

Justicar Jhee and the Spectral Armada

Justicar Jhee Mysteries, Volume 0

Trevol Swift

Published by Trevol Swift, 2019.

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First Printing: Nov 2019

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Dedication

*To my Aunt Doris, RIP, and Ticia and. Nay-Nay.
What sisters are all about.*

1 Errands



To Walk on the Beach

While Justicar Jhee wondered if it was too late to call the wedding off, she ventured a rare glance out the master bedroom window to the Storm Shield. The mystical storm shield built to protect the Blessed Isles against barbarian invasion had caused sea levels to rise and rendered many isles uninhabitable. A fishing trawler drifted on the morning mists. A charter boat and several smaller headed to meet it. More guests for the wedding, perhaps. Jhee grimaced at the *kolal* she sipped. It had gone tepid, and Shep had made it too bitter to begin with due to haste.

"Yav-Yav. Drink it on the move," her senior spouse had said as he chivvied her from her childhood bedroom. She often slipped back into her old bedroom to sleep. Just as often, Shep woke her up, so she returned to the master suite with no one else the wiser.

The suite, once her parents and long since become hers, overlooked the sea, the sea where too many of her family rested. She preferred the view from Shep's bedroom or her childhood bedroom. Both faced the hills and other isles. But as the woman of the house, it was her obligation, her duty, to reside in the master suites. Especially once she had expanded her household beyond one husband.

A walk on the beach might calm her nerves. Despite her misgivings, she liked to wade in the surf to visit her family. No one had seen her surviving sister since her parents' memorial service. Jhee kept her vision focused on the Shield and not the water until the growing gathering of folk on the beach caught her eye.

Local fisherfolk had gathered to watch the charter boat's occupants board the vessel drifting not far offshore. The Storm Child had been gracious enough to return undamaged one toy xe had seized.

Jhee's investigative instincts activated. A mystery was afoot on her doorstep. Yet, she had to ignore it because of this wedding distraction. She grabbed a pair of farseer goggles and began assessing the facts. From the size and nets, the derelict appeared to be an artisanal fishing vessel. The flaking weave-glass finish indicated it was far too modest for even a recreational craft belonging to a wedding attendee. Besides, those crafts arrived from the other isles' direction, not the Shield.

Perhaps Jhee should look into this matter. As Justicar, didn't her duty to the district demand it? No one would notice her departure, and she would be back before the ceremony even began. It was probably just routine. She trod lightly when she saw, Mirrei, her bride-to-be's door ajar.

The voice of Jhee's second husband, Kanto, drifted out. "I planned everything, so all you and *denbe* have to do is show up and swear your vows. Your wedding date has been precisely timed to follow a year and a full-tide after mine, which itself is a full-tide after her anniversary with *denme*. This way, we can make future anniversaries a household event."

Jhee halted her sneaking and listened.

"Yet, held closest to your anniversary since it so neatly falls in the middle," Mirrei said.

"Precisely so. Now you're catching on."

"This feels more like your wedding than ours."

The simple wedding Jhee preferred had transformed into the social event of the season. Mirrei had expressed a desire for the same, but Kanto insisted. Though he may have had the right of it. Their marriage meant as much to the Reaches as it did to either her or Mirrei. Quarrels of the past belonged out to sea if the district was ever to heal.

"Forgive me," Kanto said. "I offered to help you plan your wedding so I could bond with you. If we are to exist as part of the same household, it's best we try to get along."

"We get along fine. When you don't order me around."

"As if I could. Do you think denbe knows what she's getting into marrying you?"

"As much as she did with you, I suppose."

Jhee waited a moment longer before she crept to the back stairs through the kitchen. She had just reached the kennels, when a voice asked, "Is there something I can get for you, Justicar?"

Bax, her head servant, sat on a crate by the kennel entrance, puffing on a pipe. Jhee smoothed her robes. "Oh. Bax, I didn't see you there."

He gave her a once over. "I gathered. Might your humble servant inquire where the Justicar is going?"

Jhee snatched the leash for their pet shark hound from the wall. "I was just going to walk Dari."

"In your dressing gown? And your sash of office?"

"I can't rightly go out there in my wedding finery, can I?"

His yellow, glowing eyes had dimmed some with age, but still caught more than most. "Nay, Justicar."

"If it concerns you that much, fetch me robes more suitable to wear."

"I can walk Dari for you, Justicar."

"I know, but I wanted to get out and stretch my legs a bit."

"Uh-hm, why don't I come with you?"

"No need. I also need to finalize the pickup time for the wedding barge. Boring stuff."

Bax hopped off the crate. "Then I can keep the Justicar company. I'll get Dari ready, and you can grab your day robes from the mudroom."

After Jhee donned her casual, walking attire, she slipped on her Justicar's sash and insignia. When she emerged, Bax gathered Dari for their walk.

Dari pulled against the leash as they stole down the back steps. Jhee spotted Shep overseeing the appetizer assortment. She snagged a floral arrangement with her free hand and kept her face turned away to blend in among the guests. Only servants and servers who carried food, flowers, and other favors for the wedding saw their passage.

On the way along the private lane to the shore, Jhee watched the mysterious vessel on the beach recede. A set of small steps from the rear garden emptied onto a secluded cove. From there, a short walk down the back trail led to the seashore where the boat drifted. She could be back in plenty of time to meet Mirrei at the union bench. Once she had satisfied her curiosity about the abandoned craft, she would return. Instead, the vessel and its questions disappeared behind her home.

If it weren't for that drenched letter.

It had been bad enough when Miramar showed up on her threshold with Mirrei in tow. Once the home Miramar and Mirrei had grown up in became flooded, they had sought to inhabit Crag Manor. They wound up at Hillside instead. With the loss of their other homes and the death of Mirrei's father years earlier, the Crag Halls wanted the Crag back. By the time they left, Miramar had extracted a promise from Jhee to pay for the girl's tuition.

Not long after, Mirrei had arrived in Jhee's parlor alone, bearing her mother's letter. Miramar had died trying to save her home—once Jhee's home away from home—Mirrordale. Mirrei told a harrowing tale of Miramar swamped by an enormous wave while grabbing sentimental items from the doomed house. *"... she turned to confront the towering wave bearing down on her. Defiantly, she faced it as it crashed upon our dock. That was the last I saw of her. I waited for days. Then I was forced to admit she was never coming back. I had nowhere else to go. Having remembered how kind you were to us during our stay, I took the letter she left and headed to Hillside."*

In the letter, Miramar forgave Jhee. She also appealed to her to help Mirrei. Because of the years of fighting and state of the marriage con-

tracts, the Crag Halls and Mitsus had contested her rights to either manor. A circumstance Jhee had at least partially caused. After much negotiation and legal back and forth, all parties agreed to drop the matter if Jhee fulfilled the contract she had broken years ago. She and Mirrei must marry. Then their heir would gain title to everything. More blood geld was the last thing Jhee wanted, so she had designated Mirrei as her heir.

Jhee and Bax stopped first at the florist to ensure the garlands for the wedding barge had been delivered. As they left the barge rental office, Bax asked, "Pre-wedding flutters?"

"Some," Jhee conceded. "Shep asked you to make sure I didn't pull anything like this."

"Aye, Justicar."

"This marriage is the right thing, Bax? For me? For the Reaches?"

"Not for me to say, my lady."

As Jhee talked to the on-duty harbormaster about the arrangements, Bax slipped away. They were just finalizing the time and location when she heard a gaggle of voices growing louder.

Bax hurried over and took Dari's leash. "All right, Justicar, let's get you back home. Mr. Shep tasked me with keeping you from wandering, and I've already failed."

"Well, if you won't tell him, then I won't. What's going on with the fisherfolk, Bax?"

"Nothing, my lady."

A group of fisherfolk spotted her and headed her way. Jhee rubbed her hands. By the Divine Mechanism's purpose, the mystery of the abandoned boat had found her anyway.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am. Sorry to bother the Justicar on her union day."

"I'll take care of this, Justicar," Bax said. He tried to guide the contingent away from the canoe deposit counter.

"No, what is it?" Jhee asked.

"We've found a body washed up on the beach."

Jhee sobered. Loss of life changed this strange occurrence from a curiosity into an official matter.



The Dame and the Derelict

Drownings struck Jhee hardest. However, living in the Reaches meant drownings were a fact of life. Accidents at sea were reasonably common. They had become unreasonably common once Jhee had implemented the mandatory autopsies. She was sure, though, that this would be just an everyday mishap. Check it out, fill out a report, and go on with her wedding as planned. Simple. But she needed to do her due diligence regarding whatever might have occurred there at the surf. If there were foul wiles involved in the finding of that body. It was her job to find out what had happened. Mirrei and Kanto would understand. Shep certainly would. But then if she thought they would understand, why had she sneaked out?

"Come along, Bax. We need to investigate at once."

Jhee began to follow. She paused when she realized he was not following.

"What is it, Bax?"

Bax scratched his head and kicked at the planks. "Um, Mr. Shep, would have my pouch if I let you do this."

"Shep isn't master of this household. I am. And as a Justicar, I have a duty to perform."

"Aye, Justicar, but your wedding day."

"I'm the only representative of the Central Authority out here, Bax. I'm always on duty. It's always me who has to see their Majesties' justice done."

"As you say, Justicar."

On a different beach from the vessel, fisherfolk stood around a tarp-covered form murmuring amongst themselves. They quieted as she, Bax, and Dari approached.

"Justicar, what an unfortunate circumstance to see you."

"Sore omen for your union day."

"Indeed," Jhee said.

The speaker touched his palms together at angles, then spat on the ground. "Makers make the Shield."

"Makers make the Shield," Jhee and several others responded.

Jhee avoided staring too much at the body. But sterned herself as she lifted the tarp to reveal the fisher's grayed, ocean-abused corpse. A trace of sea decay assailed her nostrils.

The all-too-familiar sounds of screaming rose in Jhee's ears as she thought back to that fateful day. The cries carried with the relentless crashing of waves against breakers, and then came the eerie silence. Some bodies had washed up on shore days later, but not all those lost and not intact. Her family interred only a locket and a shoe.

Jhee swallowed hard and pressed her lips together. The body was of a woman. Most of the tawny, body hair remained intact. No signs of water adaptation were present. The extremities showed predation, but the woman had not been in the water long.

A bystander spat. "Makers make the Shield. Could it be barbarians? Do you think they've already found a way through the Shield, Justicar?"

"Unlikely." Jhee moved aside the women's head hair. A prominent gash angled across her esca. Jhee captured an image with her conch. *May this one be Remade magnificent.* She quickly covered the body again before she embarrassed herself by adding her breakfast to the scene. "Does anyone recognize this one? Does anybody recognize who she is?"

"I can't say as I do, Justicar."

"I do, ma'am." The chestnut-furred woman who answered touched the devotion pouch around her neck to her lips then her esca. "It's Temari, Timo and Edi's girl, from across the channel."

"Across the channel" meant Briny Town, known as the wrong side of the channel according to most. So much for dealing with this matter quickly.

"She was supposed to be on a fishing haul. We didn't expect to see her back until tomorrow," the woman continued.

A fisherwoman declared, "Pirates. If they came for her boat, she would've fought."

Another folk nodded. "Any of us would've. What do you have if you don't have your boat?"

"Or family?"

The assembled folk gave murmurs of assent.

Inside the sleeves of her robes, Jhee dug her nails into her palms until her nausea subsided. "Also, a possibility. Pirates or raiders would have found it far simpler to kill her, and she shows no signs of wounds, though, aside from this blow to the head."

Drownings reminded Jhee of the toll the Makers and Lesser Makers, such as the Singers of the Sea, had taken on her family. Drownings also made it hard to determine the cause of death without an autopsy. Limited time remained to have one done. If this death were not accidental, Jhee would have to determine so without the benefit of an autopsy.

"You reckon she was pulled under by the sea folk. First Ones' Ruins ain't far from here."

"They favor them rusted hulks and sunken homes now. Wouldn't surprise me if they see them as their domain now."

"I sent it. Wisp whirls over the water at night."

"Nonsense. Them ain't nothing but some sea polyp blooms. The storms' been dredging them glow ones up from the depths."

"The little 'uns been catching dozens. Terrible eating. Great entertainment."

"I suppose the return of the Spectral Armada is jellyfish too. You saw her ship. Deep folk got her."

"They built the Storm Shield to keep the Other Folk out. What if what it did was trap them sea folk in here with us?"

When the tour boat sank, Jhee imagined she had seen the sea folk down there beckoning her to join them. She dreamed many times since they had called to her. Was that what drove her parents to the bluffs that fateful night?

If Temari had been thrown overboard, her body should have taken on adaptations to better suit her to marine survival. The process was not perfect. It did not always result in total adaptation like gills. But increased lung capacity, finger webbing, and a sleeker form happened almost automatically. If the event was sudden and enough, their bodies did not always have time to adapt before the sea overwhelmed them. If only the total adaptation process were quicker and more widespread, maybe her sister Ghele would still be alive. Adaption could also be actively countered say if one needed full dexterity in their hands to help free those who had been trapped.

The first order of business was to determine what happened to Temari's boat—lost at sea, capsized? No other flotsam littered the sand. Whatever currents brought the body to shore, surely would have washed up more items from her wrecked craft. The fickle Storm Child did not always give up its playthings so easily.

"It's been nasty seas out there if you sail too close to the storm zone. You think the boom got her?"

"Perhaps. The question remains, though. If she were out on a fishing haul, where is her vessel?"

Every eye went to the fishing trawler.

Aboard the vessel, charts and map weights had been strewn about consistent with the rough seas last night. The shipboard instruments

and engine still worked. A meal sat half-spilled on the table with more food on the deck. Though, Jhee found no trace of blood or prints—foot or otherwise—in the mess. No signs of a struggle in the wheelhouse or the crew cabins. Well-worn copies of "Dispatches from Arrow Point" filled a bunk shelf. One text, bookmarked with a second-hand purchase slip from yesterday, had fallen. These had been written in simpler times for her and the district. It surprised her anyone still read them. Jhee replaced the volume on the shelf.

"It's as if the crew had merely stepped outside," someone said.

Jhee faced the new arrival. "Who might you be?"

The woman had the dark fur of inland nobility, but not the deep black of the high imperials. "My signet. You're the justicar of this district."

The signet card read: Dame Porgi. Cryptobiology. Cryptozoology. "That I am. What brings you here, Dame?"

"Waitawba."

Jhee burst out laughing. "The World Turtle?"

No wonder the fisherfolk had the rumors of the Spectral Armada on their lips.

The woman's expression remained dead serious. "More like the size of an islet or a good-sized ship. *Gygix-Kupai Ylusia*, the gargantuan dragon turtle or *Gygix-Gamera Jaconis*, the jumbo island tortoise. There have been numerous sightings in the area lately."

"That's just sea talk, bluster to cover suspicious vessel losses."

"Perhaps."

"That was your charter boat that boarded. I thank you for bringing the vessel in, but this is Central Authority business now. Unless you're filing a salvage claim, I'll need you to clear the ship while I finish my investigation."

The woman tipped the brim of her hat to Jhee and left.

Grime outlined where the tortoiseshell, ownership plaque had been. The ship's identifiers had been removed if it ever had any. Reach

folk often only used plaques. For less reputable fisherfolk, it made boat swaps easier.

Jhee used arcana to resonate with the hull and check if the flows aligned with cyphering usage. The Storm Shield being so close swamped much else out. A few of the spectators bit on pieces of Maker geld, an act meant to ward off stray mystical energy. Several knocks against the hull returned no unusual arcane or mundane oddities, which ruled out false compartments. If Temari were smuggling, she was only a small-fisher. Jhee switched from cyphering to element drawing detection. On that measure, the vessel hummed to life like mosquitoes swarming stagnant water.

"A terrible shame. Someone will have to tell her mamere and babere."

The fisherfolk turned to Jhee. She stared for a moment, and then she squared her shoulders. "Of course."

Bax cleared his throat with much ceremony then made a show of checking his communication conch's time.

Subtle, Bax. Very subtle. Jhee sighed. "Would one of you kind folk bring me to her family's home?"

"Sure thing, Justicar," said the woman who had identified the body. "Just give me a moment to secure a boat."

No boat. The woman must have been another fisher wiped out by either the Shield's effect on the sea or the feud. Jhee had much to answer for in the Far Reaches.

2 A Justicar's Duty



Briny Town

Jhee tucked her hands inside of her robe and strode after the woman as she gathered up her fishing equipment. Soon, they went to her boat, and Jhee did her best not to look as terrified as she felt. The boat motored into the surf and passed much too close to the breakers. She kept her gaze focused solely forward. She also did finger-cyphering exercises to calm her nerves and keep her mind occupied so she could present a calm and authoritative air.

Storm Child, Storm Child, not today. Not today.

She turned to her ferrywoman. "Did she go out on her overnight haul alone?"

"Um, yes, ma'am. That was her way. She was very independent. But I think I saw her talking to that Imperial restitution rep."

Jhee thought to herself. "I would like very much like to meet this Imperial restitution representative."

"Should have said something sooner. She was among the folk on the beach, querying the boat."

"Maybe we'll chat on the way back," Jhee said. "The first order of duty is informing her family about her untimely death. I wish I had more answers to give them, though."

"Aye, it is a sad thing. No parent should have to see their child die."

Jhee pressed her lips together firmly. "No. No, they shouldn't."

Thinking on it more, Temari's land adapted body pointed more strongly toward a deliberate cause. If she went into the water alive, there should have been water adaptation signs. Either she chose not to adapt

because she wanted to die, or she wasn't alive when she went in the ocean. The blow to her esca may have been fatal.

Their voyage to Briny Town took them by her old family home, the one once on the beach. Seagulls whirled and screeched around the top level, the only part above water. She smiled about the days when she used to play with her brothers and sisters in the surf while listening to gran-gran's and grandmamere's sea tales. The coveted home was half reclaimed by the ocean now, as were many others. For many years, the wealthiest and most prestigious families built their residences on the low-lying Isles with ample beach and shoreline. Beach and coastline being in short supply, the Freshly Flush as they called them in her grandmother's day, raised islands from the sea by Folk ingenuity, like the development on the lee of the Reaches. Those had quickly become the trend during the Expansion.

Her current house, which sat among the hills, had been called a summer home, but it had been built as a hideout for their family's illegal smuggling and squelching. That was until grandmamere got religion and legitimized the family's businesses. When grandmamere bought her way via dowries into an impoverished house with a drop of imperial blood, their family gained a title and another home on the beach. Hill homes inspired ridicule. Respectable homes were on the beach not in the hills or on one of those trendy, mortal-made Isles. Then came the Shield. Now, the hill home served as her household's official residence. For other reasons, her family abandoned the beachside husk long before the flooding. Jhee changed her focus to the approaching stilt houses.

The charter woman bore them to the more squalid side of the channel, also known as Briny Town. Here, the water wasn't so clear. It varied anywhere from brownish to ruddy with runoff from the local canneries and fisheries. Unlike those homes on the other side of the channel, Briny Town's stilt and reed houses were not built on solid firm land or sandbars. These houses were built on groups of handmade reed bundles

or on stilts out in the water. Around here, the Empire cared little about the water quality. Around here, the floating structures were subject to massive waves and more flooding in the storms.

Although, the Briny Town folk might have the last laugh. The Briny Town folks' stilt houses and reed islands had fared better than the affluent's more permanent structures. Adding longer piles and lengthening their support struts of the homes on stilts was a much easier endeavor than protecting islets. Houses built on reed islands rose and fell as the water did. Though they were prone to other hazards such, as animal infestations and fire. Being on the water, kept many fire problems to a minimum. Whereas homes built on more solid foundations of the rock isles now existed in a near-constant state of flooding.

Her ferrywoman put ashore at a far away, but not too ramshackle looking house on stilts.

A woman hobbled onto the porch and asked, "Hey, what are you about?"

The guide responded with a traditional response, "I'm about the Makers' grim tidings for the folk of this house. May we stop upon your shore?"

The woman's gaze shifted this way and that. She whistled. A man shuffled out soon after her. "Mayhaps. What can I do for you, Justicar?"

"Excuse me, *mirs*, are you kin to Temari?"

"Mayhaps, we are."

"My tidings are grim for the folk of Temari."

The woman kicked the ladder bundle down for them. "Best come inside then."

The man threw them out a line which her fishing guide caught and used to secure their fishing boat. He and the woman went inside the house. Jhee and her guide climbed up onto the little walkway leading to the house. At the threshold to the home, Jhee paused.

Jhee pressed her hands together and touched her *esca*. "Would that my tidings never breached this door. I regret to inform you, ma'am and

sir, that we appear to have found your daughter washed up on shore on the beach, drowned."



Grim Tidings

The woman gazed about the humble dwelling for a suitable place for them to sit. The fetid stench of rotten fish and possibly sewage permeated everything. Jhee followed her gaze around the shabby house. These were simple folk, but proud. Their furnishings were modest, but they did their best to keep them in good working order, tidy, and well maintained. "We're simple folk," said the woman, Edi.

"It's all right, ma'am," Jhee said.

"Do you know what happened to her?" asked the father, Timo.

"Not yet, sir. I just wanted to inform you as soon as possible and to confirm the identification. My guide here says it's your daughter. I'll need your confirmation, though."

"You mean you don't even know if it's her? Then why are you coming in here and scaring us? It might not even be our Temari. What cause do you have to come to honest folks' house and start scaring them?" asked Edi.

"I captured an image of the woman found on the beach. I must warn you, the sea did what the sea does."

Jhee showed them the image. Edi staggered as if she had been struck. "Temari? Not our sweet Temari. No, it can't be."

Timo cast the dire news outside with a cup of water, then slipped an arm around her. For a few moments, both did nothing except cling to each other.

"I regret the tragedy befallen the folk of this house."

"Thank you, Justicar."

"We don't know what happened to her yet," Jhee said, "but I can assure you I will do everything in my power to figure out what happened to her. To that end, I must ask a few questions of you first. My guide here says that they were supposed to be on an overnight haul."

"Yes, ma'am, that's true. She'd been going on a lot lately. With the shield and the flooding, the fish are getting awful scarce, and we had to go out further and further to find some."

"And even then, the hauls weren't too good," said Edi. "Temari worked extra shifts at the cannery and the fish house, too, to just have enough for us to get by. All the kids did since we took sick. It's not like the old days where a family made a decent living for themselves with just the haul off their vessel. Now we're all working for those fellows up at the fish houses and canneries."

"Or your lady's family's aquaculture operation further out to sea."

"We want to thank you, lady. Those jobs were much needed even if there weren't enough for everyone."

"Think nothing of it good mirs. My family has wanted to give back for some time now for all that we have been given."

The man scoffed. "Given?"

"Hush," said Edi, "the Justicar is a guest in our house."

Timo folded his arms and glared at Jhee but said nothing else.

"Now, do you mind if I ask you a few more questions?"

"Of course, Justicar. Go ahead."

"Did anyone have cause to hurt your daughter? Or does she have a quarrel with anyone?"

"Only those drench Brackens over on Brack Water. They was always, always coming around to where we lay our traps and our fishing lines, trying to sponge off our haul."

"But our Temari she used to show them. She learned water drawing from an old manual and was the best on these here seas. Better than anybody. Especially them Brackens. She got so good that she could send a wave at them and scatter their ships over the whole stinking bay."

"Yep, our Temari is something." The man looked down, and his mouth twitched. Tears started to well up in his eyes. "Our Temari was something."

"Mirs, would you mind if I looked around Temari's room a bit?"

"No, not at all, Justicar."

Temari's parents walked her over to a part of the stilt house separated from the rest by a simple bead curtain. Most of these houses were only one room with a limited amount of privacy. Jhee looked at the stack of books beside Temari's billet. Their subjects spanned from architecture, fisheries science, and marine biology to bioeconomics, and fishery law. Sandwiched between the pages, Jhee found clippings of articles on Jhee's family aquaculture projects.

"Temari wanted to go to the Academy and study fisheries management and fisheries science," said her father. "She wanted to design the fish farms of the future. She tried to get a job with yours, but she didn't have much schooling."

"Unfortunate, she appeared to be very bright," Jhee said. One of Temari's books was an old, battered copy of the cyphering handouts written and distributed by Jhee's mentor, Jeja of Marpele. She examined Temari's modest belongings and imagined this might have been her life if she had been born into a different class. Or if her family's past had caught up with them. She had mixed feelings about her family's notorious history. All the smuggling and squelching never sat right with her. She was an officer of the law because she loved the law. To think she and her family were only two generations removed from being illegal alcohol producers.

Why think like that? What else could Jhee do? As odd as it was, her family's crimes had paved the way for her to rise to the position she held now. They did not have royal blood or noble blood, but they had risen to Imperial notice. Her grandmother often said when Jhee complained about her activities, "Those activities put food on your table and paid

for houses like this. If it weren't for that, you'd still be over on the wrong side of the channel with others in Briny Town."

Jhee knelt down and searched through Temari's bedding. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the idea that there might be mites or lice hiding in the simple, yet damp bedding tickled her forebrain. She must keep a handle on her germaphobia. It was her job to provide justice for Temari and her family should anything have been amiss. Jhee paid extra attention to the bedding, looking for someplace where Temari might have hidden anything important. Next, she shook all the containers around her modest little section of the house.

Clay pots held shell hard currency in them. There had to be at least a several hundred or even a thousand shell in here. What would Temari be doing with this? Why would she have so much money given how she and her family lived?

Further examination of Temari's possessions uncovered discharge papers from prison. *"I hereto inform you, you have been released to the work custody of the local fisheries union and labor collective to perform community service in compensation and restitution for your crimes against the district."* With a prison record, Temari couldn't use her family's generational fishing license for at least two years. Jhee did not recall seeing any prison tattoos, but that was inconclusive.

Edi smashed a pot.

"Edi?" the man asked.

"Her home effigy's gone."

"Gone?" Temari's father and mother clung to each other again. "We'll use the one from the boat. It'll be fine."

The sense Jhee was intruding weighed down on her, and she rose to leave.

"You didn't find the one on her boat, Justicar?"

Folk who sailed a lot kept one effigy on the boat and one at home, the former should they not return, the latter should all trace of their vessel be lost. Many in the navy had adopted the practice, so her family

did not have a repeat of Ghele's loss. Jhee only wished her parents had followed it too. "I scoured the trawler and found no trace of one."

"A trawler? Our boat was a dragonet."

"Maybe... Maybe..."

"Edi, you saw the image. It's her."

"Our ancestral Maker is the Moon Fisher, a moonwave runner, Justicar. Tonight is the Spawning Moon, and the moonfish will head back to the ancestral headwaters. Without her boat or the moonfish to guide her, she can't find her way back to them. If we can't put her effigy on the moon barge, we either have to send it out to sea to reach the ancestors on her own, or her sprite has to wait onshore a full-cycle. She'll be prey to necromancers and mist stealers or become a wisp and permanent part of the isle's fog."

Jhee gave the room one last once over. Temari had lived a life not much different from hers or her sisters. She had taken on the responsibility of holding her family together and being the one who's got them through the hard times. It was all on her shoulders to keep the family going forward. And make sure that everyone got what they wanted. Everyone except her. She would take the family into the future. Now that vital linchpin was gone. Would or could her family survive without her?

"One more matter, mirs, I found prison release papers."

"Tessa, one of our other daughters," the man said. "Not all our kids were as responsible as Temari."

Jhee thanked Temari's parents once more before she left.

"You will find out what happened to her, won't you, Justicar?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure that if something untoward happened, she will receive justice, and so will you, today. I will do my best."

"Pardon my rudeness earlier, Justicar. We have no cause to hold against you what your family done."

"Thank you, sir. But the storm unleashed on the Reaches is as much my burden as theirs. I will do my best to put this community back on its feet and put it right."

The woman folded her arms. "You, by all rights, have been a level and plumb authority. Not like that last fellow. Cased up half the Brine yet let them sand shoal folk skate."

Jhee and the family exchanged nods and devotional objects. Make for Make. They gave her a decorated shell, and she handed them a precious metal blank which they could strike with an effigy or more likely sell. She tucked the shell into her devotion pouch. Her fingers brushed the locket. Jhee drew a shaky breath, remembering how important it was to her parents to have a belonging of Ghele's for the memorial. "Temari's sprite will be on the moon barge tonight and will reach the ancestral headwaters. I promise."

3 Brack Water



The Talk of the Town

Jhee and her fishing guide left the house and got back in their boat. "I neglected to ask your name, my good woman."

"Rishika, ma'am."

"Well, Miss Rishika, it appears I will require your further assistance for the rest of the day."

The fishing guide looked around. "Begging your pardon, Justicar, but as much as I liked to be helpful. And as much as I liked Temari. I haven't been able to put in the shifts or go out on a layout today. I'd thought to charter for the Dame today but got scooped by Temari's sister."

"Oh, I see. How much would you charge me to charter your boat?"

The guide's eyes lit up. "Oh, I see, too. Um, we'll settle up at the end of the day then."

"Miss Rishika, would you know anything about this feud with the Brackens?"

Her guide shrugged. "Eh, the Brackens have been nothing but Trouble Makers for years. You're man up at the house, his family used to have a good feud going with them too. But then the Shiners put them in their place. They've been nothing more than a nuisance since. You don't reckon they got bold again and taught Temari a lesson? Do you, Justicar?"

"I'm not willing to rule anything out at this point. But I have known a few Trouble Makers who been just that, troublemakers. But when misfortune struck, everybody went looking to lay everything at their feet anyway."

"Often with good cause. Them Brackens ain't nothing but trouble."

"Which makes them easy prey for false accusations, and anything else anyone wants to lay at their feet."

"But that also don't mean they didn't do it. And if the Brackens done it, someway, somehow, the Brackfins were involved."

"The Brackens." Bax wrinkled his face and spit on the ground. As if reacting to Bax's distress, Dari whined then snarled. "My family had run-ins with them too. Dari didn't much like the taste of them either."

Jhee stroked Dari's coarse fur and soothed the old girl down. "What say we go have a chat with these Brackens?"

Her guide shrugged again. "As you wish, ma'am."

Miss Rishika and Bax weren't far off in their assessment of the Brackens, but Jhee wanted to cut down that notion before it sprouted to life on its own. Personal feuds had a way of escalating. If Temari's death resulted from one, she wanted to nip it in the bud.

Bax's expression had taken on an extra load of sullen.

"Bax, I know. I should head back."

"That ain't it at all, Justicar. It's just what you said to the parents, about the moon barge. Folk make promises to them all the time only to break them. Brine folk are used to others failing them. You had no cause to make a promise to them you won't keep."

"I intend to keep it, Bax."

"Most do, Justicar."

Jhee had more than enough cause to know where the Brackens lived. She and the brute squad had visited enough times for her to have the way practically memorized. The Brackens built their stilt houses at the edge of the district, deliberately straddling the jurisdictional line. When law enforcement came to call, the Brackens often moved their operations, contraband, or person of interest to the other side of the line outside of Jhee's reach. Jhee's attempts to coordinate with the Justicar from the next district over often found knowledge of the raids leaked. Also, the laws of the next region often favored more of their

activities. The officials over there were more amenable to gifts than in hers. Although it went back and forth. Between the Brackfins and the Brackens, they always found one community or the other more disposed to their activities.

The Brackens were a bastard offshoot of the Brackfins, a family with which Jhee and her family had more than their fair share of run-ins. Most of the wealthier families had brushes with the Brackfins nowadays. Thanks to her family's predations along with those of the Mitsus and Crag Halls, anyone who could have challenged them had been neutralized, which left them as her problem.

A problem Jhee thoroughly deserved. With many of the big fish out of the way, a lot of smaller fish had risen to prominence. With the Brackens, it appeared the fish didn't swim far from the spawning bed. The Brackfins often used their poorer relations to act as enforcers of their will this side of the channel. Whose interests were they serving this time, though? Were their aggressive moves the result of their own designs or the Brackfins?

Did Jhee have the time to figure this out here and now? Investigating this crime calmed her flutters. On the altar bench, Jhee must have her over mind clear of regrets and doubt. It would not be fair to Mirrei to do otherwise. Or was Jhee only making excuses not to return to her wedding?

Had Jhee made multiple promises she could not keep?

Miss Rishika's motorboat headed for the Brackens' tidelands. Jhee still had time to ponder it.



The Stilt Houses of Brack Water

Jhee and Bax stood forward of the boat rather than stern as they traveled into the Bracken's gullet, the name used for unofficial family territory. She wanted to be seen. As expected, when they rounded the designated bend, a boy on lookout duty rang a loud bell. He took off running, while yelling, "Imps, Imps!"

Jhee turned to the fisherwoman Miss Rishika and tasked her, "Speed up."

Miss Rishika set the outboard into motion and then waved her fingers to do a little bit of water drawing to speed their passage.

The boy continued to yell, "Imps! Imps!"

"Not too fast. We want to give him time to properly alert everyone."

The raised eyebrows showed Miss Rishika's confusion, but she made no protest. They pulled up to the main jetty. A woman strolled out from the dockmaster's shack.

She took a drag on her smoke root. "Ayup, what tidings do you bring, Justicar?"

"None. I just wanted to look around."

The woman's eyes shimmered with suspicion before she took another long pull on her smoke root. Her role was to delay them. She took extra-long tying them off and kicking down the ladder.

Jhee did her best to abide by smugglers' etiquette. She took her time, giving them a chance to hide anything too incriminating as she walked through. She used her cyphering abilities to weave a little bit of charm searching for traces of blood and/or violence which couldn't so easily be hidden by throwing a tarp over it. The slight danger sense that might give her an extra second or two of reaction time.

Folk continued to work on boats, darn nets, or weave as Jhee passed, but the whole clan had her under surveillance. She wasn't interested in their usual scams. She wasn't even after poaching. Whenever she was after a more significant crime, she looked the other way on smaller ones as long as she got cooperation.

Curious children came out to gawk at her or Dari. Jhee couldn't be sure. Bax and Dari kept close to her just in case any Brackens got it in their heads to try and to take her out. She couldn't deflect projectiles with cyphering. But Jhee could sure put on notice anyone who tried anything. Jhee had also made it known that should a Justicar go missing, all holy trench would descend on them. And she being such a prominent Justicar, people would notice if she went missing or her body turned up in some unfortunate swamp or be "lost at sea" like so many others.

The Bracken's lived in squalor because of runoff from the fisheries and canneries. Even by rural standards, their dwellings were poor and rundown. But they had claimed Brack Water by dint of the own sweat of their brow. Waterways and sandbars that no one else wanted. They existed on the shoals, and they did what they could to survive. They eked out a living as best they could at the edge of even polite society. Most everyone treated them as bottom-feeders. Because you always had to have someone else to look down on to make you think your lot was better.

Brackens survived mainly by poaching, selling black market goods, repair, and boat scams. They also had an off-market brand of home-made liquor, squelch in the local parlance. Not so long ago, Jhee's family used to do something similar. They became noble and got away with it. They also had money to cover up and bribe the right people, so mostly their operation went unchallenged. While those like the Brackens often got sent away by less than reputable Justicars.

Jhee knew from her grandmamere's stories that her family had had just such an arrangement with one of the previous Justicars. They always kept the bribes coming along with little benefits and side gifts, which kept the law enforcement on her side. The irony of her now being the one to be so strict about enforcement of the rules. The irony was not lost on many. Her family's past got thrown back in her face often when she came to enforce the law by both the high and low.

Previous Justicars had not bothered with training. Often it was a political appointment based on nepotism. The primary role was as a functionary who gave the proper accounts and reports to the Central Authority or capital. Jhee, as far she knew, was one of the few justicars who had undergone formal training at the Emperors' Academy on Emerald Isle.

Jhee concluded her search and saw nothing amiss. Even with the lead time she gave them, she knew that any critical evidence she could suss out before they hid it. That was part of the game she played. She let them think they're getting away with things. They all knew she had not just been taught drawing but cyphering. Many of them were not sure what the boundaries of cyphering were, and so she convinced them she could track many things that she could not.

"Everything seems in order," Jhee loudly told the dockmaster who had none too subtly accompanied her. "But if I find any more evidence of you not being straight with me, I will be back."

"Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am."

Jhee hopped back into the boat with Bax, Dari, and Miss Rishika.

"That it?" Miss Rishika said.

"For now," Jhee said. "Bring us to the hulks. Out of sight, though."

Miss Rishika pursed her lips but complied. Jhee had promised Temari's folk they could put her daughter's sprite to rest tonight. Previous authorities had let these folk down again and again. She felt a sense of obligation, a duty, to the people of her isle. She watched the direction of the stilt houses where she had primed the pumps.

Within minutes of hiding, Jhee started second-guessing herself. Perhaps she should deal with this later. Go back to her soon-to-be bride and her new family and forget this trouble for the moment. She should return to Hillside this instant. And yet, and yet?

Small motorized boats sped off in various directions. There was no way for them to follow them all. Jhee took a moment and scrutinized different boats. On one, the pilot continued to look back and forth

between the forward way and their approaching craft. That woman seemed to be the one most nervous. Jhee noted an enormous, peculiar bundle in her boat. She pointed. "That one. Follow that one."



The Overburdened Boat

Miss Rishika spun the boat around and followed. Jhee engaged in drawing the winds to speed their passage. She conjured up a gale that sent them speeding along after the boat woman. Jhee reached her will into the waters up ahead of them. She focused on slowing the boat's passage. There was only so much she could do. Drawing the sea was a foolish endeavor no one person could hope to manage. But by the Makers, she would do what she could. She held as fast as she could to the waves drawing them to her, pulling and pulling with all her might. She kept herself only at the surface of the waves and did not reach her powers too deep into the depths. That way lay madness and destruction at the domain of the Storm Child and the magnificent shell Drakes of the depths.

Their suspect's overburdened boat could not keep ahead of Jhee's slowing influence. The boat strained a while longer till they came upon some rocks. Jhee tensed. The would-be-escapee killed her motor lest it burn out and spread out her hands as if to say she was thoroughly caught. Rishika pulled their boat up alongside hers.

"Now, do you mind if we go back to shore and discuss this calmly?"

"Yes, ma'am. As you say, ma'am."

They guided the woman and her boat back to the Brackens' ramshackle houses on stilts. Folk tied them up to the mooring posts, as Jhee climbed out to the more stable walkway.

While Jhee took a moment to compose herself, she fixed the Bracken they caught with her most authoritative stare. "Now, so long as you answer my questions honestly and forthrightly, I'm going to not look at whatever it is in that boat you are trying to hide."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

"You are like to be the politest Bracken I've ever had to deal with."

"I'm likely the only Bracken you've ever dealt with that's been raised right," said the woman. "Now, ask your questions if you would."

"I've heard you had cause to have strife with Temari over from up side of Botany Bay?"

"Oh, that, that's nothing but some minor territorialism. We and her family disagree about where their gullets end and ours start. We say it's by this little islet over up there by Vulture Bay. They say it's over at the little buoy closer to the point."

"Yes, I know that islet. I also know that islet has never been over three meters above water at high tide, which makes it unsuitable for marking off territory."

The woman gave Jhee a wide-eyed gaze. "No, no, ma'am. It's three meters above the water exactly. I could swear on it."

"Perhaps it is now," Jhee said. "You and your relations aren't going over there and perhaps scuttling vessels in the water, then dumping sand on them and pretending that's an islet."

The woman's amber eyes widened again and glanced around, hoping to see some means of escape. "Of course not, ma'am. We would do nothing of the sort."

"Of course, you wouldn't."

"Is Temari and her family saying we did that?"

"Temari isn't saying much of anything right now. She's dead."

The woman almost bolted. "We didn't have nothing to do with that. I swear we didn't."

"Do you and all your family have someone that could verify where you were approximately ten to twelve hours ago?"

The woman straightened her shoulders. "Yes, we do. We were all together, and we were bringing in our haul. You can ask any of us."

Jhee laid a finger aside her nose then she tucked her hands in her robe. "How convenient you can all alibi each other."

"Well, it may be convenient, ma'am, but there it is."

With time, Jhee could break the alibi, but likely not by tonight. "If me and my associates here had a nice little talk with some of your other relatives to see if their alibi details match yours, would they?"

The woman tugged her ear and shuffled her feet and did her best not to run away. "Um, well, you see..."

"As I thought. I'm only interested in Temari's death right now, which is why I gave you and your folk time to hide anything you didn't want me to see. If I find any evidence that you or your folk had something to do with Temari's death, you can rest assured that next time I won't."

"That seems only right, ma'am."

Jhee and company returned to the charter boat. She considered her next steps.

"There's something I need to tell you, ma'am."

"What is that, Miss Rishika?" Jhee asked.

"Well, you see ma'am, Temari wasn't on a long haul."

The fisherwoman looked away then she stared at Jhee guiltily.

"Well, go on."

"Well, you see ma'am, she had taken extra shifts at the fish house. You know, to help her family out."

"Then why would she lie about being out on a long haul?"

"Temari's family is proud. They come from a long line of fisherfolk, fine independent folk. And while working at the cannery or the fish house is good decent work for most, for fisherfolk to have to be working at the fish house for someone else. Why do you think the fishing combines haven't been able to make inroads here? People like being their own stewards. They don't like working on behalf of someone else."

"I see. So many folk think it's a step backward."

"Yes, ma'am. It's honest work and all, much like working on your family's operation, but...."

"But it's hard to work for someone else, and it feels like a failure."

"Exactly, ma'am."

"But Temari's family seemed fine with the fact that she worked there."

"That's because they didn't know that she had completely given up her boat. She didn't just work there to close the gap on her wages versus her fishing. She worked there because she had lost her boat ownership plaque to the Brackfins. Yeah, she still had her boat, but they owned it. She didn't work there part-time. She worked there full-time, and she didn't want her family to know."

In the past, the Brackfins had been nobodies. Their family barely even rated. But in the years since the feud, they had become one of the wealthiest most prominent families in the district. In two districts even. Families like the Wolphins had also prospered. Though, the Wolphins had sworn token allegiance to her family. Much like her second husband's family had. Symbolic allegiance in that they had really not done much to help hers. She suspected that they had made similar pledges to the Mitsus. Then hung back until they knew which side would prevail. She could not fault them for having played the game in such a manner. The only winning move in a conflict so foolish and destructive had been not to play. None of the families who had stuck their heads up and interfered had fared well except for hers. But that had come at the expense of so many others.

"Hm, interesting," Jhee said. "Was there anywhere else that Temari liked to frequent? Say, in her downtime."

"Well, there's this one place where the folks who work to the fish houses and the packers go to have a little nip and squish. They serve a nice squelch. You can say that for the Brackens, if nothing else, they have a nice, cheap squelch that gets you right as quick as anything."

"And her hauls?"

"Not sure, ma'am. Mayhaps excess she got from the fishery. Too paltry and blemished to go on the market, but still fit to eat or package as is. Used to could make a nice bit of clink-clack selling the standard food off to other manufacturers or turned into fish meal as feed for other fish houses and the agricultural feeds industry. The oil could be extracted and refined for the pharmaceuticals and cosmetics industry. Nowadays, companies do it all themselves. They work with other companies."

4 Honest Work



The Packing House

Jhee, Bax, her guide, and Dari sailed to the Wolphins' cannery. To call the business a cannery was a misnomer. Metals had become much too expensive for such use. Metal prices had skyrocketed once the Shield had gone up, and their legitimate trade with the Other Folk had been slowed. Mostly what the former cannery did now was aseptic packaging in pouches and other hybrid polymer containers.

After they arrived, Jhee's guide appeared uneasy.

"Begging the Justicar's pardon, but I work here too, and just in case anything goes sideways, I would prefer not to be mixed up in anything. I need to protect my livelihood, you understand?"

"Yes, yes. Thank you so much for your help. If I need anything else, may I contact you?"

The woman glanced about her. "I suppose. But only if you really need to. Like I said, I want to keep myself out of this as much as I can. It's just Temari was a friend of mine, and I just wanted to make sure that someone spoke for her."

"I'll keep that in mind and do whatever I can to keep you out of it. Now, thank you, and you can be about transporting more passengers."

Rishika made herself scarce. As always, the cannery was active. This was a twenty-eight-hour operation. Anytime they were not packaging, they were not making money, which is why they were one of the largest employers in the area now. They had to staff full-cycle to meet demand.

Jhee entered the cannery. Dari stayed outside because she might contaminate the packaging operation. Bax remained with her. An of-

vice assistant pointed her at the owner, Bibiana Wolphin, most folk on the isle knew her as Miz Bibi.

Jhee saw Miz Bibi talking a woman the clip parchment, coveralls, and worn shoes. A civil servant of some sort, much like Jhee herself. There was no agency insignia visible from Jhee's viewpoint. She assumed the woman to be a fishing inspector. Jhee barely made it a few feet in the woman's direction before she intercepted her.

"Makers Blessings to you, Justicar," Miz Bibi said.

Jhee and Miz Bibi clasped forearms. "And to you too, Miz Bibi."

"This is an unexpected surprise. I thought this was your union day."

"It is. But duty is duty. I wanted to inquire about one of your employees. Temari over from Botany Bay."

"Oh yes, Temari." Miz Bibi suddenly looked nervous. "Good worker, but I don't know too much about her. How may I assist?"

"We found her body washed up on the shore earlier today."

"My word. That's tragic."

"She told others she was going on an overnight haul, but she no longer has a boat. I understand she worked for you full-time."

Miz Bibi went stone-faced. "Well, I can't speak about what she might've said to others, but she worked here full-time starting a while back. And she hadn't asked for any time off, so I don't think she could have gone on a long haul, but you never know."

"Understood. Would you happen to know if she was friends with anybody working here or on the line?"

Miz Bibi touched her chin and thought for a moment. "Like I said, I try not to be too up in my employees' business. Well, she worked in the third section on third shift. That's that group right over there. Maybe they might know."

"May I have your permission to question your workers?"

"In a few minutes, maybe on their break. With all the knives and machinery, we can't have them distracted or make a slip. We must keep things moving, you understand?"

"Of course. Of course. In the meantime, you mind if I just take a walkabout to see how your operation works?"

"Sure, but you must wear this equipment to prevent contamination. We're the only independent packer left after the food contamination scandal bankrupted the Karanxs. Also, better yet why don't I come with you or I could have one of my family walk you through just in case. You know we've got to maintain safety standards."

"That will be fine, Miz Bibi."

In the locker room, changing into hair coverings, masks, a smock, and shoe covers, Jhee began to feel the weight of every moment ticking closer to her vows. No reminders from Bax needed. After Jhee returned to the packing floor, the brother explained the various workers' duties as they helped clean and sort the fish or bring them to grading stations and places where the catch could be visually inspected by machines. Some brought part of the catch to pallets where a heavy loader helped move them to storage.

"We try to maintain a policy of from caught to covered in twelve hours or less," the brother said proudly. "We've invested in our own fleet of fishing vessels. Our operation will be first in line to have some of the new permits to go beyond the Shield once everything gets sorted out."

"So I've heard," Jhee said. "The permits I heard were expensive. Many of the smaller fisherfolk won't be able to afford them or even the vessels sturdy enough to get beyond the rough waters associated with the storm shield."

"Unfortunately so, Justicar. But our company, the family business, invested a lot getting vessels up to code and big enough with processing centers to handle and store the catch with a minimum of human intervention. It will open up many new jobs for the community and for those who can't afford to have the larger vessels like we can. We're doing what we can. We want to give back to our community. Which was why we are so generous in trying to help those who couldn't afford their own fishing vessels."

"True. True. But fisherfolk are a proud lot. They're not used to being regulated or having to go to someone else for their livelihood."

"Don't I know it. But we've been trying our best to get them on our side. Times have changed, and we just can't go on the way we used to. It's a new world out there. The Flower Wars and our failed invasion of the other worlds, and the raids from the Fire Folk, took their toll. And now the wall is taking what's left whatever's left."

Jhee walked the floor, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious. Most of the workers did not make eye contact. She also noticed some of the workers had the rosettes and stripes associated with Fire Folk. When they made eye contact, their blue-green eye color and teardrop-shaped esca, Maker's mark, in the center of their foreheads confirmed it. She passed by a worker who dropped her trimming knife.

"It's fine," the brother said. "Go get a new one."

"Yes, sir. As you say, sir."

The worker spared Jhee an extra glance when the brother wasn't watching. She grabbed another knife at the steam-cleaning station.

"I trust you found nothing out of sorts, Justicar," said the brother.

"No, not as such. Thank you for allowing me to look around."

Miz Bibi smiled and clapped her hands. "Excellent, excellent. Now, Justicar, on to a more practical matter. Do you have a contract with anyone to do packaging for your aquaculture operation?"

"Now, now, Miz Bibi. It would be improper of me to mix my personal business with my duty to the empire."

"Understood. Understood. But if you happen to be looking for a new packer or processor, please keep us in mind."

"What did that inspector want?"

"Nothing to do with the packing house, I assure you. An insurance matter. The Bay Ridge development. The empire is being the empire. Delay. Delay. Delay. I won't bore you with the details. Though, if you have any pull with the fisheries modernization act bureau, please."

"That I will Miz Bibi. That I will."

Those housing developments had aspects for many to hate. The new expansion joined onto the existing one had violated the established fishing areas. It gave nobles extended rights out into what once was open access fishing areas. Now with their homes further out to sea in artificial islands, the rich could extend their territorial fishing rights and cut out the smaller fisherfolk. Wolphins and other families of their ilk got cut out because they were landlocked. The scandal around the permits and developer's bankruptcy finally brought the previous Justicar down.

"Your sisters were heroes, Justicar. If it weren't for Ghele, I might not even be here."

"Me neither. Thank you, Miz Bibi."

Jhee exited the packaging facility. She searched the building over for signs anything was wrong.

"Anything, Justicar?" Bax asked.

"Nothing, in particular, Bax. But did that place feel off to you? You notice anything out here?"

Bax shrugged. "Maybe a little. Or maybe it's just my thief's instincts. We are a bit of a suspicious lot."

"So are Justicars. Keep a lookout for me. I want to do a little bit more skinking."

"I could skink for you. Begging your pardon, Justicar, but your wedding."

"I just want to speak to the workers when they go on break. I made a promise to give Temari's parents answers. Something is not adding up, but I can't yet put my eye to it."

"All right, Justicar. But I will give you a few minutes and then I must insist you go back home and get ready for your wedding. Because if you're not there, it's gonna be on me, as Mr. Shep asked me to make sure you stayed put."



To Warm Your Extremities

Jhee and company waited around outside the processing plant until the workers went on break. Most of them went to the leaf mongering area where they toked smoke root. Jhee searched for the worker who caught her eye earlier. She saw her standing by the corner of the building, giving timid peeks around the corner while she continually brought a cigarette to her lips. Eventually, Jhee caught her eye. She ducked back behind the building. Jhee casually made her way over to where the woman stood.

"We gotta be discrete. I can't let anybody see me talking to you. Especially not the bosses. So Temari's dead?"

"Yes, she is."

"How did it happen?" the worker asked.

"I'm still trying to understand that. But right now, it looks like she drowned. Do you know anything about what happened to Temari?"

"Not a lot, but I know what Miz Bibi said wasn't right. She knew who Temari was. Temari and a few others were part of some special or experimental project she was working on. Her and a group of the other people who took this work after losing their boats."

"Why would Miz Bibi lie about that?"

"I'm not sure. But I just wanted to bring it to your attention. One more thing, too. Temari was actually on shift yesterday. At least she was earlier in the day."

"Was there something unusual about that?"

The worker shrugged and took a long drag from her smoke root. "Maybe a little. Normally Temari works third shift. Second shift, she don't usually truck with that. She didn't want her family to know so she

would work third shift. That's so she wouldn't have to see them or explain to them where she was going during the day."

"Were you and Temari close?"

"Not so much. I knew her enough to say hello. And she and I were almost in similar situations. My family lost their boats long back. So, I had an idea what she was going through. Though we had never taken a loan out from the Brackfins."

"Is that all?"

"Well, it seems as though many third shifters were involved in some special project. I don't know if it was black market or smuggling or what it was. All I know is that they were all strong elemental drawers."

Jhee raised an eyebrow. "Would you know which kind?"

"Well, most of us are water or wind. So, it seems like mostly water or wind. But there is one fellow I know, he was an earth drawer. And some barbarians, uh, Fire Folk earth primaries. Now that's unusual. Usually, the earth drawers work early shift because those who specialize in animals are best suited to working with the fish."

Jhee looked at the woman's wrist and noticed a prison tattoo. So, these were work-release prisoners, and the others were trustees. "What were you convicted of?"

The worker took a long drag on her smoke root. "Criminal trespass. It was a trumped-up charge. But here I am."

"The previous Justicar?"

"Yes, ma'am. That gutter guppy was as crooked as a lazy river. Pardon my language, ma'am. You ma'am, I ain't heard a bent word about your character from the more recent convicts. Only normal grousing about getting caught."

"I'm trying my best to fix what the previous Justicar did. I could look into your case too if you want?"

The worker's eyes lit up, going from a more subdued golden hue to one a little bit more yellow and twinkling. "I much appreciate that, Justicar. You have no idea how much I would. My conviction prevents me

from going in on the new combines or even trying to get a new boat for myself. It's been so hard on my family. The laws are such that they can't apply either, as long as I'm there living with them."

"I'll see what I can do. But no promises. The old Justicar's records were a mess, and I'm doing what I can do, my best. But it's no guarantee that I can get it overturned. I might put in a good word with the board, though, to see if you can get you another fishing license."

"Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am. That would be great, ma'am. Anything you can do.

"The worst part is your hands never get warm. The packhouse is kept cold. Everything is packed on ice. Your fingers are always chilled. You can try to warm them up on break, but by the time you do, you have to go back on the line. It's best to wait until you get home or are done for the day. On a haul, there's lulls. You can go belowdecks. Have a little somepin' hot to warm you up. Now, I gotta get back."

What sort of special project required drawers and can only take place so late at night? Jhee put her mind to what the worker had told her about Temari and the third shifters. She contemplated the ether tower on the packing house as they left. Were they experimenting with alternative power sources?

With the increased frequency in storms, why would the packing house have an ether antenna? A lightning rod made sense. They also used it to store temporary power for the packing house. The explosive charge battery systems were usually used to get a jump from lightning strikes. A proper lightning elemental drawer could help guide the electricity to the batteries without destroying the structures themselves. Properly stored, the cells could then be sold and used to generate power for other nearby homes. An ether antenna would spend most of its time out of commission.

The working conditions inside of the packing house appeared benign, and nothing seemed amiss. Nothing pointed toward the workers being mistreated. Even the concerned worker who had pulled her aside

had mentioned nothing about abuse. Other than that, Jhee had surmised the employees were all ex-cons or Fire Folk. People who couldn't afford to file complaints.

If only Jhee could come back at night to see what they may have been about. But if all went as planned, she would be in the bridal chamber with her wife. She forced herself to admit that she would prefer to be here. She had nothing against Mirrei. The young woman had her mother's attractiveness, but the history there could not be ignored. One reason she had agreed to this marriage was a symbolic stowing of harpoons and putting an end to the feud between their families. The wedding was to be an enormous affair where she would show the whole district that whatever had passed between Mirrei's family and hers was now in the past. And for them all to be done with it.

She knew now more than ever, the wedding had to go forward. If not for her peace of mind but for the district's so that the healing can truly begin. Throughout the Far Reaches, the families who had stayed neutral had fared the best. While the larger houses, who had meddled in politics and played games, eliminated each other, the smaller families thrived. They found opportunities to increase their wealth and holdings while the others were occupied.

5 Honest Play



Fish Stories

Jhee, Bax, and her guide went to the nip and squish joint Miss Rishika had mentioned earlier. The dilapidated shack set way back in the brine grasses from the fish house. Jhee spotted Dame Porgi scrupulously taking notes as the biggest tall tale-tellers in the place tried to outdo each other.

A tawny-furred woman drained the dregs from a mug before taking over from the last teller. "Last night, I was in a puny rowboat offshore. I thought to catch a few quickfins before the storm rolled in."

The woman tale-teller grabbed a chair. She sat on it backward and mimicked rowing, then hopped up on it.

"But that storm, it come up with the speed of the Boltbird. Ahead of it, came this eerie mist born on dead calm seas. In the water, one by one, these dead, black eyes appeared. Them eyes stood out as if they had took in all the darkness around them. The sea folk. I thought I was sure to be dragged down to their watery lair. That's when they appeared. Waitawba and the Spectral Armada led by the Lady of the Isles."

The woman sat again and pretended to hold reins with one hand while swirling the other in the air. "The Lady rode the vanguard commanding the giant dragon turtle with its glowing eyes and fiery breath. I saw them. Just as I'm seeing you now. They chased off the sea folk. A band of mist wights crewed the vessels."

The teller banged her hands against the chair's rungs rhythmically and continued, "'Come, join us,' they chanted as their crewing song. 'All are welcome in the Lady of the Isles fleet. Come, join the Singers of the Sea and the Moonwave Runners.'"

Jhee's guide pointed at the woman who had just sat down from recounting the harrowing stories of her encounters with the sea folk. "That's Tessa, Temari's sister."

"Early in the day for drinking. Does she know?"

"I don't reckon she does."

"Justicar, fancy seeing you again so soon. Come to hear more sea tales with me," Dame Porgi said.

"Alas, Dame, I'm here on much more somber business."

"Chasing crime. Happy hunting."

"You, too," Jhee said. After she said it, she realized she shouldn't be encouraging her.

Another bar patron slammed his cup on a rickety table and drug the back of his wrist across his mouth. "Har! I c'n top that. I was on a boat attacked by the Spectral Turtle itself."

Jhee had heard many of the fisherfolk recently talking about a ghost ship that had been seen on the waves. That was not unusual. The Far Reaches had many a tale about sunken vessels and lost fisherfolk who had gone out too far. The story of the spectral sea turtle, though, the preferred means of transport of the Lady of the Isles, had been one of the oldest tales from the area. It is said to even predate the earliest days of Makerism. Pagan folk deity holdovers from the days before the concept of Makerism had been brought to all the Isles. The Lady of the Isles and her spectral armada led by the World Turtle were older even than the tales of the Maye Queen and the Maye King. Which made them some of the oldest legends and myths associated with their people. Some say it may even come from the days of Findar-beneath-the-Waves before it sank. Findar-beneath-the-Waves: another ancient legend. Pure paganism and myth.

"You're crazy. The Turtle doesn't attack Makerly folk. It protects them."

"Well, this time it did. Do ye wanna here me story or not? It were late one morning when I was out on the Brackfins' shipping vessel, be-

yond Wailing Point. Like she said, there was a mist like no other mist I'd seen before. Out the mist, it come. Green eyes sizing up the crew and vessel. It's head easily the size of a wheelhouse. Then its great jaws opened to reveal a maw straight down to the trench itself. I saw a spark at first. Next thing, Rawr! Flames shot out of its throat. Singed the eyebrows clean off of us. There's no fighting that. Most of the crew scattered. Many hurled themselves into the water, me included. That creature had a name, and its name was judgment. When the assessor's come, I told 'em what I saw, but they didn't believe me. No one believed me 'cept Lady Brackfn."

Jhee approached Miss Tessa, who gave her the once-over. "My Lady?"

After Jhee gave a once-over her own, noting the jailhouse net tattoos on her forearms, she asked, "Are you kin to Temari?"

"Who's asking?"

Jhee flashed her Justicar's sash and her arbiter's ring. The woman shrugged and harrumphed.

"I regret to inform you that your sister has been killed. I've already spoken to your parents, and they know."

"They sent you to find me?"

"I'm here trying to find more information on Temari."

When the sister didn't seem inclined to speak, Jhee motioned for the barkeep to refill her cup.

"Why? Something wrong with her death?" Tessa asked.

"A drink for a tale. Isn't that the way it works?"

Tessa grabbed the whole bottle. "Mayhaps."

"I'm looking into it. Hopefully, it will just be routine. But Temari appears to have drowned with no signs of adaptation."

"No signs of adaptation? You saying she killed herself?"

"I'm not willing to rule anything out yet."

Tale tellers gave way to musicians. A tambourine jangled. Jhee waited for a lull to continue, "What can you tell me about her or her activities lately?"

Those at the bar tapped their mugs on the counter in approval at the end of the first song.

"Not much, ma'am. Temari had been keeping to herself a lot. Spent a lot of time reading those Arrow Point mysteries. Had her face buried in the final one, last I saw her. Though I was one of the few she told that she had lost her boat."

Short drums and twang boxes struck up accompanied by the shake and rattle of shell shucks. Jhee had several false starts at a follow-up. Each time she opened her mouth, a new player or instrument joined the others.

As the striker beat rhythmically on a shell snare, someone shoved a mug in Jhee's hand. The musicians soon broke into old high seas favorites.

Folk began to pound their cups on tables. "Ordo. Ordo. Ordo."

The musicians paused a beat to increase the tension, a performance flourish Kanto once explained to her. Performance and its nuances were passions of his that held her interests. A hat got passed. Jhee threw in a few shell.

The bar crowd joined in for a boisterous chorus of Ordo and the Nine Singers of the Seas of Doom. It became so loud that Jhee barely heard herself think. At another time, Jhee might have lost herself in the performance, searching for details Kanto had brought to her attention.

Jhee motioned at the sibling and used her siren module to boost her voice a fraction, "Mind if we talk outside or someplace quieter?"

"Sure."

Voice amplification and use on animals did not require more than a passing mention in her reports. Tessa brought the bottle. She and Jhee chose the other corner of the building from the tokers. A leaf monger

went by selling smoke root. Jhee's conch pinged. Before she silenced it, she checked the messages.

The message from Shep read: Where did you take Dari on that walk? The Scorched Lands?

Then one from Kanto: Is the barge rental and pick up time all settled?

And the last one from Mirrei: Live your Make, denbe.

Shep and Bax must have covered for her and told them she was out running errands. Yet again, Jhee wondered if it were too late to call the ceremony off. She sleeved her phone.

"You were saying Temari was secretive lately," Jhee said.

"Not so much secretive. But she was sore embarrassed about her boat. She asked I keep it quiet. Our parents didn't know."

"Did you know she had picked up extra shifts at the fish house?"

"Naw, I didn't know nothing about that. Though, seems like something she would do. Temari's always been the one who did her best to take care of us once our parents couldn't any longer. Once the seas started rising, they just got too sick to get out of bed most days."

"You are sure she had no reason to hurt herself or think maybe your family might be better off without her?"

"We still had fishing insurance, income replacement. Although we no longer had the boat. If Temari died, we'd get something more than zero. There was a government subsidy for the fisherfolk who had been wiped out by the rising sea levels, the hurricanes, and the privations brought about by the war. Our family got one of the war stipends and a special salvage license. Because one of our older vessels, the ones our parents used to use, was donated to the merchant navy. Mayhaps donated was the wrong word. The government commandeered it, and we fought for years to get compensation, and we wound up being one of the lucky ones."

"I remember. Jeja Marpele and I worked on that. It was a mass litigation, and she and I had been brought on as extra help."

"Well, if you helped with that, Justicar, then you have my thanks and that of my whole family. Those stipends got us through some tough times as we waited for things to go back to the way they were. We were just starting to get back on our feet till the wall came."

"I'm sorry. So many are being wiped out by the higher water levels."

The sister shrugged and took a swig. "What you gonna do?"

"So, what happens now? With the stipend and insurance?"

"I believe it goes to my parents. She would have wanted them to have it. I'm sure they were beneficiaries."

Jhee put a finger aside of her nose then tucked her hands in her robes. She thought for a moment. Perhaps Temari had chosen not to adapt. If she had insurance and it would go to her family, she might have thought she was better off dead. That way, at least they could get the insurance. "Does the insurance have any special clauses or riders about suicide?"

"No, ma'am. And I also don't think it has a rider on murder either."

Jhee bobbed her head. "Thank you for your time. You have my condolences on the tragic turns the Divine Mechanism brought the folk of your house."

"Thank you, Justicar."

Shortly after Tessa left, Miss Rishika and Bax approached her. "Where to now, ma'am?"

A swamp runner pulled away from the dock with Dame Porgi at the prow and piloted by a Water Folk woman who had the tawny coloring of Temari and her sister.

"Another of Temari's sisters?"

"Tui."

"How many other siblings does she have?"

"There's one more Trina. She was almost as good as Temari in the water."

The pilot sat stone-faced and grim. She knew about her sister's death. Jhee understood why she kept working. Sometimes all you could do was keep yourself busy. Then process it later.

"Take me to see her brother," Jhee said.



The Fish House

Another ether tower protruded from the rusty fish house building. Jhee scanned up the oxidized facade to the tip of its antenna. Her guide was right. These businesses wasted nothing. Her family's aquaculture platform rig further out also did similar so they could have emergency power instead of relying on the solar panels etc. which had become less reliable in the stormy weather. They also worked to generate hydroelectric power to keep the machines running. The increased water activity and storm churning of the winds provided a constant source of motion and wind and wave energy for the rig to use. As long as they could adequately store and capture the power, the rig can run almost indefinitely.

Inside the fish house, half of the employees refused to make eye contact again. The employees' bodies bore the stripes and rosettes of Fire Folk. Barbarians and Water Folk alike sported similar net and hook prison tattoos.

Jhee had reopened some of the other Justicar's cases already. A picture was emerging of his many corruptions. This appeared to be yet another. He used to impose harsh sentences as an excuse to sentence people to confinement. In lieu of confinement, they could work at local businesses for reduced wages. Often the rich, though, would receive fines in lieu of confinement. The previous Justicar's go-to sentence was confinement, but their system didn't have lots of places to store prisoners. Often they were encouraged to make alternate arrangements. Or

come to some kind of other accommodation with their sentencing. It was a lucrative racket.

Negotiated sentences frequently tricked the accused into believing they had received a better deal than they had. The empire did not waste real estate on jails and prisons. That land was needed for farming and animal rearing. Prison ships were expensive and hard to maintain. District and isle governments knew they did not have the space to house even a fraction of those sentenced to incarceration. Yet, they continued to countenance many adjudicators who sentenced the guilty to confinement to fill their nets or provide cheap labor. Jhee just skipped the nonsense and the theater. She assigned the alternative punishments directly instead of playing along with the farce. The crime reforms encouraged Justicars and justices to give folk alternative penalties to imprisonment. According to the standardized guidelines, they should have been given the negotiated punishment in the first stead.

Jhee skimmed the workers' faces and body hair for a resemblance to Temari. Temari's brother sorted and trimmed fish on the line wearing the hair bonnet with blue rubber gloves up to his arms. "Are you kin to Temari from Botany Bay?"

"Aye, that I am."

"I regret to inform you we found her washed up on the beach this morning."

The man paused his fish trimming. He caught his breath and choked back a sob. He resumed trimming. "That's, that's disturbing to hear."

The supervisor that accompanied her looked at the young man and said, "It's okay if you need to take a few minutes."

The man shrugged. "I'll take a few minutes on my break. I need to keep busy. I have to keep busy."

"Take a break now," said the supervisor.

Temari's brother slipped his knife in its sheath on his belt. Jhee followed him over to the employee break room. He sat slumped on the

seat. "So, I guess if you're here, there might be some problem with her death?"

Jhee tucked her hands in her sleeves. "Perhaps. We have ruled nothing out yet. But if you have any facts or information about what she was doing before her death or her state of mind, they would come in very helpful right now."

The man shrugged again. "Temari always took care of us. Even my parents. She's the one who kept us all together when it all went bad. I don't know what we'll do without her."

The man shrugged again. But soon, his body was wracked by sobs. Jhee did finger-cyphering exercises to maintain her composure. A picture of Temari was emerging much like hers. She understood that impulse to hold your family together. When sometimes the parents were more like children than the children were, one child took it all on themselves. It is a responsibility she had to take on once all of her siblings were gone. Jhee supposed her experience much different because she had means and no remaining siblings to look after. It had been just her and her parents in the latter cycles, yet she had failed anyway.

Behind Temari's brother, Jhee reached to place a hand on his shoulder. She paused. The protocol from notification duty in the service came back to her. You did not touch the next of kin. She tucked her hands into her robes and redoubled her exercises.

The man sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Begging your pardon, mum. Um, well, Temari had been worried about the fact that we were going to lose the family boat. I don't know all the details, but we had made some bad investments. Our parents were getting on, and it's been years since they've been able to take a full layout to go fishing. Also, now with the water so rough and the need of permits. It's been so much more difficult."

"I know. I spoke to your parents already. They seem like fine people. So far, your sister did too."

"She was. She was the best of us. I got to get back to my work now, ma'am."

"Of course, of course. If you think of anything else that could help me figure out what happened to your sister..."

"If I do ma'am, you'll be the first person I call."

Jhee watched after the man as he returned to the main floor. She touched her hand to her chin, lost in her thoughts for a moment. Her initial leads had bottomed out. Speaking to Temari's other sisters, though, might uncover more.

6 Waitawba



The Fiery Maw

Outside the fish house, Miss Rishika fell in step with Jhee, and they went to collect Bax and Dari. A bloodnut-furred Fire Folk blocked their path. A flash glinted off his blade before he struck. Jhee pushed her guide out of the way. Miss Rishika scrambled away into the reeds. Jhee and Bax sprang into defensive crouches. A bunch of toughs surrounded them brandishing knives.

"You're out of your jurisdiction, Justicar."

"I'll be the judge of that," Jhee said.

An assailant lunged at her. She deflected the stab with one sleeve then slipped a knife from the other. Bax drew his blade too. As their attackers circled them, Jhee and Bax made small feints to keep them from attacking in force. Most were hesitant. Only one, the main attacker, had any stomach to press the attack. Bax put himself between them. Jhee went back to back with him to ensure none of the others slipped a knife in it.

Bax distracted them. Jhee considered if fire drawing or engaging her siren module was the better option. Preserve life first. De-escalate. She quieted her mental state lest she alarmed Shep through her arm sigil.

Jhee engaged the setting for humanoids on her siren module. One shout should hit them all. She pushed up her sleeves to perform defensive cyphers just in case. The red-furred Fire Folk glimpsed her arm sigil and tattoos. His pale-green, illuminated eyes went emerald. He backed away from her.

"Ginger, what are you doing?" another attacker asked.

Bax and Jhee made their escape through the opening. Jhee couldn't find Miss Rishika anywhere. Their choices were the marshes or the swamps. Neither way afforded Jhee and Bax safe passage to make it back to Hillside on foot. Without their own craft, they were up-creeked.

They bolted for the swamps, without seeing if their attackers pursued.

A sharp hiss from the reeds drew their attention. Miss Rishika emerged with her boat and motioned for them to embark. A resonant, plaintive shark dog howl followed them.

"Dari?" Jhee said.

Bax, panic-stricken, scanned the reeds.

"They're still after us. We don't have time to worry about your dog."

Bax's face turned hard. He grabbed his knife and made to leave the boat. Jhee grabbed his arm. "Go, Justicar. I'll find her."

Miss Rishika put her hand on the tiller.

"We wait," Jhee snapped.

As the moments dragged on, Miss Rishika kept her focus on a swirl around them. Jhee recounted statutes in her head. More howls and yelps came from the grasses. The reeds shook. Various gouges cut through them headed their way.

"Ma'am, please."

Jhee fashioned a torch from rags and some foul-smelling liquor she wound in the craft.

"We wait," Jhee said.

Jhee lit the torch. Dari and Bax burst forth. More gouges followed them.

"Bax, Dari, burrow," Jhee yelled.

The pair dived forward for the boat. Toughs broke from the reeds. Jhee performed a quick, fire-and-air draw. She aimed high with the augmented torch flame. The fireball was still massive enough that anyone who didn't want to burn scattered. "Now, we go."

Their party drove out into the harbor. They had just reached Wailing Point when a fog rolled in. Jhee tensed. Dari whined and nuzzled her leg. The mist made their passage more dangerous. But they needed to throw off pursuit.

Nevertheless, Wailing Point had a notorious reputation. The treacherous breakers meant they should not sail blindly through the area. Jhee grasped the fog via the prime forces within and the Divine Mechanism. She sensed for obstacles in the mist. Another will fought her. Not the Storm Shield, though. This felt nearer. Was it their attackers? Was it Temari's spirit or even the spirits of her lost kinfolk as they sought for the shore?

A low rumble came from the fog. The water became choppy. All thought of feeling out the fog abandoned Jhee. She let her grip on it slip away. Instead, she clung to the suddenly too flimsy craft. Dari's whining increased.

The rumble became a roar as a water bulge plowed toward them. Two fiery red orbs looked out from the wall of water.

"... she turned to confront the towering wave bearing down on her. Defiantly, she faced it as it crashed upon our dock."

An enormous beaked head breached the waves. Something vital in Jhee's over mind shut down. Only her under mind remained active, and it yelled, "Flee."

The giant maw opened. Their tiny boat's occupants dove away as the sharp beak descended and sheared their outmatched dinghy in half.

Furious itching in Shep's neck brand caused him to grit his teeth: Jhee. He rubbed at his neck, where the stiff robe collar chafed.

"What's wrong, future co-spouse?" Mirrei asked.

"Nothing," he said. Kanto peered over her shoulder at him. Shep took calming breaths. "Excuse me."

Because Shep did not want to alarm the youths, he waited until out of sight to quicken his pace. He hustled to the docks where they kept the speedrunners. Shep had seen the commotion on the beach,

the ship, the body. Jhee could not resist squeezing in an investigation. If there was trouble somewhere, Jhee found it like no one else. He had tried to have Bax intercept her. His Jhee, though, had a way of sweeping you along with her.

The itch turned sharp, danger or panic. He undid the sash to his robes. Shep dropped to the ground. His calming breaths became deep chuffs as he worked himself up to undergo extreme adaption. He paused on the verge of ripping through his robes. The itching had stopped.

The crisis had passed one way or another. Shep pictured the calm depths, sipping tea by the fire, anything to relax himself. *Bax and Dari are with her... Bax and Dari are with her.* Jhee would want him to tend to Mirrei and Kanto. He awaited further sensations to let him know which outcome had befallen his lady wife.



Wailing Point

Panic set in once Jhee slipped beneath the water. A furry form dog paddled up to her. Jhee clawed at Dari, her savior, for dear life. An arm slipped around her and pulled her onto nearby harbor wreckage. Dari scabbled onto it beside her. Jhee backed away from the edge.

"Easy, Justicar, easy," Bax reassured.

Jhee gasped for air on all fours. "That was no luminescent jellyfish."

"Believe me now?"

Miss Rishika sniffled. "That was a loaner boat. Temari and her family ain't the only ones boat-less now."

"Since it happened in the course of helping me in my duties, apply to the Empire for recompense. If they don't reimburse you, I will out of my own coffers."

Miss Rishika looked dubious.

"She's good for it. Believe me," Bax said and winked.

"What do we do now, Justicar?" Miss Rishika asked.

Jhee rolled onto her back and contemplated the skies above. She should have been a star sailor. "Give me a moment to consider our options."

...and compose myself. Storm Child, Storm Child, not today. Not today.

They spotted Wailing Rock and paddled for it. A domed structure covered in a camouflage net occupied a sand-covered platform which had been made to mimic a rock outcropping. Jhee pulled out a glow orb and shone it in the openings. When she saw no movement, she rapped on the structure's hatch. No answer and no movement. She tried the latch.

"Bax, the door."

"Yes, Justicar."

Inside, they found a stool and a cook pot and Adept warming stones. Jhee mustered the prime forces within to activate the warming stones via fire drawing. Bax placed their conchs in some stored grain he uncovered. After she removed her outer robe and laid it near the smokeless heat source to dry, she rose. Her aching sigil transmitted Shep's distress. As she stroked it to calm them both, Jhee examined the shelter. Battered farseers hung from a peg by an opening along with a watch book.

"What's this place?" asked Miss Rishika.

Jhee answered, "An observation post."

A cramped workbench held fish bones, pieces of flotsam, and a collection of tortoiseshell plaques and ornaments. Many homes and ships in the Far Reaches had them. They brought favorable notice from Lethys and the Rum Toad. Though, these proved to be lucky for neither the turtles nor the holdings they were meant to bless. Among the

refuse on the table, she uncovered a ship's ownership plaque. After she read it, she snatched it up.

Jhee returned to Miss Rishika and tossed the ownership placard on the deck beside her.

"Talk."

"I can explain," Miss Rishika said.

Jhee tucked her hands into her sleeves. "I'm listening. It better be good. This says you're the owner of our phantom ship. You knew Temari."

"I never claimed I didn't, ma'am."

"Then why did you keep it to yourself?"

"I didn't want too many questions."

"You were in a bind when the boat turned up without her. If you claimed the boat, you'd be implicated in her disappearance and have to explain why your unlicensed boat was out there."

"It started off as just fishing around the half-sunk, unguarded properties. We caught almost as much junk as fish. We usually threw it back. One time we found this beautiful dish. I take it home and clean it up. While we were on the docks, this lady sees it in the stall and offered us fifty shell for it. We kept fishing. Every now and then, we caught something worth cleaning up. And once it was cleaned up, we'd take it to the swap meets and the flea markets. Soon, the items were fetching more than our catch. Then the Dame showed up paying top shell for older turtle charms. Eventually, she asked where we was getting them and if we'd take her there.

"We kept the boat near the Brackens' gullet because folk around there didn't ask too many questions or look too close at licenses. And we gave the Brackens a cut. That's why Temari and the Brackens were fighting. Once they knew how much we was making, they wanted a larger share."

"We? Our? You and Temari?"

"Aye, ma'am."

"And who else?"

Miss Rishika kicked the ground. "No one else, ma'am."

"Did you and Temari go out last night?"

The woman kicked the ground even harder. She shook her head.

"No, ma'am, we didn't."

"Are you sure? Are you sure you and she didn't go out last night get into a fight over your haul?"

"Oh no, ma'am. Nothing like that. I haven't even been out in weeks. A few full-tides back we were caught. By the Wolphins. Ever since then, I hadn't seen Temari or her brother. That was the last time we went out."

"Several weeks, was it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You said the Wolphins caught you?"

"Yes, ma'am, they did. I thought that's why Temari didn't show up no more. I thought she had gotten spooked and decided not to go out anymore."

"Perhaps you and she fought over her not wanting to poach anymore. Perhaps you fought, and you struck her and threw her into the water. She had to have gone in either dead or deliberately."

"No, no, ma'am, nothing like that. I swear I hadn't seen them in weeks. Not since we were caught. I got away, but Temari, well, the Wolphins' brutes caught her. That was the last I heard of it until her body washed up on the shore. I kept returning to the hideout until them toughs chased me off."

"Fine, once we leave here, we'll return to the Wolphins' packing house. We'll speak with the Wolphins. They'll confirm your story?"

"They should. But who am I to say what they will or will not confirm, ma'am? I ain't them."

"If your story checks out, then you have no cause to fear. I will have to impose sanction on you for the poaching, though. I'll check with the owners to see if they care. But this close to shore, you're not in the salvage zone. I also wager you don't have salvage permits either."

"I believe Temari's family did."

"A non-transferable one only for boats they owned. They had a permit and no boat. You had a boat and no permit. Now, are those brutes chasing us doing so because of your poaching?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am. Temari's brother has something of a big mouth. He also has a bit of a gambling problem which she covered for. Maybe he told them, or Temari told them to get them off their backs. I know Temari and them tried to take out a loan to save their boat, but I don't know who from. I thought it was the Brackfins, but it turns out not to be the case."

Jhee considered the possibilities. Perhaps toughs came looking to get a share of Temari's profits. Then when she wouldn't give it to them, they taught her a lesson. They intercepted her on the sea, beat her up, and threw her overboard. It was a plausible enough theory to test findings against.

7 To Catch Your Prey



Rock of Woe

The conchs stored in grain emitted pings and buzzes. Jhee fished hers out, and her stomach sank at the time of day. She shoved her hands in her robes. The more immediate matter of rescue remained.

This was her own drenched fault. She had sought time away from the madness of the wedding preparations, and the Makers had implemented her design. Instead of being in her warm home, enjoying drinks and appetizers with her betrothed and her other spouses, she shivered in a damp hole.

One delight, a shared fondness for teas, bound her, Kanto, and oddly enough, Shep. There is nothing she enjoyed more than to have an excellent cup of spiced tea while she read. She should have been content to sip tea by the fire with them until the appointed time. That seemed to be the only time where she and Kanto got on; when they sat in the front room together drinking tea. She'd settle in with her texts while he perfected his sewing and sketching. And he was very much a talented sketch artist. Most of his many talents were lost on her. He had gotten stuck with such a stodgy and boring wife. He insisted he did not mind, and she should do her best not to gainsay his opinion. Still, she could not pretend that she didn't wish they were better matched or at least as matched as she and Mirrei were.

Kanto needed near-constant attention. And he made it difficult to ignore him. That assessment of Kanto may have been fair, but it was unkind. He deserved better from her. Jhee tried to stay engaged when they were together, but she did not share his passion for fashion, gossip, or music. Although on the latter, she enjoyed his playing and thoughts on

performance. When he explained to her the nuances of a musical performance, she found that most fascinating. His grandmother had said he was something of a singer. She had yet to hear him sing, though.

Mirrei was a much better match for her. The young woman shared her love of books and learning. She understood the curious mind and how puzzles could fascinate and vex one so, pushing out all other things. Mirrei knew when Jhee was distracted by a case or had other matters on her mind. She accepted it in a way Kanto did not. Mirrei had even set up a death record irregularity searcher on Jhee's conch. The young woman insisted that if Jhee were in the midst of an investigation, Jhee should not feel obligated to stay with her. Especially if she would drone on about and obsess over said case.

Either way, Jhee felt both Kanto and Mirrei were too young for her no matter what their interests. However, once circumstances permitted, she was sure she could find them more suitable matches. If Jhee left this matter unfinished now, though, her thoughts would be elsewhere. Being distracted and unable to give Mirrei her full attention, was less than the girl deserved.

Today, Jhee had another responsibility: finding justice for her constituents. Temari and her family must put their daughter's spirit to rest. They needed the answers Jhee promised. Jhee needed answers before one promise caused the breaking of the other.

Dari's head rose. Her whine turned into a menacing snarl. The platform slanted under the effect of additional weight. Boots clanked on the platform. A form of an upright anapsid-shaped head and shell moved past the porthole. The bulkhead to the shelter squealed. The three readied their knives.

A figure stepped inside. They wore a sandshell and debris-covered rain slicker, bearing a knapsack that resembled a carapace. Dame Porgi lowered her hood and threw her sack on the deck. Her gaze shifted from one to another of them and their knives. "You are by far the saddest sea monsters I've ever seen," she said.

"Seen many, have you?" Jhee asked as she slipped her knife back into her sleeve.

"More than you think. Why are you on my observation deck?"

Miss Rishika answered, "A giant turtle ate our boat."

Jhee cleared her throat. "What *appeared* to be a giant turtle ate our boat."

The Dame's eyes glimmered. "I won't say it."

"Best if you don't. I'm not quite convinced we saw what we thought we saw. Why are you dressed like a chelonian?"

"Camouflage. Our great oceans are a vast unexplored testbed for the Makers. Megaf flora. Megafauna. We really don't know what's down there."

"Shell drakes and the Unmaker's Trench is what's down there," Bax said. "And it's best to leave both be."

"Uh-hm," Miss Rishika said and nodded.

"Perhaps."

Bax made the gesture for the deep dive to show what he thought of Dame Porgi's mental state.

Dame Porgi started unpacking her knapsack, which was full of discarded chelonian shells. "I'd think the woman who wrote 'Dispatches from Arrow Point' would have more imagination than that."

"The girl who wrote those did. The woman knows better," Jhee said.

"Pity."

"Quite the collection of charm shells you have. Afraid of wisps and mist wights, are you?"

"Aren't you?" The Dame walked to the workbench. "These shells, especially the ones from the older homes or those generational scutes of ownership, provide a guide map to the chelonids of this area."

Jhee held up the ownership plaque for Miss Rishika's boat. "Is that why you took this? How are you acquiring these shells?"

"I think its best if I keep that to myself for the moment."

"I'm in the midst of investigating a suspicious death. I'm afraid I will need more candor from you."

"Is that your theory? I brained the captain of the vessel to get her ownership plaque."

"How do you know how she was killed?"

"I didn't. It was a turn of phrase. Besides, why bother with violence? It's so messy and draws unwanted attention."

"You still haven't answered how you are getting the shells?"

"I buy them off the locals." Dari barked at the door. Temari's sister, Miss Tui, who bore a large sack, eyed Dari from the threshold. "Like Tui and Rishika. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, ma'am," the pair answered.

"For my records," Jhee said, "where were you during the squall last night?"

The dame waved Miss Tui over while Jhee scratched Dari's ears and ruffled the shark dog's fur. "I was checking and collecting traps until late."

"Can anyone corroborate that?"

"I can," the Dame said and activated a screen cycling through several observation cameras. She pulled a logbook from beside the screen. "I check the traps in a specific order. All saved, dated, and logged."

Jhee captured copies of logs and footage with her conch.

Dame Porgi removed a meter-long turtle shell from her bag. Jhee's eyes widened. "Oh these, these are babies. The turtle I'm after is bigger, much, much bigger."

"Netherwise, I've put in a call to the Coastal League of Ships. Once they arrive, we're sorting this out. I thank you for the unintentional hospitality, Dame," Jhee said.

"Anytime," the Dame said.

"Justicar, maybe we ought to," Bax began.

"Don't say it, Bax. Just don't say it. Next on the agenda is locating the ruffians who accosted us."

"I recognized the one called Ginger," Miss Rishika said. "I know where they may be holed up. Our old basecamp in the swamp."

"Then that's where we'll head."



The Shell Memento

The Dame and Miss Tui armed themselves with nets. They wanted to bring harpoon guns, but Jhee scrapped that. Preserve life first. De-escalate.

Miss Rishika led them to a rusted-out swamp wreck. After a few minutes of watching, it became clear no one was there. Their guide took off for the wreck before Jhee could stop her. Jhee, Bax, and Dari followed.

An old, dead fire with a pot hanging over it sat in the middle. Jhee checked her conch. The hours until her wedding had bled away. Less than four hours remained until she needed to be there to say her vows to Mirrei. The area around the hulk showed frequent signs of use. A smoke-darkened chute above the cook pot opened up to the sky. The ground had been hard-packed from regular footfalls.

"Is there another way in or out of this wreck?"

"No, no, ma'am."

"Excellent. Time to improvise. What's say we have a little surprise waiting for our friends when they return?"

"All right, ma'am, if you say so."

Jhee faced Bax, and he nodded. She and the old thief assessed what they had around them. Predominantly household items, but they found some nets near a stack of crates and a cache of spears and harpoons.

Miss Tui glared at her. "You should have let us bring the harpoon guns instead of using that old junk."

"These will do nicely for what we have in mind." Jhee and Bax planned their traps. They began making snares. "Miss Tui, you and Bax go scout for our assailants. This time they won't catch us unawares, and we will be ready for them when you flush them towards us. With time to prepare some cyphers, I think they won't find us such easy prey again. Leave us a net."

The rocks and the logs they sat on while assessing the scavenged items were worn shiny and smooth. Jhee adjusted her seat. No matter how she did so, the log always met the least padded part of her rear. Her pelvic bones ached within moments on the cold surface.

"What do you have in mind, Justicar?" the Dame asked.

"Live capture. Just like you."

Jhee decided her aching posterior needed relief. She wandered further into the hideout to escape the moist winds and locate additional materials. What was this overhang used for normally? She walked the well-trod path as it continued along the rock face. It led to a little inlet stocked with furniture of all sorts. "The Divine Mechanism provides."

A turtle-shell locket amongst the illicit goods reminded her of the one on her older sisters' memorial.

She held the locket close and closed her eyes. "Ghele."

None of the items appeared to be on the banned or restricted goods list. Dishes, knick-knacks, and cutlery were all household odds and todods. A lot of it was wet and waterlogged, damp, with some mold. Rare and antique items were scattered in. While the occasional piece was of barbarian manufacture, these weren't relics or off-world contraband. These items had been looted from sunken homes.

The theory the goons killed Temari no longer tracked. If they had wanted to steal her goods, why are all these objects still here? They had been here long enough to liquidate much of this, if not to wear down

those seats. What were the other possibilities? Her partners, maybe? Was it a dispute between them?

Jhee murmured a cypher to detect arcana. Once she grabbed a bunch of items she thought might be useful, she returned to the logs.

"Who was the third party to your scheme, Miss Rishika?"

Miss Rishika shifted her seat. "No one, ma'am."

Jhee clenched her teeth. "I noticed at least three different ether-prints, three bedrolls, and three well-used, if horribly uncomfortable, seats. I'd expect more than three if it was the 'squatters.' At the observation post, you said you hadn't seen Temari or her brother in full-tides and mentioned his loose tongue. He's involved?"

"Teo, Temari's little brother, can water draft, too. He used to fish with us on the quiet because his parents didn't approve. He and Temari could create these whirlpools and waterspouts when they worked together. I'd never nothing like it. Practically, dropped the fish and what-not in our boat. We was our own fishing co-op, ma'am. My boat, their skills and license. All I know is I'm telling you the Makers' honest truth, so help me."

"Is that the whole truth this time?"

"I swear by all my ancestors."

If Jhee used her siren module to test Miss Rishika's veracity, she would have to do more than noting it on her report. "All right, I will trust you for now."

Next, they constructed windfalls meant to be knocked over by a stiff breeze. They secured the nets above the only way to access the overhang using the salvaged spears and harpoons. They returned to their trap making.

When they finished, Jhee assessed their work, "The Prime Maker's Design be done."

"This'll mean giving up our stash permanent," said Miss Rishika.

"I should think that should be the least of your worries. Because if at some point they relieve you of this merchandise, it will be better for

you when I come back with the brute squad. By taking these goods, well then, they're guilty of looting too. Less evidence on you and Temari's brother and more evidence on them."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, we need to go back to the fish house. I have questions to ask, and I have a marriage to attend. The first order of business is questioning our friends out there."

"But how, ma'am? We don't have time to wait out here all day for them to return."

"By getting warm. Light that fire."

"But that will draw them right to us."

"Exactly. Now, quit your sulking and light that fire."

The woman struck her flint and tinder a few times and lit the fire. Jhee wanted to conserve her drawing skills. They then had their guide sit out in the open by the cook pot and the fire.

Miss Rishika sat prominently near the fire on the uncomfortable log. Jhee, the Dame, and Dari hid in the shadows and waited for their prey to come to them.

They did not have to wait long. A mixed-gender group of six folk arrived at the edge of the wreck's overhang. They shouted when they noticed Rishika sitting out in the open. She stood and fled further into the hideout. They barreled after her.

Once they reached the edge of the overhang, Jhee blasted their windfall with drawn air. The harpoons and spears collapsed. Their fishing net canopy dropped on the invaders, trapping them. Miss Tui and Bax threw their nets over anyone they missed.

Bax rushed forward to draw in the nets. Miss Rishika and Jhee joined him. Soon the toughs were tied up and safely secured. Bax reached into the bundle of bodies. He started relieving them of their knives.

"I gotta pee," a forlorn voice from somewhere in the tangle whimpered.

"I got this, Justicar." Bax set Dari to watch them while he secured any errant limbs with extra rope. She growled whenever one so much as twitched. "They'll have to be more creative if they want to cut themselves loose."

"Thank you, Bax." Jhee steadied the twisting net. "Who sent you?"

"I don't know," one answered.

Great, paperwork, Jhee thought as she activated her siren module. Jhee projected her voice wide at the netting. Shimmering mist passed from her to the captives. She asked the question again.

"Ginger did," another uttered.

"They don't know," Ginger said. "They take orders from me. I take the assignments."

"Who gave the assignment?"

Ginger narrowed his eyes. "A woman," he forced out.

He had caught on to her compulsion. Jhee swore and regretted how she phrased the question. Only one command use left at near full potency. She withdrew her inspiration from the others to target Ginger.

"Tell me the name of the person who wanted you to attack us."

Ginger struggled to keep his mouth shut. "Miz Bibi," he blurted out.

Jhee nodded and turned to her companions. "We'll call someone to come and get them. And you, Miss Rishika, you're going to take us back to the fish house where we are going to question Temari's brother."

The woman started to cry. "Temari was good people. She weren't out stealing that night. She'd used the salvage we collected to create an aqua-pod. We kept it tethered offshore past Wailing Point, where no one liked to go so no one would disturb her experiment. She wanted to bring it in ahead of the squall. She had a loan payment to the Brackfins coming due. If she lost her harvest, she'd lose the pods too just like her boat."

"The fish she supposedly got on her hauls. Why did she lie about where she got it?"

"What do you have if you don't have your boat, ma'am? She was honest, Makerly, and forthright. She didn't like the looting. Me and her brother, though, we kind of. Well, we were insistent. All that money. Profits from the pods was slow. Money from looting and swapping was faster. Me and Teo liked fast money. I'd almost made enough to get a new fishing license. Teo liked his gambling and women. Temari was fine with just the poaching, but the stealing from the homes. That's like stuff the Brackens would do."

"This is what I mean about everyone willing to lay blame on the Brackens' doorstep. Are we all really that much better? I asked myself that every single time I look at the damage that my family's, no, my foolishness and arrogance caused these Isles."

8 From Hunted to Hunter



Forged in Fog

A few minutes of searching uncovered the miscreants' swamp runner. The monster hunter put her hand on Jhee's arm. She pointed to something in the reeds. The giant shell of a turtle bobbed in the bayou ahead of them. Jhee held her breath. This time when it came about, they were ready for it. Jhee tried her siren module on it, set to animal mode.

No effect. The creature had not resisted. The module simply had no effect. Two possibilities remained. The turtle was not folk or creature. Either it was supernatural in composition, or it was an object of mortal make. She would proceed as if it were the latter.

Jhee crept up to the shelled form and ran her hand over it. The weave-glass hull had been draped in moss to conceal it. Inside was space for one to two people. She found cloaks covered in seaweed and starfish. "Mist wights indeed," Jhee scoffed.

The rest of their party crawled over the craft, examining the thing inside and out.

"I think I know what this thing is," Miss Rishika said. "I think it's a turtle tug. During our tale-telling around the fire, Temari talked about her design for a mobile platform. You'd anchor the aqua-pods to. You could tether them in the bay or move them as needed. The tugs were for when you're fixing to dock it."

"Can you make it work?" Jhee asked.

"I can. I can pilot anything. It can't fit all of us, though."

"Fine, Miss Tui, Dame Porgi and Bax take the swamp runner and deliver our captives to the Coastal League tell them what we found out. Miss Rishika, Dari, and I will head to the packers and the fish house."

If either group tried anything, Jhee at least had someone she trusted within each. Miss Rishika led them back up to the path through the brine grasses to the fish house. Jhee asked the supervisor to speak with Temari's brother again.

"I'm sorry, Justicar. He went home, bereaved."

Jhee gave a polite but curt nod before leaving. "Trench! Come along. Our next stop is the Wolphins."

"I can't find Teo. He disappeared after he learned you'd questioned the Brackens about Temari's death."

"Do you think he went looking to settle things himself?"

"I would."

"Forge my patience in fog and then quench me in the quiet. We have no time for this."

They went back to the Wolphins' packing house. Miz Bibi and her brother were nowhere to be found. The fish house had been shut down for the day too. It seemed about time for the third and fourth shifts to be coming on shift, yet the fish house remained dark.

"Closed. Out of respect for the dead worker," said the security guard.

"Really? Miz Bibi said she barely even knew Temari."

The security guard shrugged. "Didn't make much sense to me, but she gave folk the rest of the day off with pay. I'm not going to gainsay it. I also think she said something about being on time for a wedding."

"My wedding?" Jhee paused. Had the Wolphins been invited? Since her wedding was meant to show she and the Mitsus had sealed the breach between their families, anybody who was anyone would have been sent an invitation. The Crag Halls put up some fuss most likely to save face, but Mirrei was part Crag Hall. This had been as much about atoning with them as anyone else. She had barely glanced at the invite list. Kanto and Mirrei had handled most of the arrangements. Shep had asked that his family be invited, but they had sent no response. Shep

did his best to hide his disappointment. Why would they want to attend a wedding involving the families who had ruined their brother?

This catch reeked of one coincidence too many. Jhee, Dari, and Miss Rishika nosed around the exterior of the packing house. They might have closed early for her wedding, but they would not have closed for the death of a low-level employee. Eventually, they found their way to the dockside of the fish house. This was where the deliveries and ships, fishing vessels would come and drop off their catch. She touched a corrugated fishing tube. So much about fishing was changing. A hold could be emptied in an hour with these tubes. Whereas it often took half a day or more for folk to do it.

Raised voices caught Jhee's attention. She motioned for silence from her party. They crouched down and then stealthily approached the back entrance to the fish house. The lights were on, and several people surrounded a table. They passed by the office for the dockmaster. She and Miss Rishika slipped inside. On the table, images and floor plans for many of the wealthier homes still left above water on the island lay. Why would they have these? With her conch, Jhee captured images of the table and the plans.

Jhee traced the voices to a small cove or inlet in the rock face. Jhee crept behind her and hid when she came to a stop. Others met her there. To Jhee's shock, Miz Bibi and her brother, Brackens, and some of the other less infamous families gathered around a table. These were decent families, not like the Brackens or Brackfins. But they were all here, nonetheless.

"You know what to do, right?" That was Miz Bibi's voice.

"Yes, Miz Bibi."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Aye."

"Yes."

Miz Bibi clapped her hands together. "Good. Now you, Teo, are you going to be good? Are you good?"

Temari's brother shrugged. "I'm good."

"I hope so. Or else you may wind up like her sister."

"No problem, Miz Bibi."

"Now, you all have your assignments. This requires precise timing. We only have a limited opening to pull this all off. No houses that are not on the list and nothing that isn't in plain sight. Every single one of you needs to hit your mark. Anyone who doesn't.... Well, let's just say there could always be more bodies that wash up on the beach."

There were a few murmurs. Several affirmations. Lots of agreement and yes votes.

"Good. Now move out."

"You, Teo, you come with me. Will you still be able to pull off that trick of yours without her?"

"I'm not sure, Miz Bibi. I practiced with Trina some and tried to teach the technique to the other drawers. They ain't as good as Temari was. She and I, we just sort of paired. You have to get the rhythm right for it to work."

"Well, we'll just have to see about it anyway. But at the least, you know how to speed up and slow down boats, yes?"

"Yes, Miz Bibi. I can do that all on my own. Trina, too."

"Good. Good. Now come along."

Many of the men and women gathered had already scattered. Miz Bibi and Mr. Teo filed out with several others. Jhee and Miss Rishika moved to get a better look. They descended the gangplank into what looked to be a submersible vessel.

"Ha!" Jhee said when she saw the tortoise-shaped submersible. Waitawba indeed.

The semi-translucent hull of the submersible glowed with an unearthly light in the growing overcast of dimday. Yes, this easily could have been mistaken for the Lady of the Isles' spectral turtle. She had thought the local fisherfolk had just become more superstitious, especially now that the Shield had gone up. Add to that the likes of Dame

Porgi, who flooded the area with their flutter-takes. But it turns out they were being misled by Miz Bibi's deception. What better way to throw off suspicion of whatever piracy or illegality she was involved in than to set up a ghost ship that would keep most fisherfolk away. Or explain anything strange they saw while out on the waters at night.

Think smart. Since Jhee couldn't stop the submersible, she should start from the other end. She went back into the manager's office. The plans and images were gone, but she consulted her conch captures. The criminal's scheme hovered just beyond her mental grasp. However, she needed one more insight into the system to reveal its workings. She and Miss Rishika left the manager's office and sneaked closer to where she heard folks arguing and raised voices.

She thumbed through the images, this time magnified. The floor plans and the images had expensive items circled and exes marked in various rooms. These houses were too spread out for her to get there, secure each one, and lay traps. She must raise a region-wide alarm. Perhaps if Jhee warned her guests. While Jhee composed her message, Miss Rishika tugged her arm. The crooks were moving out.



To Catch A Turtle

Once the criminals boarded that craft, there would be no way for Jhee and Miss Rishika to follow them. Air was her primary ascendant with drawing. Fire became her secondary because of her service. A fat lot of good that would be pursuing them. And she had never progressed far enough to learn lightning manipulation. Jhee only possessed tertiary dominance with water. Miss Rishika had some, but from what she had heard about Temari and her brother, both of them were formidable. If

she engaged in a contest of wills with him, she might not come off the better.

Jhee spied a motorized craft. Could they pilot it and track the submersible underwater? If Temari's brother knew the speed-up trick, there would be no way they could keep up with them. She'd bargain with the Unknown Maker for a gyrocopter. What she needed to do was outthink them, to figure out where they were headed.

From her quick observations, Jhee knew one crew was headed to the homes of the rich to rob them while they attended her wedding. Why would they need a submersible for simple burglaries?

The spectral turtle had been preying on the ships in the area. Might they mean to delay the yachts and vessels from returning from Jhee's union festivities, possibly even board them and steal valuables? These fiends had used the occasion of her wedding to plan a mass robbery and piracy operation. Not on her watch. This wedding was meant to bring the Isles together and to scuttle and deep-sea grudges. These ruffians and fiends would not turn it into one of the most considerable burglaries in isle history on her watch. That would not be her legacy as Justicar. Jhee considered what resources she had her at disposable. All she had was Dari and possibly Miss Rishika until Bax returned with the monster hunters. No, that would be nowhere near enough.

Jhee contacted Bax to see how he fared with the Dame and Miss Tui. "Did you meet up with the Coastal League of Ships?"

"Aye, Justicar."

"Put the captain on. They're going to want to hear this."

Jhee explained what she suspected.

"I'll send a runabout for you and we'll rendezvous on the way," the captain said.

While Jhee waited for the Coast League's roundabout to arrive, she laid out a bio-film sheet on the table and used her images to reconstruct the map she had recorded. She brought out her conch and filed through her cypher compendium. Most required line-of-sight, and she

had never excelled at the methods to perform them via scrying or remote viewing. She hoped their combined efforts stopped this scheme in time. The last outcome she wanted was her wedding to be another incident that divided the community.

Jhee's focus returned to the map of the houses the burglary team planned to hit. If Jhee had Mirrei's aptitude for devices, then she might figure out some ether-assisted solution to the problem. Maybe that was it? Set off security alarms at all the houses at once. The only way to do that was with a combination storm cypher and water or lightning draw. For her fire drawer training, she specialized in the pure fire aspect of that element. She might manage some lightning elemental drawing, but nothing on the scale she needed. She checked on her conch for what documentation she had on the homes and infrastructure of the Reaches.

The numerous messages from the governess of the Reaches caught Jhee's notice. The governess was one of the Shield's most ardent supporters. They had corresponded often about the Shield and security arrangements for her visits, and her visits were frequent. So much so, Jhee delegated the task to whoever agreed to go. The governess visited every place MANTEL constructed pylons and copied her on every correspondence. The practice only stopped once the woman took ill. Jhee took a breath to clear and center.

"Captain, we need to go here."

Jhee approached the captain of the Coast League vessel that transported her. Jhee pointed to a spot on the nautical map. The location was midway between her old house, Oceanside, and Mirrordale, where Mirrei once lived. There they might find the means to thwart all the burglaries at once.

"What about the sub?"

"If we can pull this off, it will stop the robberies, and you can collect the submersible at your leisure."

Jhee had one of the other vessels out using their sonar equipment, looking for the submersible while she went over what she knew about the artificial islands. Where was the weak point? They would have to be connected to hit every one during the wedding. She studied the design plans harder. They fed off of the same umbilical tethered to shore. Attached to a plan for the umbilical was the filing which ultimately brought the Bay Ridge project to a close. The cargo umbilical, designed to transport goods and utilities even when the surface was impassable, undermined the structural integrity of the artificial islands. If you blew the umbilical, the homes would float off, or if you blew all of the seals at once, then the homes would sink. Was it going to be done manually? Or via some form of explosion? Raise the homes out of the water by those skilled with earth drawing?

Another idea for stopping the burglaries came to Jhee. Jhee pointed again at the nautical map. She jabbed her finger at the map again. The tap echoing in the wheelhouse. "Here. This is where we need to go."

"We thought you said that they were planning to hit several houses," the captain said.

"They are. But we can't outrun them or stop them from being several places at once. We need to get ahead of them another way."

"How?"

Pylons were the heart of the storm grid system. Many acted like giant lightning rods. Would Jhee be able to use that to her advantage? Jhee skimmed through her old messages from the governess. Hadn't she sent Jhee the locations for the pylons some time ago?

At last, she uncovered a zoning map of the pylons' locations. Many of the towers, though, were nowhere near that area. The wealthy residents had put up such a fuss that the governess forced the towers to be moved further out. One house stood in the center of them all, Jhee's old family home, Oceanside.

9 Unslakeable



A Home Revisited

Jhee and a ship's engineer stopped off at the broadcast pylon near her old home. Pylons had changed little since her youth when she and gram would row out to one and give it a few whacks with a wrench. After they scraped off a layer of corrosion, the engineer threw the master switch. The electrified glow orbs of Oceanside guttered to life. The emotions and memories from seeing the old homestead this close again were all a jumble. From listening to stories at gram and gran-gran's feet to listening to her parents' fights and tears. From mooning over Shep to the mortification of introducing the worldly, sensualist Jeja of Marpele to her rustic family.

"This pylon's been off the grid too long, and it's suffered degradation from disuse," the ship's engineer said.

"What about that one?"

The engineer followed Jhee's outstretched finger to the newer Storm Shield pylon a few meters away. Storm energy had wreathed the stanchion in lightning. A rust-colored, crystal the size of Jhee's head topped the weave-steel tower. The engineer rubbed her chin and worked matters out in her head. "Bypass the damaged connections. Bridge the two. Give this one a boost. It could work. I'll consult its emergency maintenance manual. That lightning, though. We'd need more than my skills to keep it at bay."

"Whatever skills I have are at your service."

The engineer made adjustments to the broadcast pylon. "Let's see if we can perform surgery while simultaneously trying to diffuse a bomb."

They sailed close to the Shield pylon, the choppy seas rocking their boat. The winds sought to blow them back. Their hair stood on end from the crackle of electricity in the air. Mists came and went as they pushed farther into the buffer zone.

Through the mist, a shadow of land stood out against the fog bank. For as many islands as it sank, the Storm Shield had raised new ones transitory as they may be. This one appeared near her home, or else she was sure someone would have laid claim to it already.

With her training in fire and air drawing, she should have been a natural with lightning. The Prime Maker had a different design for her skillset. However, she was better with it than earth or water.

"We'll need to reverse the field and cut the power in between strikes. I'll need you to deal with the charged particles in the air."

Jhee connected to the supreme dynamism. The Storm charged every drop and breath around her. It surged toward her wanting to make her a conduit. She danced with the surge, beating it back or flowing with it to push aside crackling air particulates as their craft neared the pylon. Small lightning strikes required the engineer to secure the tiller and bat them away.

Their fur raised. Jhee and the engineer exchanged wild-eyed looks. The tingle heralded a building lightning strike. Jhee formed her best approximation of an induction cage with the speckles. The engineer braced herself. "Incoming!"

With a mighty yell, the engineer deflected the strike. The boat floated dead in the water while they recovered. Jhee's ears rang.

"You okay, Mme?" the engineer yelled louder than previously. Jhee nodded, and they continued.

Every speck in the air zapped her. They bobbed close enough to lay hands on the pylon. Jhee cyphered and drew to discharge the accumulated particles surrounding it. The pocket of neutrality barely covered her and the tower.

The engineer pressed a screwdriver in Jhee's hand. "I'll try to keep the lightning at bay while you open the panel and throw the switch."

A series of shocks later, Jhee removed the access panel from the pylon and moved the field selector to neutral. The particle intensity dropped. The engineer went to work. Trickle of blood ran from both her ears. When she turned the selector one more stop, the particulates blasted away from them and the pylon. After a few minutes, the engineer returned the field selector to its original position. A bout of nausea hit Jhee, and she felt drained.

"The next lightning strike should kick things off," the engineer yelled. Jhee mimed that she could heal the woman's ears. She waved Jhee off. "Happens all the time. Ship's doc can fix it."

As they brought their boat about, the air came alive with energy. Lightning strikes moved ever closer to the Shield pylon. Jhee's skin tingled. They ducked and covered their ears. A massive lightning strike split the air. Even covered, the boom set her ears ringing again. Residual charge coruscated through them and their craft.

They straightened. Satisfied that the Shield pylon hummed along, the engineer focused on the broadcast pylon. Jhee was about to turn away from the Shield when her vision quivered. All that energy must have bombarded her good. She blinked. Her sight was fine.

The shadow island in the distance rumbled. A head rose wreathed in lightning. An ear-piercing roar filled the air. A wild wave bore their boat up. Jhee drew a breath. By the Storm Child's grace alone, the runner did not capsize when it hit the water again. Two red spheres rose then dove deep beneath the surface of the waves. She studied the Storm curtain. More than her ears rang, her esca warbled as if a struck gong. The phantom island had disappeared.

"Did you see that?" Jhee asked the engineer.

Having not heard Jhee, the engineer continued to fix their heading back to the broadcast pylon. Jhee clasped her hands and brought them to her esca. She fished a few gold coins from her devotion pouch and

cast them to the Wave Makers and Singers of the Sea before she turned toward her former home.

The sea light on the ocean face of the house hissed, popped, then burnt out. Other lights in the house followed until Oceanside darkened once more. Hopefully, the same happened to the Bay Ridge homes and their security systems, many of which had included remote doors and storm glass resistant to breakage. With Lethys's blessing, the robbers would find themselves locked out or in the vulnerable dwellings.



The Fish Tube

Sheets of rain pelted them as their naval coalition pushed farther into the buffer zone. Jhee leaned forward, straining against the droplets, which slashed at her face almost sideways. She narrowed her eyes looking for any sign of the submersible. The oppressive gray sky pounded down on her. Engrossed in the search for the criminals, she had no fear. The hunt distracted her from the thoughts of creatures such as the Great Shell Drakes and monstrous turtles, which swam below them. What giants of the deep lurked below for unsuspecting travelers and fisherfolk to pass above them to where they could be dragged down to the Unmaker's trench? Chills elicited a shiver from her. She had to focus on the task at hand and not let herself get distracted. One day, one day, she might go down there to join her family. She knew or at least she hoped that they could return to the lifestream. And that they did not exist somewhere in oblivion, unable to return to the lifestream and become a part of the Divine Mechanism or the Grand Design. As she herself hoped one day to become. Down to the depths where the Unmaker and his minions waited is where she pushed her morbid thoughts.

Jhee had leaned further over the railing than was probably prudent. Now that she had worked out the scheme, her ire and her rage boiled. These pirates and thieves had used her wedding to perform an action that would yet again tear the district apart. She had half a mind to leave them to their fate. Why should she try to keep holding this district, this community, together when all it wanted to do was come asunder?

Perhaps, the district's problems had long been seething underneath the surface and had nothing to do with her or her family's feud. It just provided a convenient spark for it all to come undone. It only required a single tug on the right line for it to awaken the beasts below the surface. Nevertheless, she had to do whatever she could to fix what she had helped destabilize.

The charter boat appeared on the horizon again with Dame Porgi in her dramatic position.

"May I be of assistance?" the Dame asked.

"How?" Jhee replied.

"I've been tracking our giant, shelled friend. I set up a series of sonar beacons in the bay along with some bait implanted with trackers. Here, look." Dame Porgi unrolled a length of readings and a map. A series of times had been marked on the map. "Besides Wailing Point, it likes to frequent this area here. I believe that's where it's headed."

Dame Porgi tapped the lee of the isles.

"The Bay Ridge development," Jhee said.

"You know of it."

"A housing community built on a series of artificial islands and reefs. Also, a *gargantuan* hassle I don't need."

"Why is that?"

"Ongoing litigation regarding rights, ownership, and so forth. The empire manages it currently."

"My theory is the Storm Shield has disrupted their migration patterns along with many other species. It took up residence near the ship graveyard over in that area. The new trade route inland has forced more

commercial traffic through there. Some turtles are partial to jellyfish, so it may have followed the migrating sea polyps. The attacks on ships are just it being territorial."

Tui spat. "Your turtle ain't the only one feeling territorial. They built them homes through our traditional fishing waters."

"Thank you for all your help. This is a dangerous undertaking and a criminal investigative matter. You can go back to shore now."

"Just as all the fun was about to start? Harrumph, see if I ever come to your rescue again." Dame Porgi hopped in her boat. She waved her sea cap as she motored away. "Tallyho."

Jhee shook her head. Amateurs. She turned back to searching the horizon. She spotted a dark speck. Could it be? She narrowed her eyes and squinted. A quickly enacted cypher allowed her to see beyond the veil of rain. The cypher permitted her to detect the vague glow of magic residue trails. There was always the ambient background magic of the sea itself. With the coming of the Storm Shield, its background radiation had become more pronounced. Off to her side, she saw in the distance a great, gray glowing mist that was the residuals from the Storm. She returned her focus to the horizon. Yes, there was definitely a brighter spot there.

"There!" She pointed at the horizon. The captain of the vessel held up his farseers and looked. "I think... I think I can see it."

"Good. Go faster."

"No can do. Mme. Justicar. Not in this weather. We can't risk blowing out the engines. This is about as fast as we can go safely."

"Then go unsafely. We have to catch up to them."

"In all due fairness, Mme. Justicar. I'm the captain of this boat, and I'm not gonna risk my crew for some rich folks' property."

"Captain, I am giving you an order, with the full backing of the Imperial authority of Justicars, straight from Central Authority."

"No, ma'am. I won't risk my crew."

Jhee smacked the railing of the ship. She did finger-cyphers to calm herself down. This was unacceptable. She bit her lip and quietly seethed as the vessel continued on much too slowly. The submersible diminishing and getting smaller and further away from them. She turned to the captain. "Assuming the Dame's surmise and mine are correct, maybe we should head them off at the source."

"As long as it doesn't mean risking my crew, Justicar, I'm in."

The tube was a cargo umbilical, designed to transport things even when the storms made passage by sea difficult. A line had been cut and a marker placed near Wailing Point. The burglars planned to cut a junction into the umbilical. Reverse the air and water flows, and you had an excellent means to transport valuables, even unwieldy ones, away from the houses quickly. If you sank the artificial islands afterward or destroyed the umbilical, no one would be the wiser about your theft. It was pure madness and brilliance. Jhee wondered what Maker they petitioned to come up with that scheme.

Jhee took out her nautical map and pointed at the place where the umbilical for the artificial islands connected to the mainland. "Here, I believe there's an intake valve here out off the coast. They may try to gain access here. Coordinated drawers at both ends with a little help from fish tubes or the propulsion system on the submersible would make a shuttle system for them and their stolen goods."

"Hm," said the captain. "Those waters are a little shallow for most of us to go. We have to send a dinghy or a lifeboat. Perhaps a small diving boat. We could send divers. But I'm not sure what they can do, few are trained for underwater combat."

Jhee swore. If only Shep were here, he had training in underwater combat. She would be no use under the waves. What other means did they have of taking on the bandits? She didn't have Temari's or her brother's experience with the waterspouts or whirlpools. However, maybe she can back form what they did. If she could pull that off, then she might ground the dive team before they struck the homes.

"Do you have speed runners as part of your flotilla?"

"Yes, Mme, Justicar."

"Good. A group of us will take those to trace the end of the pipeline. The rest of the fleet can use the Dame's sea trackers to catch up to that contraption."

"I need everyone skilled with wind drawing with me."

The captain waved her hand, and several of her wind drawer crew approached Jhee. Jhee and the squadron of speed runners took off for the mists.

The voluminous clouds of mist and lightning loomed in the distance. The Storm Shield, the mystical masterpiece and grand gamble for peace, watched over them as it did the whole empire. Were the traces of those who died building it imbued within it the way spirits were said to inhabit the mists? Artificers left an imprint behind when they used arcana on the Mortal Sphere. Was it such a farfetched idea that they left one on the Ether Sphere too? Did the dead live on in the Storm Shield also, with the mist their enfolding arms and the lightning their unslakable anger?

They arrived at the junction where the thieves had created their own intake valve.

After a few minutes of getting the lay of the area, Jhee shared the rest of her plan with her team.

"Here is what we're going to do," Jhee said. "We're going to make an air funnel. It won't be like Temari's waterspouts or whirlpools. But we're going to create a low-pressure vacuum that will suck the thieves out of the umbilical. Does everyone understand?"

There were murmurs of assent from the crew. Jhee and the crew began to make circular motions that would stir and rotate the air. And start it up with a cyclonic funnel or movement. They continued to demonstrate the move as the other crew joined in. The amount of air they moved increased exponentially. To tamper with the weather this

close to the Shield, may have been sheer madness. But Jhee would be drenched if she would let this robbery go off right underneath her nose.

As the wind funnel increased, it started to suck up other items in the area. "Good. Now keep it going."

Jhee directed the funnel into the umbilical opening. She then signaled that the participants should reverse the flow. Doing so created a low-pressure vacuum which began to draw air out of the umbilicals. It wasn't long before loose items started to come shooting out of the umbilical opening.

Eventually, they heard a keening yell. And then a groan and a yelp. A woman came sliding out through the hole in the umbilical. She was tossed several feet in the air. Another nearby wind drawer made a softly cushioned fall for her. She directed one of the wind finders not to join the funnel and to be on hand to deal with anything that came shooting out of the umbilical. Soon larger items flew out of the umbilical. Another burglary crew member came out. They were followed by some heavier equipment such as cutting torches.

One by one, they sucked the nefarious thieves out of the tunnel. After a while, nothing else came out of the tube. She counted up the number of people that had caught. They were a person or two short. None of those they extracted out of the tunnel were Miz Bibi or Temari's siblings. They must still be out there.

10 A Sister's Duty



Two Promises

Jhee suspected that as the crooks had been sucked back through the tunnel. Miz Bibi, on the other end, had gotten wise to what they were doing. She and Temari's siblings were still in one or more of the houses. Likely they had braced themselves so they would not be sucked into the tube. Now that they knew what was going on, they were likely to be more dangerous and on the alert.

She thought about her current assets. She began to form the cypher for heat detection. That may be the only way to figure out where the remaining criminals were without risk to the crew. She performed the cypher that removed the scales from her eyes. And allowed everything except for heat to fall away.

Being skilled as an elemental drawer did not just mean that you could fling it about. While Jhee could not create an element, Jhee often had to be attuned to where it was in order to manipulate it. Jhee scanned for fire and heat, anything she might put under her control.

Using the heat in other lifeforms' bodies was out of the question, but she could track its presence. The heat and fire within others were under their total control, and no elemental drawer could wrest it from them. Perhaps the Makers might have been able to, but no mortal possessed that ability.

Jhee scanned the length of the tunnel for heat signatures. At last, she was forced to admit that she would have to get on a boat or take the gangplank closer to the houses to see if she could figure out where the remaining thieves were.

"Captain, I need someone to take me out to the far sides of these houses."

"Nay, Justicar. I think the Icon has a small one- or two-person flying vessel. That's the only thing that might remain high enough above the waves. But it's not very powerful. Should the winds pick up, it'll be tossed around like a ragdoll."

No shiver from Jhee this time, but she was not entirely comfortable with that. She did not have a problem with heights. But to be going over the water in a flimsy air vessel still meant she could drown. "It'll have to do."

"Justicar, please," Bax said.

"I made a promise to her family."

He sighed, suddenly showing every cycle of his age on his face. "You made a promise to Ms. Mirrei and her family. Justicar, I know you feel responsible for, well, everything, but you got to stop living your life at the beck and call of the Reaches and sins of the past. I won't speak for how you treated other folk. That's a matter for you and the Maker of scales, but I know what you did for folk like Dari and me."

"I must see this through, Bax. Not just for them. For me."

He nodded.

In a few moments, Jhee had been ferried to the ship, the Icon. A small crazy-looking man with aviator's hat had a tiny little two-person glider type deal. She hopped in and prayed to the Makers that this dingy, dinky flying vessel would remain aloft long enough for her to examine the homes for heat signatures.

As Jhee flew over the homes looking for signatures, she squinted and narrowed her eyes. At first, she saw nothing. A little heat speck flared in one of the outlying houses. "Over there!"

Jhee pointed at the farthest house. The crazy little pilot brought them closer. As they neared, Jhee differentiated multiple heat signatures. The count matched the missing burglars. Two heat sources re-

mained mostly stationary, while another wandered about. Three heat signatures. She assumed it was Miz Bibi and Temari's siblings.

The pilot took them in a little closer. Jhee squeezed her eyes shut and said a prayer to the First Makers. "Pilot, you have any gear for water rescue and a line I can use to descend?"

"Behind your seat. You're not going to do what I think you're going to do, are you?"

"Unfortunately, yes. If there was any other choice, I wouldn't. But I need to get closer, or else I can do nothing for Temari's siblings."

"Okay, then. Hopefully, it won't be your watery grave."

"May your words be geld for the Prime Maker's Grace. And make sure you hold this contraption steady."

Jhee unclipped her seatbelt and reached behind her seat. She found the harness and winch and began to put it on herself. Once it was secured, she turned to the side and swung her feet out of the open side of the aircraft. She slowly inched out. "Here we go. Lower me down."

She hopped off the side. She slowly inched out of the aircraft and allowed herself to dangle. The winch lowered her down to just above the house. What was she thinking? She breathed deep. She shut her eyes to staunch the sudden wave of vertigo overtaking her.



Glass Houses

Jhee carefully positioned herself above the home. When she thought she might miss, she used her wind drawer powers to push her closer to the house. She got on one eave. She grabbed onto the house's godspark rod. When she had firm hold to it, she unclipped herself from the harness. She made sure her footing on the slick roof and waved the aircraft away. The sound of it had hopefully masked her landing on the roof.

She would wish for the cover the engine provided, but the winds generated might make it harder for her to get down. Jhee went over to one edge of the roof nearest the walkway leading to the home on its artificial island. She touched her hand on the roof, and then she placed her ear against the roofing material. She whispered and wiggled her fingers to make an eavesdropping cypher. The roof became a conductor to pass the sounds from below another cypher, which amplified the voices and filtered frequencies to clean garbled voices or noise. As she had suspected, there were three distinct voices. Miz Bibi sounded agitated. She yelled at the others. The other two voices, who Jhee assumed were Temari's siblings, screamed and pleaded back at her.

"We are surrounded. We can't get out. Miz B, we have to surrender."

"No surrender. I will not go to jail."

"The Justicar is a fair woman. You'll get an awful lot better than I did. Perhaps you won't even be sentenced to work for your other noble bastards."

"I will not work alongside the likes of scum like you."

"Working alongside likes of scum like us was fine when you wanted to rob your friends and neighbors."

"I should've let you all rot in Briny Town."

"And maybe we'd all be the better for it. I've been on a prison ship. I know what it's like. They're gonna eat someone like you alive. As far as I can tell, I'll only have a short bit to do. I can do that standing on my head. But you? Oh, they're gonna love you."

"Shut up!"

"It's over, Miz Bibi. Just let me and my brother go."

Jhee sneaked along what once might have been a beautiful decorative veranda. The unfinished paint had chipped and faded. At last, she found an opening with which to enter. A window's shutter had rusted open. Jhee slipped inside then crept up on the three heat signatures. They were in the common room, the broad central area where most

houses kept either a fish hold or central fire. There was no fire burning now. All she saw was the heat signatures of the people.

Just as Jhee had gotten to the entranceway to the central area, Miz Bibi spun around and lashed out blindly with a wind guster. Jhee had only an instant to dodge. "Miz Bibi, you are surrounded. Do as Temari's siblings say. Let them go, and I will be inclined to show leniency."

"You'll never take me alive, Justicar."

"I most assuredly will. Remember, Miz Bibi, I served, and I know how to fire draw. I'm a combat-trained veteran. While you, what were you a simple cushy naval commission or desk duty at the intelligence pool?"

Ridiculing anyone's service, left a bad taste in her mouth. But everyone knew that the upper class often landed the least dangerous and most comfortable assignments for their scions. She had wanted to go into a similar situation. Jhee, though, based on the legacy of her family, wanted to do more. Unfortunately, fate and her own failings had other plans. With her service problems, who was she throw stones?

"You have no call to question my service, Justicar. I've heard about you. I know why you never got a naval commission. The whole damn Reaches knows."

"Be that as it may, Miz Bibi, you should know, at least by now, I didn't just sit around twiddling my thumbs and learned some skills."

"I'd wager I'd like to try those skills."

"There is no need for violence, Miz Bibi. You can't hope to escape. The Coastal League is outside. Most of your crew are in custody. Please, just turn yourself in, and we can talk about this. I'm sure you have connections enough to get yourself out of any serious trouble."

"Isn't that always the way with those types?" said Tessa. "The poor get used up and sent away while the rich like her get to go about doing whatever they please."

Jhee cleared her throat. "Be that as it may, Miz Bibi, you really have no choice."

"I'm not taking the rap for something I didn't do. I didn't kill Temari. I needed her and her brother for their elemental drawing abilities. When she turned up dead, we were screwed. We have to scrap our plans."

"Unless you could come up with a backup who also knew how to do the waterspout and whirlpool tricks."

"Exactly. Temari's brother knew that his other sisters could also do the trick. I understood that if we took him hostage, we might get one or the other of them to go along with us. When Temari didn't show up, we thought she just gotten cold feet. Next thing I know, you're at my door saying she's found dead."

"So, you kidnapped her brother then did what you could to force one of her sisters to help you."

"We had no time. Your wedding was today. We had no backup. We had to scramble and improvise. The only others who might know how were Temari's siblings. Remember that food lot we had to destroy. I'd bought some of that meat the Brackens sold the Karanxs and the corroded aluminum. Don't you see we had to kidnap him to make sure they cooperated? Or else it all would have gone belly up."

"Bibi, is that true?" her brother asked.

"How do you think we got the money to pay the fines and modernize the equipment?"

"As I am an officer of the Imperial court and laws, I will take that as your confession to both kidnapping and robbery."

"No, wait, you can't do that. You tricked me!"

"Miz Bibi, you have no choice but to turn yourself in. You cannot get away with this."

"But, but...."

"Come along peaceably now."

Miz Bibi lowered her air cannon. She hung her head, and her shoulders stooped in defeat. Jhee approached and took the air gun from her hand. She put a hand on her shoulder and began guiding her out.

"Is that it?" yelled Tessa. "She just gets to walk away. With some slap on the wrist!"

Jhee paused. "I will make my determination as to sentencing later. What's most important is bringing this situation to a swift and peaceful end."

"You reckon we square," Tessa said, "but we ain't square. I lost my sister because of her. And my brother, he can't go to the Academy no more. So, all I've done has been for nothing. All the time in jail, all the time working for her stinking fish house. Ruined."

Tessa pulled a waterlogged spear from a lance and shield wall display.



To Reach the Headwaters

Mr. Teo put a hand on his sister's shoulder. "It's over, Tessa. We have to let this go."

"This is all because of you. Why couldn't you have been a good son? Why couldn't you have been a good child like me, Temari, and Trina? The sacrifices we made so you can go to the Academy and have a better life. But you have to gamble, run your mouth, and swim with many ruffians and bad influences. It's your fault Temari's dead."

"What cause have you to say that to me? I did my best. I never wanted to go to the Academy. Y'all forced that on me. I wanted to stay home and work with my family."

"We wanted more for you. We wanted you to get out of stinking Briny Town. That way, another generation of us wouldn't have to come home reeking of fish; our hands worked to the bone. Our livelihood is going away. The wall's right there. All the rich guls and the wealthy will get the permits and shares of the spoils. And thanks to your stupidi-

ty, we can't even have licenses. Because I took the rap for your drench crimes."

"Who asked you to? I never asked for any of this. I wanted to be with my family, but that wasn't good enough for any of you. All you wanted me to do was go to the Academy, join the military. Well, I'm not fighting the drench rich people's wars just to make you happy."

Jhee turned to face the arguing siblings. "What's all this now?"

Mr. Teo turned to Jhee. "My sister's rap for stealing. It was me. She took the blame because she didn't want to ruin my chances to join the military and get free courses at the Academy."

"You idiot. Now it was all for nothing."

"It's over. It was already all for nothing. What's done is done."

"You're telling me this wasn't Temari's idea?"

"No," said Mr. Teo. "It was mine. I didn't want to go to the Academy. I just wanted you and mom and all the others to be taken care of. I asked Temari to help me. I thought if I could get up enough clink-clack so 'mere and 'bere didn't have to work no more."

"All my sacrifices, everything I went through. I went to jail for you."

"No one asked you to. Did you ever bother to consult me before making all these plans for my future?"

"Miss Tessa, you killed Temari," Jhee said.

"Yes. For him." Tessa leveled the spear at her brother. "You've thrown it all away."

"Calm yourselves, please," Jhee said. She secured Miz Bibi's hands and then strolled between Tessa and Teo. "Let me see if I can piece together what happened. You caught your brother and Temari out practicing and doing their dry run for the robberies. You thought Temari had instigated it."

"Yes, I did."

The spear lowered. Jhee touched her chin as she stepped forward just inside its reach. "According to your fish story, you had been out last night."

"A fish story don't prove nothing."

Jhee continued to stroke her chin. She placed gentle body pressure against the spear. The point inched away from Mr. Teo's direction. "You're right. It doesn't. You also said she was reading the third Arrow Point story when you last saw her."

"So?"

Jhee lowered her hand from her chin onto the spear's haft. "She didn't buy it until just before she took the ship out."

Tessa lowered the spear more. "She needed help with the traps. We argued. I thought she was the one leading him down a bad path. I thought she was the one who was ruining his future. We fought. We were on the boat. While we were arguing out to sea, a big wave swell hit. The boom came loose and hit Temari square in the head. She was knocked into the water. It was dark. I wanted to go in after her but with the darkness and the rough waves. I couldn't find her."

Jhee looped her arm around the spear. "When you didn't, you took the boat back in and said nothing to anyone?"

"She confided the whole scheme to me. *Confessed*. She said it was her fault, her idea. I thought now with her gone, then they would call it off, and then I can get my brother away. I told Tui what I had done, and she agreed to cover for me."

Miss Tui spoke up, "My job was to steer you away until we figured out how to keep Teo out of it. Then he went missing. And they said that if we wanted him back, we had to take Temari's place. So, Trina went along."

"Tessy, is that true?" Mr. Teo said.

Tessa began to cry. "Temari thought maybe she could buy her way into the military. A drawing powered water drone. As long as she paid for it herself or got a noble sponsor, she had a way into Tihalmec Academy. The Wolphins would give her a recommendation which would allow her to get in the military even with her spotty record. Or maybe even a pardon or exception so it wouldn't matter."

Jhee grabbed the spear shaft and trapped it against her body. "Miss Tessa, I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of your kin, Temari. Do you deny the charges?"

The sibling glowered and tugged on the shaft several times before giving up. "We just wanted a better life for our kinfolk. We all gave up so much, so much. And like that, he threw it away. Never mind our sacrifices. Never mind our sorrows. You think this is what we wanted to do with our lives? Both Temari and I couldn't go to the Academy, but you could. She protected you, kept your secret right up to the end. We had laid the path for you. A perilous road that we had done our best to clear all the obstacles out of your way. All you had to do was be grateful and take it."

Mr. Teo hung his head. "The pardon. It wasn't for her, Tessa, it was for you. That's how I got her to agree to help."

"Unfortunately, I will have to take you into custody as well."

"I understand, Justicar," said Temari's brother. "She traded away her designs, her chance to go to the academy, and finally her life for us. None of us deserved it. None of us thanked her. Yet, she did it anyway."

"One last thing, do you know what became of Temari's effigy? Your parents need it to put on the moon barge."

Tessa reached into an inner pocket and took out a pouch. "I took this so her sprite wouldn't seek vengeance on me. I also didn't think she deserved to rejoin our ancestors for dragging our brother into her schemes. Temari deserves to reach the headwaters. It's me that should be put out to sea. My parents need to put this on the moon barge. See that they get it."

Grunting and clanking restraints reminded Jhee of Miz Bibi's presence as she strained against her bonds. Jhee put slap cuffs on Mr. Teo and his sisters. She checked Miz Bibi's loops. She'd rubbed her wrists raw. "Stop. You're just hurting yourself."

"I'm not the only one who will hurt," Miz Bibi said. "This isn't over. This doesn't end with me. I won't be the only one on the hook for this. I'm naming names. Believe me."

Jhee secured her prisoners. With the only one being left unchained and to her own devices was Miss Tui. Jhee, unfortunately, left her standing in the middle of the broken-into home. Jhee marched her prisoners down the gangway back to shore, where representatives of the Coastal League waited.

"Captain, I trust you can take these prisoners in hand. I have confessions from two out of the three of them. There should be no problem on the third, though. Meanwhile, I have a wedding to get to."

On the bow of the flagship, Bax, Miss Rishika, and Jhee leaned against the rail. Jhee's gaze lingered on her old home backlit by the occasional strike of godspark. She had the impression of a sizable iridescent shape underneath the moorings, something impossibly large and undulating. The mass circled the home, moving between it and the Storm Shield. Bax and Miss Rishika mouths gaped. "Don't say it, Bax, Miss Rishika. Don't say it. No more side endeavors."

"Yes, ma'am. Let's get you to your wedding," Bax said.

"We going to a wedding? I love weddings," that one prisoner called.

"Would you shut up," Ginger said.

Miss Rishika came up to Jhee. "Ma'am, I can get you back in plenty of time. Where do you need to be meet your wedding canoe?"

The captain looked at Jhee and said, "A wedding? Where's your wedding canoe?"

Jhee palmed her esca. "The wedding barge! Drench! I knew I'd forgotten something."

11 A Household's Duty



A Wager

Kanto fumed because denbe, his esteemed wife, had not arrived yet. Nor had she even replied to his inquiries. He had wave-worn himself to make this a special day for both her and Mirrei. And yet again, denbe proved to be inconsiderate and dismissive of their feelings. She always let everything slide, all the little gestures trivial to her but meant the most to the rest of them. This was unacceptable. This simply would not do.

Kanto examined his conch both to check the time and to see if there was any response from her.

"I heard from our lady wife," Shep said. "She says she got tied up picking up the marriage canoe."

Denbe had the time to message Shep, but not him. Of course, she had.

"Picking up the marriage canoe? She should have sent servants. We have barely enough time as it is to get her hair and make-up done even if she were to teleport back. Where's Bax?"

"He's with her."

"This is so typical of her. Where are they then? If I meet them en route, I can work my wonders before she arrives at the ceremony. I intend to give my wife and soon-to-be sister-wife the most lavish wedding ever. No one will ruin it, even them."

Kanto grabbed his conch and messaged denbe and Bax furiously. How much longer could he tolerate this? And should he? His grand-mamere, Lady Kadence, piloted her mobility chair to his side.

"A serious change is needed in how this household runs. You've joined just in time," Grandmamere said.

Grandmamere always seemed to know his mind better than he did. She even had a candy at the ready for when he began to grind his teeth.

"Agreed."

"She ran. Same wager as always?"

Mirrei shook her head. "She wouldn't run. She's too responsible to do so without telling me."

"You're not feeling smothered here, too, are you?"

"No," Mirrei sighed. "It's just the atmosphere has been so serious and tense. They are all very intense folk. Each in their different way. It can be draining interacting with them. Particularly when they're all together."

Uncle Alden pulled aside the window covering then let it drop. "It's not a far drop to the level below. We can be on my boat and back at the Crag long before anyone notices."

Mirrei checked the saline doses remaining in her pill keeper. She had taken none today, but she felt so great maybe she didn't need them anymore. Makers did she look forward to the day when she could throw them away forever. "Thanks for the sentiment, Unk. Trust me, they'll notice."

Beside the pills lay an early union present from the Justicar, a collection of travel folios and cyphering texts. Mirrei flipped through a folio, marveling at the far-off sites depicted. As a bookish companion and ingénue of a bureaucrat, would she ever visit places like that?

"What do you think of the Justicar, Unk?"

"It doesn't matter what I think."

"If I couldn't handle the answer, I wouldn't have asked."

"In her youth, she was a great kisser."

Mirrei wrinkled her face. "Victory point to you. That was an answer I couldn't handle."

"Maybe she won't show," Uncle Alden said.

"She'll show."

"Even if she does, it's not too late to call this off."

"I call it off, and the estate fight between you and my cousins will drag on until the next age or coronation whichever's later."

"Us, supposed adults, sure made a mess of things."

"Yeah, you did."

"You don't have to be the one to fix it."

"I'm choosing to be the one who fixes it."

"All right. All right. I won't mention it again."

"One hundred shell. She would have at least offered to take me with her."

"You've got a wager, dear niece."



On A Mission

Jhee boarded the vessel *The Icon*. Notifications from Kanto made a near-constant accompaniment. She winced as she read through them. She decided to explain herself in person. A charter boat appeared on the horizon. The monster hunter's vessel approached theirs at speed. Jhee's heart quickened as she thought they meant to ram them. A few hundred meters out, the craft slowed up and came about. Next thing she knew, Kanto hailed them from a charter boat.

"Permission to come aboard," he yelled.

"Whelm and waves." Jhee placed a hand over her heart. One shipwreck for today had been quite enough.

The crew allowed the charter boat to come alongside. Kanto and contingent of servants climbed aboard to the main deck.

"All my Makers, what did you do to your hair?" exclaimed Kanto. "How am I going to work with this? Come along. Let's see what we can do."

Moments earlier, Jhee had feared another adventure in the water. Instead, the whirlpool of fate had dredged up something far worse: Kanto on a mission. Jhee glanced over at Bax, who merely shrugged. She pleaded with her eyes for him to save her, but he wagged his conch at her with a triumphant grin that suggested she had brought this on herself.

Kanto forced Jhee into a folding captain's chair. While he removed the hair sticks from her hastily put together hairdo, he spoke about how much of a mess she was. He threw down a garment bag beside her and then set about laying out the items. The raft of servants scurried to fulfill his orders. He even enlisted the help of the boat's crew. Before long, he acted the admiral of the entire ship's crew. When he said fetch him items, they stepped lively. She admired his efficiency.

"I spoke to the marriage canoe company. They won't be able to pick us up in time, but somehow, we're going to manage. You should have clued me in about what you were up to. I could have made contingencies. This is something you're going to have to get much better at."

Jhee found it interesting that Kanto took it as a forgone conclusion that they would keep this up as part of the routine. Or that this would not be the last time she did something like this. She supposed she was very predictable. It would not be that much of a stretch for him, or anyone really, to imagine this wouldn't be the last time she'd run off to work case when other matters needed attention. For the first time, she had a vague idea that this household situation might work. Not just in the short term, but as a long-term arrangement. But she couldn't afford to let herself think that way, both her new spouses were young and sheltered. Once they reached the capital or any other lively place, she could very well find that their eyes wandered and that they were wondering what they were missing.

Jhee examined that thought. Once they reached the capital? So, it seems like her under mind had been working on the solution and reached the problem for her. She had not quite decided in her over mind that she would accept the offer to go to the capital. Now, however, it seemed the logical choice. But that was something to worry about on the morrow. Now, though, she had a wedding to deal with and a hectoring husband who would brook no nonsense from her right now. And if she was honest, she deserved it. So, she let him do he will and chide and scold her as he would. This was his domain, and she needed to let him run it, or else there would be trench to trawl.

Jhee grabbed Bax as he rushed past. "Temari's effigy. I promised her parents."

"I'll see to it, Justicar."

Kanto touched his chin, shook his head repeatedly, and tsked as he examined his work. "The charter boat was the best I could do on short notice. Most others had been hired out for transporting guests."

Kanto paused for thought, "Let me guess, you forgot to charter the wedding float?"

"Ha! I didn't forget. I just neglected to arrange a pickup place and time."

"You forgot."

"I forgot."

The captain said, "Never you mind about that canoe. How would you like the biggest, most fanciest wedding float out there?"

Jhee poked out her mouth and glanced at all the craft surrounding her from the tug to submersible to the flagship.



The Familiar Life

Shep checked his conch then the dual suns position to gauge the time again. Not only had Jhee gone missing, but now Kanto as well. He glanced over at Mirrei. Perhaps Jhee might have been inconsiderate enough to ruin this day for her, but he expected better of Kanto. Especially after all the fuss he had been making about pulling off this wedding and making it the event of the season. But perhaps Jhee had gotten to and worn him down.

Jhee's dedication to her work could be infectious. It was easy to see the high she gained from working a case. And when you were around her when she was in that state, it was hard not to get sucked in yourself. However, Kanto had never struck him as that sort, but then again, you never know. And if he was honest, he also felt that adrenaline rush when they worked a case together. The more dangerous, the better. Just that adrenaline and getting your blood up, just thrumming in your veins. He meant to have some definite words with Bax.

However, Shep needed to leave those days behind him. He checked on Mirrei again. This was the young woman's day. He and Jhee now had a family, two younger spouses to take care of. And so, they needed to cut down on their reckless ways. Though, to be fair, when they were at home, they were at home. They kept themselves mostly quietly. When they had downtime, they spent it doing quiet activities such as reading and enjoying each other's company. He and Jhee had had enough excitement for a lifetime during their service. Now, as an older couple, they liked to take joy in simple pursuits.

Shep touched the eye scar, which left half his vision clouded. It was good Jhee had more innocent and younger people to keep her attention. Young men and women without as much baggage. They could be light and fun and give her someone to take care of other than him. It had taken a dagger to the eye to make him genuinely see what he must do for himself, for Jhee.

He felt the sensation of being watched. He turned to find Mirrei regarding him with concern. "I'm sure they just got hung up. They'll be here soon."

"Oh, I know. I trust that Kanto won't let anything, even the Un-maker or the Great Shell Drake, itself get between them and this wedding. I was more concerned about you. You had a somber look on your face for what should be such a happy time."

"I was just worrying. Kanto is the one who's making the big deal over the wedding, but now I found his anxiousness has worn off on me. Jhee doesn't always mind things. She has a way of letting the time get away from her."

"Don't I know it." Mirrei giggled. "It's one thing I find so endearing. She's a much more easygoing than mamere led me to believe."

Mirrei continued to laugh. The sound reminded him so much of Mai. Mirrei's mother had been Jhee's lifelong friend who turned rival because of him. And now she was dead. Mirrei's laughter transformed to coughing a moment later.

Shep became solicitous. "Are you sure you're fine?"

"I'm fine. I just kind of want us to hurry and get this over with. Then maybe Kanto would go back to his normal anxiousness and not wedding monster anxious."

Shep chuckled. "I know what you mean."

Before Shep could say anything else, he heard a massive engine. Many of the guests exclaimed. *What now?*

"Wait here," Shep said to Mirrei.

"Not on your life."

Shep and Mirrei ran to the edge of their property. A bale of boat-sized turtles swam by as the vanguard for an even more gigantic turtle, the Spectral Armada. His breath quickened at first. These turtles, though glowing, were quite substantial and covered in garlands. From the unnatural way they held their heads out of the water, Shep realized

they were crafts. While he picked his jaw up from the ground, the sound of engines grew louder.

Around the cliff face, came a yacht and several flagships of the Coastal League. On the foremost ship's bow, Jhee, his personal Lady of the Isles, stood proudly with her foot on the rail. Kanto accompanied her, grinning from ear to ear. Somehow, they had decked out the main ship with flowers aplenty like a proper marriage canoe. The fleet motored up as close as they dared to the ship's side loading dock of the house. Every ship bore at least one garland. The foghorn sounded on the lead vessel.

"Ha-ha!" Mirrei said.

Jhee waved from the bow of the ship. She spread her arms wide as if to say, 'how about this for a wedding retinue?' Shep chuckled. *Well, he'd be drenched in the Trench.* The crew threw out the gangplank and helped Mirrei up to join Jhee. Shep followed. Jhee placed a necklace of flowers around Mirrei's neck.

"Sorry I'm late."

Mirrei threw her arms around Jhee and kissed her on the cheek. "This was worth it!"

"Let's get married."

Jhee and Mirrei descended the gangplank to the private cove off the rear garden with Shep and Kanto not far behind. Only a fraction of those invited attended the actual ceremony. The rest awaited them at the Seaport Pavilion for the post-wedding rollick.

"Enough of that," Kanto said. "Places."

The cove bore a simple Makers' shrine. Three First Makers architraves had been erected. As they had been when Jhee and Kanto married, and when Shep and Jhee recommitted themselves a few years after their elopement. Though, the officiants of the Makers had been different. A Mechanist priestess waited along with a hand-faster of Lashae and Pascoe. Kanto and Shep escorted their lady wife and prospective

denye along the flower-strewn dock to the union bench. The women seated themselves and clasped hands as the clergy presided.

"As the workings of the Divine Mechanism have meted out," the Mechanist fabricator said.

"As the bonds of wellness and bounty have nurtured," the hand-faster said.

Shep and Kanto spoke as one, "As first and second spouses, we present these wedding wreaths to you as a sign of our blessing. May your house be as much a haven of care and learning to our denye, sister-wife, as it has been to us."

Stern glares to the guests from the two men dared the attendees to gainsay their approval. They held hands with the wedding officiants in a circle around Jhee and Mirrei.

"By all the names and countenances of the Makers are thee wed and your houses united. May your union know harmony across all Spheres."

Jhee and Mirrei crowned each other with the flower wreaths then touched esca. The guests cheered and applauded, some less enthusiastically than others. While Jhee and Mirrei performed devotions at the family shrine, Shep and Kanto passed out geld coins to the guests and sprinkled them with blessed, scented water.

Shep and Kanto stood as proud honor guard beside their denbe and denye. Guests filed by anointing the newlyweds and tossing geld into the Makers' shrine. Kanto beamed as proudly as if this had been his wedding. Shep had an idea, for the first time since he presented Kanto to Jhee, that this might work. This felt like a proper family. For the first time in a while, he had hope for the future. At the very least, he had confidence now that Jhee would be well taken care of should anything happen to him. He knew now bringing Kanto aboard had been the right decision. And as much as he grouched and resented it, Jhee bringing in Mirrei might have been the right decision too. He just didn't like that their decision to marry had been driven by guilt and Mai's manipulations. But for the moment, he would accept it. They had to make this

work. They had to solidify as a family. All he wanted was the best for Jhee and for the junior spouses. And it finally seemed as if this match would be suitable for them all.

12 Unchartered



The Rollick

"To the Seaport Pavilion, my good captain," Jhee said.

The captain blew the seahorn and gave the order to move out.

As the ship pulled away from Hillside, Jhee encouraged Mirrei to pose defiantly at the boat rail as she had. She understood why Dame Porgi did it. While it made for a dashing tableau, that was nothing compared to the exhilaration of the wind whipping through your hair. Every one of them, though, held their breath ready to catch Mirrei at the first sign of distress.

"You guys have to try this," Mirrei said.

The four household members had a good chuckle once each had a turn, then they held hands.

A forlorn voice came again from amongst the criminals the crew were still untangling, "Congratulations on your wedding. It sounded like a lovely ceremony. Will there be sweets at the reception? I'd sure love a pasty."

At the reception, Jhee smiled, but her thoughts still felt heavy. She thought about Temari and her family. The last sister bore the sole burden of caring for everyone now that her siblings had been arrested, and her sister was dead. She could not help but think back to her own childhood and her parents. She felt such a kinship with Temari.

A video arrived from Bax of Temari's parents dressed in mourning shawls placing a small, carved canoe effigy into the stream with the moonfish.

"Oh, Justicar, we were thinking you would not show to your own wedding."

"Oh, I was just wrapping up a case. A group of criminals sought to burglarize and sink your homes. I prevented it. You can be pleased to know all your belongings were uncovered and your homes saved."

"Pleased. Indeed," the Lady took a long drink of her champagne.

"Truly," her husband said.

Jhee found their reaction strangely subdued. They wandered away from her and over to another group. The group surrounded a woman bearing the cream-colored imperial sash of a low-level office. That must have been the imperial reimbursement representative sent to assess folks' claims. The crowd around the assessor began to disperse.

The greeting exchange line formed, and Jhee took her place beside Mirrei. Jhee never talked to the imperial assessor. She supposed it didn't matter now. The killer had been found, and the robberies stopped. What had the criminals said? Nothing not in plain sight. Why then were so many valuable items in the central areas which should have been locked away?

The assessor came down the line, and Jhee placed a garland around her neck after she put her Maker offering with the others.

"I heard you wanted to speak with me," the imperial representative said.

"Doesn't matter now, I suppose."

"Well, I, for one, am pleased. I'd like to thank you for thwarting those robberies. You saved the empire and insurance fund a lot of money. If we had to pay out all those claims, it would have been us ruined. When those security notices rolled in, several approached me to make claims. At a union rollick, what vultures. I swear, can't a body ever take a break."

Mirrei chuckled. "I've wondered the same myself."

"Is that so?" Jhee laid a finger aside her nose.

"Stop it," Mirrei said.

"Stop what?" Jhee answered.

"Detective mode. You're thinking through something, and it's not our post-rollick retreat."

"My apologies."

A drunken guest stumbled over to Jhee as she ruminated. "You think you're the Lady of the Isles with your lavish wedding and armada. Well, Lady of the Isles, why didn't you warn us?"

"What's that?"

"Don't act like you didn't know. You knew the Shield was going up. Our investments in our homes would be worth nothing. You've always wanted to ruin us because we'll always know how your nether-born family got its wealth. Miz Bibi sure had you pegged correctly."

A vein throbbed in Jhee's neck. Jhee chocked her teeth and recited the first volume of maritime law in her head. She swept her gaze over her guests. Many turned away from her scrutiny. Mirrei squeezed her arm, eyes glimmering with concern.

"My 'nether-born' sister did not think twice about saving half your lives—"

"You're a washout coasting on stolen valor from your sisters."

Shep had come up behind Jhee and placed a restraining hand on her shoulder.

Jhee whispered, but used air drawing to carry her words, "Coming to the reception wasn't merely you being lured away from your homes. You took a leaf from the Brackens' stratagem manual. Attend the reception where you could alibi each other while you scammed the insurance agency and reimbursement fund."

"The reimbursement fund scammed us. The old justicar and the Bay Ridge developers sold us a more elaborate version of the old moving island scam. Because our land parcels didn't meet the standards for islands, natural or artificial, the Empire refused to reimburse us."

Plenty of folk would have been more than eager to help get one over on the other nobles who had gull-rigged a means of getting extra land and water rights. This was an evil equal-opportunity chance to get

back at the Freshly Flush. Resentful older families keeled off because of these mysterious islands would not have been inclined to help save them.

"Finished" did not even begin to describe the state of Jhee's system. Yet, she performed finger cyphering exercises until she found equilibrium. Arresting these crooks was the last act she could perform before she gave up on the Reaches and left the wreckage of the district behind for the capital.

"By the power invested in me by the dual sovereigns of the Six Isles, I'm placing the lot of you under arrest."

"For what?"

"For beginners, fraud, robbery, and assault. I'm sure once the whole scheme is excavated, we'll uncover more."

"You'll never get us to a judgment date."

"Perhaps. In the meantime, I'm confining you until the rollick concludes."

"You and what forces, Justicar?"

At a gesture, the suspected conspirators' household guard surrounded them. Shep chuffed behind Jhee. She took in her surroundings as she relinquished Mirrei into Kanto's care.

"Our forces," Alden Crag Hall said. "We've had enough of you using our injury to enrich yourselves. It stops now. Can't there just be peace in the isles? I'm thinking that won't happen without a wiped shore. It's my niece's union day, a day of peace and letting old grudges drift out to sea. You didn't come here to celebrate it with us. You came here to give yourself alibis. House Crag Hall has no quarrel with this house."

"House Zeloach has no quarrel with this house."

Kanto turned to Lady Kaydence. She raised her eyebrows. He raised an eyebrow back at her and folded his arms. She pursed her lips. "House Kenyatta has no quarrel with this house."

Shep remained silent. If he could have declared the feud over on behalf of his birth house, he would have. Maybe the worst of what hap-

pened to him could have been avoided if he could. He had no authority to speak for his sisters. It was they who needed to be appeased.

Mirrei's eldest cousin and current mere of House Mitsu also stood mute.

"House Brackfin has no quarrel with this house."

Jhee had no doubt that would cost her. And so, it continued with several smaller houses until..

"House Mitsu has no quarrel with this house," Dame Porgi said. The cousins gaped. "Close your mouth dears, lest you attract flies."

"Dame Porgi," Mirrei said and continued to speak almost to herself, "Peerless Porgi. Aunt Porgi."

Dame Porgi tensed within Mirrei's hug. "Not too loud, dear. I owe a few folks here money."

Mirrei threw her arms around Alden Crag Hall. "Thank you, Unk."

His eyes pinked with embarrassment. "It's time someone let this go. Half the Reaches' families broke their engagements to ours, not just hers. And with good reason, most of us were asses back then, except your father. He had his own demons, though. As for you, Justicar, I'll be checking in with my niece regular. You make me regret this, there won't be enough left of you to consign to the Trench. Now, get these rotters out of here, so the breezes for this union frolic can be nothing but fair."

"Dame Porgi," Jhee said, "I half expected you to hasten back to your search for Waitawba."

"I helped get one bride to the wedding. I should at least get to enjoy some of the spoils."

A newly arrived Bax opened his mouth.

"I trust you'll see to my spindle-ward kin's request," Jhee said. "I have a bride and her family to keep happy. Oh, grab some treats for the folk on the ships."

He gave a wink, and curt nod then had the impromptu security team escort the accused nobles out. When Jhee returned to Mirrei's side, she was whispering to her uncle.

"Give it to charity," Mirrei said then took Jhee's arm. After her day's adventures, Jhee chose not to inquire further.



Anchors of the Past

Their wedding rollick lasted for days. Even Kanto looked pleased and less dour than he had since wedding planning had begun. The salt spray splashed their faces, and there was a smell of sweetness in the air. They frolicked on and on. Shep treated the guests to his kelp fruit and k reel tarts he'd cooked expressly for the wedding. Kanto entertained them with his talents as a musical virtuoso. Mirrei ensured any excess food was shared with the rest of the Reach folk. During the day, there were make-for-food swaps. At dimday, they donated the excess to the food centers. Meanwhile, Jhee sent in her acceptance request and chartered a yacht, so they could travel in style. The rollick had transitioned into a farewell celebration.

"Aunt Porgi." Mirrei's eyes sparkled. "Peerless Porgi of Portshire Place, the adventuress and blackfish."

"I don't blame you for not marrying into that clan, Justicar. While the Crag Halls and Portshires were numerous and bountiful, they were always such bores. I preferred seeking rarer fish in the open sea myself."

"Well, Dame Porgi, are you disappointed your legendary terrapin turned out to be merely a mechanical marvel?"

"This time. Alas, it was merely a craft, though quite an impressive one. Would you like to see a find nearly as impressive? Dear niece, may I steal your lady wife for a moment?"

"Just bring her back undamaged and preferably dry," Mirrei said.

"I make no guarantees."

Jhee and the Dame went to the formerly derelict ship. The Dame had filed a salvage claim which Jhee had been forced to grant when Miss Rishika could not cover the impound fees. This had been one instance Jhee could not pay the charges herself. "Why are we here, Dame?"

"I wanted to show you something I bought from the Brackens."

Was that the tarp from the boat of the Bracken Jhee questioned? "Please, remember, I am an officer of the court."

"If you find this disagreeable, I'm sure you'll tack it onto the other fines you already assessed me." Dame Porgi chuckled and whipped the tarp off her ship's hold. She angled a glow light over the hold, so Jhee could have a proper look. Inside was the largest, spiked tortoiseshell Jhee had ever seen. The mottled, amber-streaked carapace had to measure at least as long as Jhee. Spikes the size of her fist protruded from the scutes. Fearsome saw-like serrations ran along the shell margins. "They poached it in more ways than one."

"That's one big bowl of turtle soup."

Jhee and the Dame burst out into laughter together. "They claim there's more out there."

"And they'd be happy to show you where for a small fee."

"Once I show this to my colleagues, I think the area around Bay Ridge will become a protected reef or wildlife preserve."

"Perhaps you should dump it overboard."

"Perhaps, once I found a live one to study. My bait trackers are still active. Tallyho."

Miss Rishika came up behind Jhee and coughed. She sported a new sea cap and kerchief. Despite the loss of her boat, she smiled.

"What about you, Miss Rishika? May I ask what your plans are?"

"I liked to curse you along with the last Justicar for those fines, but it was a fair cop for what we done. Your charter fees and the dame's more than squared it." Miss Rishika glanced at the phantom ship. Dame Porgi hailed them. "The Dame needs folk to help her cook

and maintain the ship while she tracks. I thought maybe I'd help with her search on a more permanent basis. Her craft was a little small. Mine's better suited to the task. She sold her old tug with its fancy fish-finding equipment to Temari's kin. We'll upgrade mine over time. Mayhaps all them sightings was the thieves' craft. Mayhaps it wasn't. But you gotta admit we saw something out there. Maybe it's just jellyfish, but it's gonna be some fun finding out. Who knows, ma'am, maybe in a few cycles I'll get bored?"

"But in the meantime, you will have probably earned enough for a new fishing license."

"Yes, ma'am. By the by, a company licensed Temari's aqua-pod designs."

"Excellent, it was only a matter of time," Jhee said. "They were quite innovative."

Miss Rishika tipped her cap then boarded the ship. Jhee's conch blipped, signaling a message from her financial manager. She confirmed the purchase of new equipment for her aquaculture rig.

Jhee's conch dinged with an incoming message. Dame Porgi had billed her a sum equal to the fines for the rescue and transporting Kanto. The Dame waved her hat at Jhee as her new vessel and crew sped away.

Miss Temari's life was not Jhee's. She shivered. No, she was not Temari, and Temari was not her. She had to let go of all the past and of the guilt that had kept her weighed down for all these years. She looked at the smiling faces of her younger spouses, and even Shep did not seem so sad as well. This here and now, this family, this is what mattered. And she had to let go of the past. The district could no longer be her responsibility. She had to let it go. She could not change the past. And she would not stand in the way of her district's bright future. The community had moved on from the feud, and so should she.

The chartered yacht arrived to bear them to the capital. The four waved farewell from the stern to the Far Reaches and the anchors of

the past. As the yacht headed for open waters, they moved to the prow. From that vantage, they faced forward to their future.



THE END



Thank you!

Thank you for reading JUSTICAR JHEE AND THE SPECTRAL ARMADA! I hope you enjoyed it! Please check out Justicar Jhee Books 1 & 2. Available for sale and pre-order via the links below:

Justicar Jhee and the Cursed Abbey:

<https://books2read.com/u/b5QoB7/>

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Excerpt

Please enjoy this excerpt from Justicar Jhee Book 1...

Death stalks the abbey at Tranquility Bridge...

On their way to the Imperial capital, Justicar Jhee and her spouses must halt for repairs at a secluded abbey. Trapped by circumstances and with no way for help to arrive, can she uncover the truth before she or her spouses become the next victims of the sinister forces that lurk just out of sight?

Chapter 1



Accommodations

Lightning drew Jhee's gaze to the stormy skies beckoning beyond the large, squared portholes of her stateroom. She and her marriage cohort's yacht chugged along its way from the Far Reaches near the recently constructed perpetual storm shield to the storm-free capital. Assuming, of course, the First Makers allowed them to arrive there intact.

Kanto's lute playing filled the air. Jhee jotted down the last bit of the healing derivation on the digital, seaweed skin parchment. Her young, junior husband had already reached the tricky crescendo sequence. With her new position in the capital, though, time would no longer be a problem. Jurisprudence and teaching would replace investigation and legal proceedings.

Jhee triple-checked her part designs for her Mechanist's ritual objects then sneaked a peek at the music box schematics. At an early age, she had declared herself a follower of Mechanism. However, her duties as Justicar rarely left her time enough to perform even the minimal devotions required of an avowed Mechanist. Her work, also, seemed never to leave her sufficient time to manage a family which had practically doubled overnight.

Did Jhee dare work on another design? Soon, Kanto would conclude the musical piece he practiced. With the music's end, Jhee lost another means to politely turn aside his romantic overtures.

The yacht lurched. Her parchments scattered along with the tallies from her fishing lanes and the massive ledger of legal findings. Kanto missed a few notes. She gathered her fallen work then glanced at the clock. That would be all. She had already spent more time working than she said she would.

The musical composition ended. As per their agreement, she set her work aside. She stacked the derivations, music box plans, and part designs for her orrery together neatly with the tallies before using them to mark her place in the ledger.

He joined her at the desk and handed her a parchment. "Missed one."

She snatched up the sheet, worried it might be the music box schematics. She wanted that to be a surprise. It turned out to be healing sequences. The handwriting did not match hers, yet the work was excellent. The penmanship on the derivations showed a notable decline the further down the page she read. It brought to mind heavy thoughts of Mirrei resting in the next stateroom under Shep's care. Kanto's time, she admonished. She hastily tucked the sheet into the ledger with the others.

"Arcana?" Kanto asked. "Don't worry. I will shield my poor delicate male eyes."

"Not for these. Healing sequences."

The golden light of his eyes dimmed. He laid his hand with its impeccably manicured and lacquered nail-claws on her shoulder. “How far along are you? Did you need a few more minutes?”

“I think I have some promising avenues. I need to take some time to think about them, though.”

“Talk me through them?”

“Which would no doubt bore you to brackishness. This is your time, of which I have already stolen too much for others. Thank you for being so patient.”

“If your mind was going be elsewhere the whole time then you are not really here with me, are you?”

Her digital conch beeped. A flashing notice announced the results had returned from her automated search of the death records in the area. She made an apologetic gesture to him and picked it up. She went through a few. Most turned out to be routine. She hovered her thumb over disable search. In the capital, she would have no time to run down death record anomalies in the Outer Reaches. She closed the search results instead.

Another notice indicated her last attempt to upload to the judicial archives had failed. She winced. Kanto sighed and motioned for her to address it. Miserable weather and interference from the storm zone had made all her transfers slow when they worked at all. She checked its holding capacity. The space on it was running low. She restarted the transfer. She brandished and silenced the conch for him to see then set it aside. He inclined his head in approval.

Jhee pushed her seat back from the desk to face the oh so very young Kanto. “Please, play for me. You will have my complete attention.”

He plucked a note on the strings and played beautifully as he always did. It lifted her spirits. She felt lighter and happier. She even found her foot tapping along as his bright notes filled the stateroom. His expression slipped from smiling to pure absorption in the music.

She imagined this is how she looked when she worked on legal decisions or arcana.

The color of his golden eyes intensified. The room resonated with his music. Such a smooth, handsome face. Many older women in her position took husbands much more disparate in age. She wanted to make him as happy as he tried to make her. That would be enough to make this arrangement work until the capital. He would be the toast of the Imperial Isles. There he would find a more suitable household than hers. Both him and Mirrei.

Despite her promise, her thoughts drifted to Mirrei. She played with the edge of a parchment. Both so young. Too young for her. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

Kanto laid his lute across his knees. "We should retire."

Jhee's stomach sank at the prospect. She became all too aware of the pitching and yawing of the yacht. "No. Your playing was helping."

"I think that's enough for now."

"If that is your wish, this is your night."

"Our night."

As he packed up his lute, her gaze fell upon the robe he had laid out on the bed when he arrived. He rushed over with a smile. He held it up proudly for her to see.

"Try it on. Mirrei and I finished the last bit of tailoring. I want to ensure the extra pockets didn't ruin the lines."

Jhee undid her sash.

"Let me," he said in a low voice. He stepped closer and switched the robes she wore. She and Kanto caught each other's gaze. "Perfect fit."

His eyes sparkled and took on a deep golden hue. A shade she hoped hers matched. They touched their foreheads together. A tingle went through her as he gently brushed his *esca*, the illuminated golden star in the center of his forehead, against hers. He caressed the small of her back. A moan escaped her. He bent in, and she pulled his mouth against hers.

A knock sounded at the stateroom door. Kanto's posture sagged. His eyes pleaded with her, "No."

Jhee, however, refastened her sash with the new robes. The rain had caused everyone to take on sleeker aspects gradual enough she forgot. The extra slick look of his build and blue-black fur was unique to him. No doubt the result of his fastidious grooming and exercise routine. If only their relationship weren't so new and awkward. She stepped away from him and affected her most official stance.

"Enter."



The Dispute

The first mate stepped in and doffed her cap to Jhee.

"Sorry to disturb, Justicar. We've had a dispute arise amongst the crew."

"Details." Jhee snatched her conch from the desk. The transfer to the archives had failed again. She found and deleted some non-critical files from the spare and sparse then set it up to record the trial. She still got a critical space warning.

Kanto plopped down on the bed and folded his arms. "More work. Lovely."

She faced him. "I ask your indulgence, husband."

"Go."

"I'll hear their case here. First mate?"

"Yes, Justicar?"

"Have the disputants bring any evidence they wish to present here in fifteen minutes, and I will do my best to render them justice in the Grand Empress and Emperor's name."

The first mate excused herself.

"I'll go next door with Mirrei and Shep."

“Yet, I require your assistance as witness and scribe.”

His ears perked up. “You want my help with a case?”

“Unless you don’t feel you are up to the task?”

“No. No. What do I need to do?”

The spotty connection did not allow them to do a proper set up of the judicial code base on Kanto’s conch. Instead, they painstakingly copied over and adjusted access rights from Jhee’s. By the time the follow-up knock came, they had cobbled something together that would work.

“Now, fetch me my stones and tabard from that case over there.”

The first mate brought in two crew women. They doffed their caps and seated themselves respectably like two fine and stalwart women. They looked sheepishly at Jhee but stared daggers at each other.

“Now, state your names and what seems to be the nature of your dispute.”

Both began to talk over each other.

“Enough. One at a time. You” — Jhee gestured at one — “go first.”

Apparently, the plaintiff had purchased an ice chest full of oysters, clams, and cockles from the defendant. The plaintiff claimed the delivery was light and wanted a refund. Jhee took possession of the evidence they brought with them, namely the chest of sea meat and the payment. She pulled a luggage scale from her arcana toolbox. The defendant turned her cap round via the brim, and the plaintiff appeared smug while Jhee weighed the chest and its contents. Kanto tapped his sketch pencil against the bag of shell coins in dispute. The plaintiff shifted her weight back and forth, coughed, straightened the objects on the table.

Not content to stop there, Jhee called for a mug and a bowl. She doled out portions until she emptied the ice chest. As she did so, the defendant wrung her hat in her hands.

The defendant let out a breath and smiled. “You see, just as I said. One full container of sea meat. She just wants to get out of paying.”

“I counted how many mug fulls. I know how many eight quarts of sea meat is and that won’t enough,” the plaintiff said.

Jhee picked up the empty chest. Too heavy. She placed her hand in the carton and noticed it ended two finger joints higher than the table. More than could be accounted for by the thickness of the insulation. After motioning for Kanto to stop tapping, she shook the chest. A rattle came from the presumably empty container, and the heft shifted from side to side.

“But wait, what’s this?”

Jhee popped open a false bottom containing rocks and sand. The defendant went bug-eyed.

“I knew it! You’re a cheat.”

The crew members had a brief scuffle over the sack of shell currency.

“Enough,” Jhee said, using her siren module to enhance the command.

They stopped fighting immediately. Jhee seized the currency purse and dropped it on the table. She paused. Kanto also perked up. He had heard it too. Too flat.

Jhee dropped the purse on the table again. She hefted the bag a few times. A quick appraisal with cypher-enhanced senses proved some shells to be gilded fakes. Jhee curtailed a second altercation.

“I’m ready to render my judgment. Are you ready to accept it?”

“Yes, Justicar,” they both said.

“I find, in this matter of the first crew woman against the second crew woman, against the defendant. I sentence you to issue a partial refund equivalent to one-quarter the agreed payment. In the countersuit, I further find that the plaintiff was also in breach, and she is to return approximately one-quarter of the sea meat, the amount she shorted her payment. Given that these appear to be what you have already done, I judge the matter settled. Should either of you wish an appeal and re-

view of this finding, you can file with the royal archives for one at your expense.”

The disputants left.



A Lesson

Kanto took the kettle and poured them each a cup of tea.

“A chance to see you work up close. You sounded so official and commanding.” Kanto handed her pencil sketches in addition to his notes. “I hope you don’t mind. The conch was doing most of the work, so I made these.”

“Multi-talented. You shall overwhelm them at the capital.”

“Your praise honors me. I enjoyed watching you work, *denbe*.”

“I was afraid you’d found it terribly boring.”

“Not at all. It gives me insight into how your mind works.”

Jhee played with the teacup. “I enjoy the citrus flavor of this tea we’re drinking. Tell me about this blend.”

“Orange blossom and passionflower from off the Ylush Archipelago’s southernmost tip. In the latest dispatches from the capital, all the influencers are drinking it. It’s renowned for its properties as an aphrodisiac and fertility aid.”

Jhee swallowed the tea hard. She reminded herself she agreed to this marriage and its terms. The dispute, while a fortuitous diversion, had also diffused their romantic momentum. Shep’s advice went through her mind.

“He doesn’t know you. Don’t expect him to yet. If anything he does pleases you, from romance to gifts, don’t make him guess.”

“I never thanked you for my lovely robe. Thank you.”

“I’m glad it pleased you.”

“It’s subtle how you worked in the house colors via the coral and turtle shell motifs.”

“Precisely. I’m glad you noticed.”

“I may not always behave like it, but I notice.”

“Not as impressive as cyphering equations, but to each their talents.” Jhee fiddled with her saucer. Kanto took another sip of his tea. “Did you mean what you said at dinner about getting me arcana training?”

“With the lifting of the bans, Tihalmec Imperial Academy at the capital has been accepting and teaching male students, even in the cyphering program. I think you would take to it quite well.”

“Teach me yourself like you do with Mirrei. Or you could align me so I could be a subject like Shep.”

Jhee winced at the characterization of Shep. She steered the conversation away from crosstalk. “I might be able to teach you to element draw. For cyphering, though, the latest research shows the process is different enough for males to warrant special instruction.”

“How?”

“Well, I’m glad you asked that question.” Jhee gushed about data and articles she had read. Kanto smiled and nodded. She lapsed into a professorial tone. She went silent once his brow had developed a permanent furrow. “Listen to me drone on. You asked for a lesson, not a lecture.”

“If anyone can figure it out, you can. It’s a puzzle then. A puzzle I could help you unravel. We can start now.”

“I’ll get you training at the capital.”

“Isn’t tonight the night you were supposed to humor my whims?”

Jhee fidgeted. “I want to give you the best. I don’t want to limit your potential.”

“You’re going to make an excellent instructor, both with me and in your new position. Do you think you’ll miss being a Justicar?”

“I’ll still be a Justicar, an academic one.”

“Teach me then. It will be great practice for both of us.”

“Meditation first. Though the situation may make it difficult. Like this.” She shook out her arms and planted her feet wide on the deck. The yacht rose and fell again with the rough seas. She curled her toenail claws into the deck boards. She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Clear and center,” she said.

Once Kanto matched her stance, she talked him through a visualization of the celestial clockworks of the universe. With it fixed in their mind’s eye, they moved hands and body to mimic its celestial motions. Rains driven by the perpetual storm system lashed against the glass in gusts too irregular to match its timing.

The giant mass of supernatural power imbued in the storm outside pressed against her inner essence. She braced herself and deep-breathed.

“The storm’s not outside,” he said. “It’s within.”

“Exercise care. Don’t let it draw you in. Use the porthole as a buffer. In its current state, it’s a muddle where the arcane finds little purchase. Too many have cut, heated, bent, and performed any other innumerable manufacturing processes to shape it into what it is now. Those same traces should buffer us.”

The yacht sailed on through the rolling seas. In calmer times, she might have found it anchoring. Now, her stomach roiled. She indicated they kneel. She stilled herself until her stomach settled.

“What next?”

“Unfortunately, it gets much more boring from here. Formulations and schematics.”

She awakened her conch to find more notifications. She hesitated on the death irregularities again.

“What was it?”

“Mm?”

“The message on your conch that troubled you.”

“Some curious deaths at a cloister of celibates.”

“A cloister of celibates. No doubt they killed themselves from being denied one of the Makers’ greatest gifts?”

She took the humor as well-meaning, talismanic, and chose not to admonish him for it. “No doubt. This must be so distressing for you. Tell me about the latest fashion trends from the capital.”

He folded his hands and looked at her sideways. “Do you really want to know about fashion? I thought we were going to be poring over charts.”

“This night is about doing what you enjoy.”

“This night is about doing what we both enjoy, denbe. It should not be one-sided.”

“We do what I want on most other nights. I wish to be more considerate and take interest in your interests, especially with how neglectful and rude I’ve been this evening.”

“We’re still finding common ground. It won’t always go smoothly. What bothers me most is how you don’t relax with me and let all the other stuff go if only for a few moments.”

She touched his hand and gave him an exaggerated once over with her gaze. He pecked her on the muzzle. Then another tentative one. He gained confidence for a stronger kiss. She squeezed his hand for encouragement. He ended the kiss with a wide grin.

Thunder crashed overhead. Jhee stepped back. “Not exactly the pleasure cruise I promised you. I’m sorry we’ve had to travel so near the storm zone. The main routes are congested and in disarray. Hopefully, the course the captain has plotted near the edge of the buffer zone will save us time. Don’t worry. We’ll rejoin high society for festival season.”

“I’m not worried. If you say we will be there in time, we will.” Kanto indicated Jhee sit. Once she had, he began to massage her shoulders. “I want us to attend all the shows when we reach the capital. You can show me off to all the blue-skinned elites.”

“We will see.”

Few pursuits disinterested her more. Perhaps his age did not concern her so much, but that they were so ill-matched.

“Those death notices aren’t the only matters which have you preoccupied.”

“The pirate attacks in the outlands are getting more frequent.”

“The location of some of your most lucrative seabeds. Your investments in sustainable aquaculture almost went under due to the shield. Yours was among the few farms to survive.”

“Um,” Jhee acknowledged, a bit surprised he knew that much about her investments. “I’m hiring extra security. Locals who have been displaced. Hopefully, it will be enough to keep them from turning pirate.”

“Be mindful of them aiding the pirates from the inside as well.”

She quirked her mouth at him. “What a thoughtful observation.”

“I’ll try not to be insulted.”

“You gave me a gift. It’s only fair I give you one.”

Jhee rose and rummaged through the bottom drawer of the dresser. First, she pulled out an unadorned, cracked music box wrapped in a cloth bundle. She rethought and chose the top drawer. She set a jeweled candy dish wrought of smoky polymer glass on the tea table. The amethyst and citrine stones matched the tones of Kanto’s robes.

“In my preferred color palette, no less. I think my good fashion sense is rubbing off on you.” He lifted the lid. “Wait! Are those?”

“Lace root melon candies.”

“My favorites. How did you know?”

“It’s what I do. I learn things.”

“Grandmamere gave me these when I told her something new about her guests. Sometimes I even received little citrus cakes.”

“Lady Kaydence. This weather does have its upsides.”

“That she can’t contact you regularly.”

They grinned. Kanto bristled up his body hair and snuggled against her. It made the difference with his wiry, slim frame. Jhee enjoyed a nice and full build to wrap her arms around. Her young, virile husband was

impressionable and eager to please. Had Jhee done him a disservice by bedding him when she intended to not make him a permanent part of her household? As soon as they reached the capital if not before, she meant to seek new arrangements for Kanto and Mirrei. Then it would be her and Shep again.

Jhee let her fingers play in his fur. “You’re quite the cuddler and the least fitful sleeper.”

Kanto touched the small of her back like he had earlier. She molded against him. Her mouth set in a thin line when it sunk in the only way he could have known where to touch her to get that response.

Shep. The questions about arcane techniques and historical trivia she knew he cared nothing for. She saw, now, the orchestrated appeals to her vanity. Shep must have coached him. With their night underway and she had already flouted its rules several times, she dared not call Kanto on it.

He cast his gaze down, then looked back up at her. “Don’t be mad. Mirrei and I must take our clues from *denme*, senior spouse, on how best to serve our denbe.”

“Serve not service.”

Kanto had planned on not being called to account. While the pre-meditation irked Jhee, she had been in the wrong. She mustered the graciousness not to withdraw from him. He continued to stroke the small of her back, and she stroked his ears. The tension and the awkwardness seeped away. All forgiven.

Their travel yacht lurched to a sudden stop. They tumbled into a heap.

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Excerpt

Please enjoy this excerpt from Justicar Jhee Book 2...

Galleon City is a central point in the Empire; the place where the Storm Shield protects the Blessed Isles from the wrath that surrounds them. But it is also a city that is being ripped apart by restless factions and swamped with refugees, the destitute and the unwanted.

Justicar Jhee arrives in the city in the midst of this chaos, but it isn't long before intrigue strikes once more, when a murder occurs.

Chapter 1



The Maid of the Mists

Jhee held up the viewer to the stately villa where they would holiday for the next few full-tides as artisans finished the last bit of construction on their new home on the capital island. “Our ferry arrived without incident, and we are safely at the resort. I wish you were here with us.”

“Non-stop social engagements? I’ll pass. You’re in Kanto’s world now. Allow him to show you around. Besides, this will give you more time with him in his element. It’ll do you and him good to spend more time together especially in an environment which showcases his talents.”

“It won’t stop me from missing you anyway.”

“Ether crest life never suited me, but it’s cut to fit for Kanto. The three of you need time together without me. Besides someone needs to

oversee the final work on our new home, so it's ready for your arrival. You'll be so busy with balls and parties you won't even notice."

"Don't remind me."

"Jhee, it'll be fine. Between them, I'm confident they'll see you don't make a fool of yourself."

Jhee spun to capture the rest of the private island off the cape's view of Straya the largest island in the Blessed Isles, even larger than the capital isle. A few buildings from Galleon City could be seen in the distance. She ended on the magnificence of the ocean and the harbor, a combination of both Makers and mortal achievements.

Kanto and Mirrei approached. "Is that our absent, boring, old *den-me* who'd rather babysit a house than ride the high crests with us?"

"Correction: who'd rather babysit a house than babysit you."

Kanto made the childish gesture of pressing his nose. "Fine. Then every stick of furniture must be precisely where I specified and every possession as I outlined or else I'll blame you."

"A fair turn."

Kanto had spent days laboring and pouring over manuals and catalogs and images of furniture. He would see their new home brightly and gaily and fabulously and opulently appointed.

Jhee had the utmost confidence in his design skills. He would know what every stick of furniture and window treatment would convey about their situation. They had spent their night together going over it extensively. He quizzed her on what impression she wanted their home to communicate to visitors. Jhee did not much care herself, but it made him happy. And she wanted him to be satisfied. He asked for so little, and tasks like this delighted him. He vowed to make their new home convey the tone and image she wanted while also remaining stylish and opulent as befitted her rank.

"I've seen images of places like this. In my grandmere's day, this used to be all the rave. A stay at a posh resort then you motor up to the capital and stay at your own or rent a townhouse during festival season."

Jhee tried not to think too hard about what that said about her taste or her age.

This was the first time she recalled being with the two spouses without Shep there to act as a buffer or point of friction.

Lady Delphine, their host, awaited them atop the sandstone and seashell steps to the entryway. Jhee held out her hands. "Oh, Lady Delphine, I want to thank you again for hosting me and my cohort."

Delphine clasped her forearms then pressed each temple against Jhee's. "Oh, you old fool. Come here. Come here. Shame on you for thinking to slip through our waters without a visit. So good to see you. It's the least I can do for the help you gave me when we were in the academy together. I couldn't believe it when you told me you had expanded your household. When do I get to meet the rest of your welcome entourage?"

"Momentarily. Shep sends his regards. He's overseeing the final transport of our belongings from the barges to our new home."

"How regretful. He will join us later, I hope."

"He'll do his best. He is not much for the festival scene."

"Ah. I won't press." Lady Delphine linked her arm with Jhee's. "About those other matters we discussed, have you had a chance to mull them over?"

"While the situation has been a little hectic, I did give your proposal some thought. Let's see how the stay goes before making any final decisions."

Lady Delphine cleared her throat and glanced from side to side. "And the last matter?"

"I had no immediate conclusions to draw from what you told me. I might have a better idea once I've had a chance to look around the work sites."

"You will be discrete, of course?"

"As much as I can be."

Liveried barbarian porters bustled by them and picked up their trunks and suitcases. Mirrei held Kanto's arm as they ascended the broad stairs of the front of the island resort. Mirrei had a figure slenderer and daintier than her mother at that age. Her gossamer champagne traveling robe hid her delicate steps. She appeared to glide up to meet them. The pale complexion to her fuzzy skin along with her light gown gave her ascent an ethereal quality. It reminded Jhee of the stories of the Maid of the Mists. Right near the top, Mirrei's steps faltered. She coughed and turned a bit red. Kanto held her steady.

Jhee offered her arm and helped Mirrei up the mansion's broad steps. "You should have let me secure a mobility chair or litter for you."

"Nonsense, *denbe*," Kanto said. "Poor, Mirrei, didn't want all that fuss."

Mirrei cut Kanto a brief look. "My fellow spouse is right, *denbe*. What would your friend think of me if I can't manage the simple task of walking up the stairs?"

And any situation Jhee might later wish for them. "As you wish, my... dear," Jhee said, trying a less formal term.

Both Kanto and Mirrei pulled a face. Mirrei smiled wanly and gave a slight shake of her head. Jhee agreed. Too much. Jhee had only said it in a vain attempt to please. Her affection for her had not become even that deep yet. It was an insult to Mirrei to pretend otherwise. She rushed to amend herself. "As you wish, my wife."

"Thank you, *denbe*."

"Yes, thank you, *denbe*," Kanto repeated. He smirked. Those two and their teasing.

"Am I going to have to separate you two?"

"No," Mirrei said.

The three of them finished their graceful ascent to the landing. Misty rain had replaced the torrential downpour which plagued most of their journey. The island resort rested far enough away from the storm curtain to experience lessened effects from its significant weather

disturbances. Once the storm curtain stabilized, even the drizzle might stop.

Hopefully, the drier weather would alleviate some of the symptoms from Mirrei's Fresh Lung Sickness. The less saline waters of the inner islands did not agree with many. Mirrei like Kanto and Jhee were used to the saltier waters of the Far Reaches. Though, their Fresh Lung Sickness had come and gone relatively quickly. The damp also did not help. Much like the storms, hopefully, the younger woman's condition would stabilize.

Jhee checked her pockets to see if she had any saline tablets on her. Even if they did not have to manage her saline levels and ensure her diet heavy in rock salt, Mirrei never had the hardiest constitution to begin with according to her mother.

Miramar, Mirrei's mother, had a difficult pregnancy. Mirrei had been Miramar's only child. A miracle child, much like Kanto. That may have been why the two spouses had bonded so quickly. Still, it was one more child than she and Shep had managed. Perhaps that would change. Or perhaps that was indicative of what difficulties Jhee might have if their plans for Kanto proceeded.

"Lady Delphine, may I present you, Bright Harmony, my second husband."

"A pleasure, Lady Delphine," Kanto said. He gave the most formal of bows before planting a kiss on the back of Lady Delphine's hand.

"Likewise, Bright Harmony," said the Lady Delphine.

"This is Star Mirror, my youngest spouse," Jhee said. Jhee used their outside name because neither had been formally introduced to the Lady Delphine. Once they had stayed under her roof, they would be less formal.

"Lady Delphine."

"Delighted, Star Mirror."

"Are we the only guests?"

“I dare say we have quite the full house. There’s a rather crude businessman, a travel writer, a mining supervisor, an organizer for fishing combines, a free-spirited advocate, and an ambassador to the barbarian lands. He is also a man of waves.”

“More clergy. My, we’ll have to be on our best behavior.”

“I don’t know about all that now. He seemed a perfectly reasonable sort. Some of the others though are quite the characters.”

“Speaking of waves and devotion,” Jhee said. “I’d like to pay my respects to your Makers’ Shrine.”

“Of course. I’ll have you brought to it once I’ve shown you to your rooms and given you a chance to refresh yourselves.”

“Much appreciated.”

Lady Delphine grabbed her arm and bundled them up the stairs to the solar where drinks with ice melon balls in them awaited them. A bit of a warm sunny drink for these overcast times, but Lady Delphine did love it so even when they were first-years together. Lady Delphine had been also assigned to the intelligence pool just as Jhee had. The compulsory military service every citizen had to undergo had better positions than others. Intelligence pool is where the wealthier could get themselves or their offspring stationed and kept off the front lines. Not so much for Jhee and Shep though. The Path Maker had different plans.

Jhee shuddered and tried to shake off thoughts of her and Shep’s military service.

“We have so much to catch up on. I’ve put you up in the Observatory suite: one master bedroom with adjoining suites. If that doesn’t suit, we can rearrange. I’ll have the last bed put away until you need it.”

At their rooms, Jhee turned to Kanto and nosed him on his cheek. “See, here in time for festival season. Just as I promised,” Jhee said.

Jhee looked over the invoice from their abbey stay. Now she understood more and more why so many rural Justicars were corrupt. The sum had almost matched the cost of booking the resort stay. Due in no small part to purchasing Tranquility Gold at market price.

“I had no doubt you would see your promise fulfilled. If anyone could it would be you, dear wife.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence. You’ll be happy to know, Mirrei, in addition to following Pascoe food protocols, they operate as Blue Waters certified for environmental protection and sustainability.”

“Excellent.” Mirrei plopped down on the master bed. “Our own beds, again.”

The yacht and the detour to the Tranquility Bridge Abbey had them sleeping double and sometimes triple. As denbe, the anchor spouse, Jhee was the only one who ever had the luxury of a bedroom to herself at any point since they left their home in the Far Isles. Though, if propriety would have permitted it, she would have allowed Shep to share it on her nights to herself.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Kanto said, “I need to start readying our outfits. I want to claim this space right over here for a sewing area and to do design sketches. From now on, it’s off limits to anyone but me.”

“Of course, far be it from us to interrupt the Maker at Making.”

“Laugh all you wish, but I intend for us to make a splash and be the envy of even the most fashionable houses.”

“Live your Make, *denye*, always.”

Kanto and Mirrei waggled fingers at each other. “Pure truth.”

Kanto pulled out various robes and laid them on the bed. He touched his chin as he poured over them, ever the fashion-conscious one. Jhee had better uses for her mind share. Let him and Mirrei tend to such matters, likely why the Makers had put them in her path. She cleaned herself up and went looking for the Makers’ shrine to perform her devotions and thank the Makers for their safe arrival as was her duty as the head of household. The shrine occupied a shell grotto off the central atrium. She gave of the elements of air, earth, fire, and water to the First Makers. The sweat of her brow to the water feature. Incense shavings for the ever-burning candle. Breath and warmth for the plants. A respectful touch of her esca to the ground for the Unknown Mak-

er, so that one would not turn her way. Next, she paid devotion to the Lesser Makers. For Kanto, she jangled Maker geld coins and bounced a few off Futou's drum-like belly. She burned a scented prayer letter and gave an extra measure of laughter to Pascoe and Lashae for Mirrei.

Though, now that Kanto had mentioned the subject, the suite provided them much more room than they had on the yacht. Since they had the space, setting up a workshop for her and Mirrei while they were here did not sound like such a bad idea. Although, constructing a chemistry lab in your hotel room was a far cry from designating a makeshift sewing room. Jhee would have to ask Delphine if she had an area where they could practice.



Hake Hill

Jhee leaned against the balcony railing to catch a bit of spray and morning suns before Kanto arrived for their walk. Gentle rain patter and crashing surf eased the tension in her shoulders. Two figures yelling and gesturing at each other caught her notice. The strong winds and surf cut off most of their conversation. She had been refining her eavesdropping cypher. A small wind drawing might produce more than a clipped word here and there. She synced herself to the winds. Such a strong presence of the winds here was hard to control. While this might make excellent practice, it made for poor ethics. Jhee allowed the winds to slip through her mental grasp. Unaided Jhee still heard a word or two.

“You need to leave.”

“Why you?”

“I have no answers. Just leave.”

One turned to leave. The other grabbed his arm. The first man pushed the second to the ground. “Nowhere near us again.”

The first man ran full on down the beach. The second got to his knees. He punched at the ground then clasped his hands into the traditional angle of the Makers where he mediated for some moments. He must have been the ambassador and man of the coif staying at another guest home Delphine mentioned. Jhee stepped back inside. She heard the door of the residence open and slam.

The encounter on the beach stayed with Jhee as she and her spouses went on an excursion. Jhee hung back while Kanto and Mirrei rushed along the Avenue from store to store. She was content to let them have their fun though she wished Shep were here to help her keep herself occupied.

Kanto came to a stop in front of a luxury clothier. "Oh! Let's go in this one."

They dashed inside and wandered the aisles handling bolts and realms of vibrant, high-end cloth.

"Denye, look at this fabric. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"No, it's got an excellent hand, practically slips through my fingers." Kanto threw the fabric about Mirrei. "It drapes wonderfully."

"This pattern reminds me of our house watermark."

Kanto and Mirrei emerged from the shop sometime later with several bolts of expensive fabric. They walked further along the Avenue. Kanto came to a dead stop. "You want to be bad?"

"Let's be bad," Mirrei said.

"Iced fruit and cream. Let's get iced fruit and cream."

"Yes!"

Kanto and Mirrei ran inside giggling. Jhee smiled and followed after them. The three of them found a lovely little table overlooking the deep blue water. Jhee kept her gaze focused beyond the immediate drop and further out to the crafts in the water. The two younger spouses gabbed about the latest doings and goings-on at the capital.

“The famous Hake Hill row. I’ve always dreamed of being able to shop here,” Kanto said. “You’ll love the capital city with all the finest foods, fashions, and entertainment.”

“No, she’ll be too busy with courses. The capital boasts some of the finest schools and academies in the inhabited worlds.”

Mirrei raised an eyebrow then shook her head and smiled. “Who needs to plan the remainder of their life when I have you to do it for me?”

“My lady Justicar,” a voice called. “Look, sibs, aren’t those our guests?”

Jhee turned at the greeting. Two young women and a young man, all quite fetching, approached them with a few shopping bags in their hands. The young woman in the lead waved her arm then hurried to greet them.

“What a pleasant surprise. I’m Erma. This is Semele and Vash. We’re Lady Delphine’s children. How wonderful to meet you.”

“Ah, of course,” Jhee said. She clasped forearms with each of them. “A pleasure to put faces to the names.”

“For us as well,” the young man, Vash, said. Vash was one of the men she saw arguing from her window. She now wished she had used that eavesdropping charm. He ended his forearm clasp with a rather forward extra squeeze before his attention immediately went to Jhee’s spouses.

“Allow me to introduce my consorts, Bright Harmony and Star Mirror.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Kanto said

Vash’s greeting lasted that extra fraction with them too, so she assumed him to simply be too affectionate. “Such evocative outside name choices.”

“We picked them ourselves,” said Mirrei. Her gaze lingered on the young man’s.

“We didn’t give you our outside names. You must think us terribly improper. It’s just mumsy has told us so much about you, we felt as if we already knew you. Given how close you and mumsy used to be, we didn’t feel the need to stand on ceremony.”

“Now, do correct me if I’m wrong. You were mumsy’s society fellow in the Academy days?” Semele asked.

“That is indeed correct.”

Jhee and her spouses stopped dead in their tracks near the monumental Cetus Fountains in the square. A group of Doombringers preached openly and proudly about the Unmaking and no one, including their escorts, broke their stride. Their proselytizing was drowned out by a group of young Folk protesting.

“Philosophy Making in the public square, a proud inland tradition,” Semele said.

Each fountain hosted a different preacher.

“The Empire thought nothing of them when it built the wall and submerged their isles. If it didn’t want to house or do right by them, it should have thought of that before it destroyed their homes.”

“Yeah, put them to work in the mines,” yelled someone from the crowd.

“Them and the barbarians,” chimed in someone from another.

“Where they can get not one lung disease but two? We don’t need another drain on Imperial resources. We need to improve the working conditions in the mines.”

“A drain on the empire’s resources? The empire’s the one who destroyed our homes, our livelihood.”

“But that’s the game isn’t it? Keep refugees and the Fire Folk at each other, so the Empire can do as it wills.”

“The only true unity is that of the Final Sword and the glorious forces of remaking,” the Doombringers said.

“Blast this trenched drizzle,” Erma said. “At least it’s better than the storms. When those rolled through regularly, it was certainly a treat.

However, everything is still moist and sodden. It's sinking into the food and draining the flavor. Meals need to be seasoned with twice as many sea peppers as before."

"I wonder what they are eating at the capital," Semele asked.

"I doubt the capital has all this rain," Jhee answered. She continued to marvel at the manic street preaching. "They are too far from the storm zone."

"Too true."

"What about you, gentle folk?" Erma asked. "Looks like we had the same idea. I figure as part of your stay here we should get you started on joining the social scene at the capital as soon as possible. That way you can learn who all the players are."

Semele clasped her hands. "If you have time you should stop by the street fair this weekend. Lots of local businesses are involved. Mumsy along with Styrling Mining is one of the co-sponsors. It's to help raise awareness of Miners' Lung Disease."

"That and Fresh Lung Syndrome are causes of mine," Vash said. "I'm a fellow of the Breath of the Deep, a foundation close to my heart."

"Nice to know," Mirrei said. She fluttered her eye color. Vash grinned.

"If you're heading back, we'd be glad to accompany you," Vash said.

Mirrei glanced back at Jhee and Kanto. "No, we still have a few errands to run. Hope to see you at the villa later."

"I look forward to it."



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TREVOL SWIFT is a sometimes-sassy author of fantasy who grew up in Connecticut. She graduated from WIT with a BS in Computer Engineering Technology and now lives in Eastern Massachusetts. In her spare time Trevol enjoys gaming of all styles, cosplay, reading, writing and dancing. She also likes to relax by getting creative, with drawing and storytelling among her favorite pastimes.

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