerly, as the new bump on my forehead would show as I careened into the wardrobe itself. Shaking my head, I pulled out I put on my best clothes, including this excellent wide brimmed hat with a single feather in it – no good captain should ever be caught without his pirating hat – and was ready to face the day. I paused briefly to glance in the mirror and grinned like a maniac. Buck had told us to meet at the break of dawn outside of the Rusty Harpoon in order for us to get ready.

I still couldn't believe my luck. I had met the Pirate King's first mate. Not only that, but he said he was going to help me get onto the Council! Well, not precisely like that, and there were some strings attached, but the general gist of it was there. I even had a first mate! Reynard and I really hit it off! I could tell he was a bit nervous, having just come from a peaceful place to basically the pirating center of Calypso. He was about my age, maybe a bit older, but he lacked the charisma I had, the charisma that made Buck say that I was like him when he was younger!

That seriously made my night.

Like. Seriously.

I scooped up a few pieces of bread and jammed them in my mouth before running out the door, stopping only a moment to pick up my trusty flintlock pistol. I hadn't had much reason to use it recently, but perhaps that would change soon. The world rushed by, slowly brightening as the sun started to illuminate the clouds, and before I knew it, I found myself skidding to a stop in front of the Rusty Harpoon.

Much to my chagrin, both Buck and Reynard were already present, looking bored and making idle chatter. I had so wanted to be the first on the scene, but punctuality had never been my strong suit.

"Morning fellas!" I said as cheerily as possible and elicited a wince of pain from myself. I never knew you could be loud enough to cause yourself pain with your own hangover, but I'd work past it.

"G'morning there. Where's the fire?" Buck said with a smirk. "Tain't no rush now. The worst thing you can do when first setting out is be underprepared, so preparation is a must." I nodded in agreement at his sagely wisdom. Reynard just harrumphed.

"So, you mentioned gathering supplies, but wouldn't it be easier to get a dockmaster to handle all of those issues?"

"Not exactly the supplies I had in mind."

"What do you mean?" I said, cocking my head.

"The mundane issues of food, gunpowder, bedding, and the like can all be taken care of. The preparation I was referring to was getting a crew ready, for your first excursion."

"So soon?" Reynard raised an eyebrow.

"Awww, don't worry there first mate! I'll protect ya!" I could feel the confidence seeping from every part of me; it wasn't a bad feeling to have.

A quick look passed over Reynard's face, but before I could comment or even register what it was, Buck was already back to talking, and I wasn't about to miss a moment of that.

"However, before we even get to all that, I was curious to know what you two even know about fighting."

"Fighting?" I asked.

"Yes. Fighting. You can't go about being all piratey without being able to hold your own in a fight. So do you guys have any way of defending yourselves?"

Reynard shifted his weight before responding. "Well, I grew up and have done... hunting... before, as well as learning how to fence from my... erm... family."

"So a cutlass and a rifle are in need of procurement for you, and what about you?"

I puffed my chest out with pride. "Well, when I'm not busy being outnumbered and caught unarmed, I'm a pretty good shot with Mr. Trusty here." I said, patting my pistol in my holster. This

wasn't a flat out lie. While I wasn't perfect in any stretch of the word, I occasionally even surprised myself with my skills. I hadn't been able to practice them recently, but I used to set up targets around the town and see if I could hit them at the most unexpected of times – hip shooting, stuff like that.

Buck nodded and grinned an impish grin. "Mind if I see for myself?" He started looking around, not finding a suitable target. A sudden flash of inspiration passed on his face and he drew out a coin. He started flipping it nonchalantly, up and down, up and down. "Could you hit this mid-air from there?"

I set a grim look of determination on my face, and pulled Mr. Trusty out of his holster. Hitting a small moving target wasn't something I practiced often, but I had done more impressive feats before. With a quick movement I targeted the coin as it neared the apex of its flip, simultaneously crouched down, and let fire. A bang (a very very regrettably loud bang) followed by a satisfying ping indicated that I had hit my intended target.

Fweeee I looked over to Buck, his lips pursed in a whistle. "Not too shabby." He said, nodding his head with praise. Reynard though, for some reason, had brought his hand up to his face. I shrugged at him, with a curt, "What?"

"Your form is terrible..." He said, slightly shaking his head. Leave it to a rich Signia boy to complain about the form of a pirate. "And why did you grab your hat?"

"Huh?" I looked at my other hand, which I had presumed to be unoccupied. Needless to say, it was no longer. I was holding my hat out, almost looking like I was posing for a painting. I glanced at Reynard, then back to my hat, and simply shrugged. I couldn't for the life of me remember grabbing it off of my head.

Buck however was laughing. "Interesting style kid. Though I think I know the problem here." He fumbled around for a moment, pulling a pistol of similar size out of one of his pockets. I hadn't even seen where he was storing it. He flipped it around, catching it by the barrel, and extended the handle to me. "I've seen this before. I can assume Mr. Reynard here is a thinker – all of his actions come from practice. You however are a doer. You just wanted to hit that target, so you let your body do what it had to do. However, your form IS pretty terrible, so you had to balance yourself somehow."

"Huh." I said, similarly stumped. I was again impressed at the extent of the knowledge of Buck. I was still screaming inside my head like a little girl who had seen the spirit of love from one of those gods tales. This was a dream come true in every way.

I took the pistol from Buck and held it in my right hand. I hadn't ever shot with that hand much, Mr. Trusty just felt like he fit so much better in my left, but Buck wouldn't steer me wrong here. I stood around, turning the two pistols over in my hands. He was right – this did feel much more natural. When I looked back at Buck, he was grinning madly in front of me. I could tell he seemed to like that expression.

He held up his hand, I saw the glint of a gold piece there. With a slight shift, he revealed another hidden behind the first. "Ready?" He asked.

Before being able to say ready for what, he threw his hand upward, releasing the two coins. My body struggled to catch up with my brain for a moment, and then I leapt into action. It was thankfully pretty easy to keep track of the two coins; the sun had barely come over the horizon, and gave a nice shine to the two of them. I did what I always did and let my body find whatever position it wanted to and then relaxed as I pulled the triggers. Right hand first, since it took a mite bit more concentration, and then Mr. Trusty. Two bangs, one headache becoming a bit more pounding by the moment, and then a ping followed by another. I grinned; even I was impressed by myself there.

I looked around. This time both of Reynard's eyebrows were raised. He seemed like the tough to impress type, and the fact that I had just impressed him meant something good: I could play this off as being child's play. I stood back up, realizing I had taken a sort of kneeling pose in order to shoot something – two somethings even – directly above my head. I opened my mouth to deliver some suitably badass line in an impressive fashion when.

"WHAT IN THE DEEPS ARE YOU DANG CRITTERS DOING MAKING ALL THAT RACKET. SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO SLEEP!"

I looked up in surprise. Some grouchy old man was poking his head out of a building behind us from the second story.

"Uh... sorry?" Was all I could manage to think of.

"Harrumph!" he said, popping back in.

"Well," Buck said, clapping his hands together, "It would seem my fears that you may not have what it takes were unfounded. I was curious how someone boasting about being the next pirate on the pirate council was going to manage if he couldn't hold his own, specially not after I heard about your day yesterday."

"Yesterday was..." I scratched the back of my head, looking for the right words. "Yesterday was just a really bad day." I settled on.

"Well, we can put that behind you, and us, and move on. Seeing as how it would appear that the two of you can handle yourselves, we should move onto the next matter."

"Which is?"

"I mentioned before, you'll be needing a crew. Now you can go down to the docks and wave around a coin purse and you'll have a boat full of cutthroats before you can even sneeze, but a crew like

that never lasts long. Every good building needs a foundation, and so does your crew. I can help fill in the handcount. And your first mate will need to get himself some weaponry as well."

Reynard waved his hands dismissively, "Don't worry about me; I should be able to manage myself in 'gearing up' as it were."

I nodded. I was already in a different place in my mind. I was already coming up with a few ideas about who I would approach – only the best and most impressive people would do. I had a few friends with ears low to the ground, and in a town like Beluga, when impressive people were in town; they always had eyes on them.

"So what then, meet up later to discuss if we have found any suitable members for the crew?"

Buck nodded, "Same bar as last night, with less drink involved this time Jack," he grinned. "We can't waste any time if we want to be in time to catch Gargon."

I mumbled something in agreement, and turned to set on my way. I was going to pay a visit to Nancy. Nancy loved to gossip, and thankfully being at the front desk of the BRB center had its advantages. Spirits couldn't do much except talk, so she often let them talk, and simply listened. I had heard tale that there was a girl somewhere in Beluga that was responsible for near a third of the casualties in the past week alone, and if the stories were any indication, she was a must have for the crew. Before that however, there was something nagging my brain that I couldn't quite place a finger on.

Reynard broke the silence, and thankfully identified what was bugging me so much. "You mean THE Gargon? The reason that no sane captain has taken the Battarick Pass for the past few months?"

"The very one."

I slowly turned back around, attempting to give time to let the cogs in my brain turn and get back up to speed. They didn't in time though. "Bwa? Hur. But. Why?"

Buck let out a laugh a bit more gargantuan than I expected. "Silly Jack – you don't think that going after any old merchant ship is going to catch my cappy's attention do you?"

It took a moment for me to register again that cappy in this situation referred to the bleeding Pirate King. "So... what are you proposing?" I said, with a gut instinct that I would greatly respect but not really enjoy the answer.

"Well, those kinds of pirates are so last year, and old fashioned, the very thing he isn't looking for right now! So what about a pirate captain with a sense of morals, one that robs from the robbers themselves!"

“Wouldn’t that make us... you know... a giant target?”

“Precisely what we want. Why go after fame when it can simply come to you?”

I pondered that for a moment. It made sense in a crazy way. And that was usually the best way. I wasn’t really the type to go chasing after merchants anyway. That part always bothered me. Most of them weren’t like Alabrect, even if they didn’t have the best reputation; they probably did work hard to get their money in place. Lacking a proper answer, I just grinned and nodded. I can see why Buck liked the expression so much.

And with that I turned and was on my way.

Reynard 4

Jack 10

I climbed up the side of the galleon slowly, using the grappling hook Flandre had left behind. I’ll admit that missing the ship entirely and then falling overboard certainly wasn’t anything I would call elegant, but I was fairly confident that no one had noticed. I briefly wondered why no ships had any deterrents on the side (I made a mental note that a few well-placed spikes or swords would be a good way to make sure no one tried this method on me) and then made the final haul up to the railing. What greeted me was quite the sight. I had heard tales in bars about fights on the open ocean, how every roll of the ocean made new opportunity; how every crash of the waves was accompanied with a boom of a gun. I hung there for a moment, simply admiring the anarchy of it all – I was also finally able to get a good look at my crew in action. I felt a welling of pride in me when I recognized anyone whoopin’ ass, so to speak. I ducked suddenly as Dug chucked some poor fellow right over my head with a very satisfied primal yell.¹³ I heaved myself over, stopping for a moment to pat Dug on the back (positive reinforcement does so help the morale), and started working my way towards the captain’s cabin.

I must admit, had someone told me that I would live to see the day when I had the chance to see a Sellekai half a man’s weight break his arm, pull out the broken bone, and use that bone to stab that same man in the neck, I would have told you that that was an absurd and oddly specific prediction that would never come true. I would have been, interestingly enough, proven wrong today. I silently

¹³ A good “RAAAARRRRRGHHHHH” is the perfect accompaniment for any suitably badass enough action. Needless to say Dug had this down pat.

applauded Flandre in my head. It was a very surreal experience wandering through Gargon's ship turned battlefield (no I wasn't avoiding fights with the other crew; I just wanted to savor my first naval battle for as long as possible. It wasn't that I was afraid; I just knew it my crew would be so disappointed if Gargon was alive at the end of the battle and their captain was dead. What kind of captain would that be? So I weaved my way through the flurry of cutlasses, lead, and even some fireballs – and here I was thinking I was the only one with non-humans on his crew). For once I was able to see what it was like being on the winning side of things. I smiled to myself at this thought.

After taking a small detour to shoot some degenerate in the back of the head who had the nerve to corner Gilbert against the railing, I kicked down the door to the captain's cabin¹⁴

I couldn't quite make it as far as I had wanted to. The gist of the missing chapters and the leap to Jack would be a gathering of crew members all for the first confrontation between Jack and the pirate captain Gargon. This first confrontation gets Jack pushed into the spotlight, and makes the real story set off. I couldn't quite make it however.

A brief note for the readers. If you can't tell, above is for a future chapter. I didn't quite get as far as I wanted to with this story, but I have learned a lot in its crafting. It will certainly grow to something more than it is now, but that's taking more time than I expected. Overall though, I wouldn't trade this learning experience for anything. Thanks for sticking with me and reading my story thus far!

¹⁴ I had really always wanted to do this, but I must admit, it hurt my foot much more than I expected.