

AQUANOR OVERARCHING BASE STORY

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CHAPTER 1: CAPTAIN OF THE IVORY RAPTOR

In the world of Aquanor, where water and sea dominate the surface and the lives of its inhabitants exists a legend of biblical proportions known as the Life Spring. Said to be the origin of all life and the entire ocean, this place exists only through theories and fables. Not in the mind of start-up pirate captain John Jonah Jaxon, however, for he believes that this fabled place exists, and swears he will be the first sailor to find it. The challenge for the good captain is that anyone right of mind would not dare believe his quest to be possible. That is, unless you are in the beating heart of nautical loonies itself, Marauder's Bay. Here, Captain Jaxon seeks to acquire a crew for his quest, as well as doing some honest-to-good piracy along the way.

He already has a ship owed to him by Sully Smith of Sully's Ship Harbor, but the challenge is finding a crew that will believe his insane goal. Fortunately, he acquires a crew in the muck of Marauder's Bay in the form of some various characters. His first addition as first mate is a boy named Arata Tanaka, whose only exposure to the outside world is fables and tales of great explorers and buccaneers. With Captain Jaxon fitting the bill of his childhood heroes, Arata was more than eager to step up. Next is disgruntled blacksmith Aidan Murphey, who bonded with the captain over their shared interest in drink, ladies, and hatred for the Montibian

Empire, who is the cause for many of the world's problems. Last is a rather difficult to convince Benjamin Tahoma, who only accepted to be on a buccaneer crew for his love of travel and desire to see the natural wonders of Aquanor. Also, Captain Jaxon cannot complete his crew without a quartermaster. Though Benjamin would accept the job, he and the captain would often clash in their differences in personality and leadership style.

Elsewhere, a navy ship under the command of the Montibian Empire is making its rounds through the Infinite Sea. On it, a young cabin boy by the name of William Gardien is constantly belittled and harassed by his crewmates for his lack of size that is so enamored in Montibian culture. His pushback against the bullies land him in hot water with his commanding officer, which forces him to take a nightshift swabbing the deck. Gardien hates his job in the navy and desires to be a part of the prestigious Mountain Guard, the main military force of the Montibian Empire, but has constantly been rejected due to his stature.

Back at Marauder's Bay, Captain Jaxon has the perfect icebreaker to bring the new work environment together: raiding a Monty ship. He starts by heading down to see Sully about his owed ship, and is given a white galleon called the Ivory Raptor. It fits Jaxon's tastes due to his love for birds, as seen with his pet songbird Sylvie. Now with a ship and able-bodied but fairly inexperienced crew, Jaxon shows his boys the ropes so that they can get ready to pillage and sabotage those diabolical Monts!

The raid happens at nightfall, where the only personnel not slouching or sleeping is William and his broom. The vulnerable crew is easily fooled, but not so easily is William, who sounds the alarm alerting the entire ship. A brawl ensues, where the aspiring William seeks to show off his Mountain Guard potential by beating the swashbuckling captain in a swordfight. He gets pummeled, as well as the other barely awake, intoxicated Monts. The Mont galley has been pillaged of all its supplies, food, and loot, and the crew of the Ivory Raptor triumphs on their first outing as pirates. William considers a career change after the whole affair.

CHAPTER 2: PERIL AT THE CITY OF LIES

The crew of the Ivory Raptor proves its mettle by making a name for themselves through high seas buccaneering. A number of various adventures later and their bounties are at levels of overflowing. The captain seeks to reward the crew's successes by taking them to the entertainment paradise of Las Tormentas. Benjamin opposes this idea, as he warns the captain of the city's nasty reputation of gambling debtors, black market profiteering, and general bad nature that earns the nickname "City of Lies." The captain doesn't care, as neither does the rest of the crew who are antsy for some high-class R&R. The crew spends their time at various attractions: Aidan bets his shares on some competitive card game attractions, Arata tries his hands at the wind-up slots, and Captain Jaxon enjoys the entertainment shows put on by the owner of the city, who is known as the Deceiver due to his talent in the magic arts. Not the sorcery kind however, but more of the "pulling rabbits out of hats" kind.

Benjamin is not impressed by Las Tormentas. He knows of the blatant shady nature of this establishment, so while the rest of the crew engages in entertainment Benjamin goes poking around to find something that will convince the crew to leave. He stumbles across a

manufacturing building where gamblers in debt are kept as slaves to produce the whims of all the city's resources. Before he can inform anyone of this horror, he is captured by the Deceiver's goons, and they seek to arrest the rest of the Raptor's crew by association alone.

The Deceiver is a man of dark nature and motivation. Anyone caught finding out too much about his operation receives the cruelest of punishments concocted by the Deceiver's malicious mind. He sees Captain Jaxon and his crew as a threat to his city and decides the most fun way to dispose of them would be pinning them in the city's most famous attraction: the gladiator arena. Here all manners of law and human morality are thrown out the window as patrons bid on gladiatorial death matches. And it looks like Captain Jaxon and his crew are up for the battle royale.

The crowds of the gladiator arena are unhinged. Drinks and items are thrown into the air constantly. The Deceiver is given a major entrance, as he is obsessed with being the center of attention. He excites the crowd by hyping up the variety of fighters entering the stadium, and openly mocks the crew as they enter. He declares that last one standing shall win, unless it is Captain Jaxon or any of his lackeys in which case, he will directly kill them himself. He makes his way to the balcony in style and rings the gong. The battle royale begins.

The crew stay huddled together as the other challengers rip each other to shreds. Not many casualties come from their side due to their defensive circle, and the other challengers not interested in the puny pirates. The Deceiver is bored by this, and with his malicious mind decides to spice the brawl up. He unleashes exotic predators onto the arena field and has the outer gates of the arena open to form a moat and make it as to where there is less space. The crew are now trapped on an island with bloodthirsty beasts and maniacal barbarians.

Benjamin tells the captain that he can find a way to bust out amid the chaos, but he'll need time. For now, the crew must survive the onslaught of death the Deceiver has unleashed on them for his amusement. Captain Jaxon can best the barbarians, as they are inexperienced and unwieldy while the captain is coordinated and nimble. Aidan and Arata stay together as a giant white snake seeks to attack them but is stabbed by Aidan. They all keep the danger away from Benjamin, who is studying the moat for an exit.

Several brawls later and Benjamin finds opportunity of escape. The crew battles their way to the Raptor and escape the City of Lies with their lives. The Deceiver is displeased at this affair, now that knowledge of his operations has left Las Tormentas' walls, he fears his entire operation may be in jeopardy. Captain Jaxon is impressed by Benjamin's concern for crew and ship and his resourcefulness in finding an escape from the gladiator arena. This noble act earns the respect of the captain for Benjamin, despite how little they get along.

CHAPTER 3: TO BE IN THE MOUNTAIN GUARD

William Gardien has finally made it home to the Montibian Empire after a long time in naval service. He heads to the capital of New Everett where he will once again apply to be inducted into the Mountain Guard, despite being constantly rejected in the past. At first, it seems

this application will be as considered as the rest of them were, until it is reviewed by a new commanding officer in the Guard who approves it. William is formally inducted into training.

The new Guard captain that approved of William's application is the rigorous Charlotte Stewart, who fought her way up the Guard's ranks through struggle and grit. She expects the same of her trainees, including William. He sees an inspiration in the captain, as he never had an authoritative figure, be it parent or officer, that has given him an opportunity to harness his abilities. Despite William's talent, the training was still immensely challenging.

His fellow trainees constantly mocked him for his stature, always quoting the famous Monty idea that "to be in the Mountain Guard, you have to be a mountain yourself." William hates that phrase: it has been the go-to weapon of mockery used against him for his entire life. Charlotte does believe in William, despite her hardened military demeanor. She herself struggled to prove herself in the masculine area of Montibian military. But through trial and tribulation, she earned that respect, and she believes William can as well.

The day was coming for the examination, where passing the tests set by the commanding officers would complete one's training and officially induct one into the prestigious Mountain Guard. William had acquired skill at that point, but was nervous beyond belief, as he suspected the other commanding officers would rig the exam completely against him. It was certainly a bizarre fear, but being so close to his life dream makes him consider what could trip him up at the finish line.

Charlotte eases Williams fears by levelling with him about the nature of the exam. She shared her struggles to achieve her position in the Guard, and told William that the exam is personalized for every recruit. She admits that she's technically not supposed to tell him that, but William proved to be Charlotte's favorite among the recruits. The day of the exam comes, and through obstacles, endurance, and a duel, William passes with flying colors, and it set to officially be part of the Mountain Guard. His dreams are finally coming true.

CHAPTER 4: REMINISCENCE OF THE GREY FANG

After more high sea hijinks, the crew comes across an atoll known on the map as the Grey Fang. Captain Jaxon does not associate good memories with the area however, and changes mood once the crew lays the Raptor in irons. Arata is concerned about the captain, and asks if any of the crew has an idea of what happened here. No one can say, and Arata is forced to ask the captain himself.

At first the captain is denying of opening any old wounds of any sort. But after time alone in his cabin, he joins the crew with some drinks and admits it will do no good if he doesn't open to someone about it. He figured why not his trusty crew?

Approximately 10 years ago, Captain Jaxon was nothing more than a regular crewmate on a buccaneer vessel. His times with this old crew educated him on the art of seafaring and how to properly be a pirate in the chaotic world of Aquanor. He admitted after some adolescent rebellion in living in the Ahgilan capital of Borough City, he joined the crew as a way to stick it to his uptight parents.

After a few years of honest work as a thieving pirate, he worked his way up to the position of first mate, whom is picked as position of who the captain trusts the most. He built a close friendship with the captain and had even advised the captain to help better the success of their adventures.

One day, the crew spotted sail of a Montibian navy ship off the atoll of Grey Fang. The captain was hesitant to attack, as he suspected the Monty ship could not be alone, but Jaxon's hatred for the Monts made him advise the captain to attack anyway. The captain listens, and as they focus all manner of cutlass and cannon fire on the ship, a massive Monty galleon appears from behind the atoll catching the crew off-guard. As the captain is in mid-rant of Jaxon's foolish decision, he is hit by cannon fire from the Monty galleon. Jaxon describes the gruesome image of the man he called friend, the man he disappointed was literally blown limb from torso by the Monts' guns. The skirmish was brutal, and those that weren't already killed in the initial cannon fire were executed once captured by the Monts. Captain Jaxon was the only one to make it out with his life.

Ever since then, he's blamed himself for everything that happened at the Grey Fang. It was his mistake, his miscalculation, and yet the ones that ended up paying for it were his crewmates and not him. He should've been the one killed by the Monts. The whole experience taught him the harsh consequence of poor leadership, and while he still takes things to adventurous and gung-ho levels as a pirate, he will always learn responsibility from the massacre at Grey Fang.

CHAPTER 5: LOYALTY AND HONOR

The ceremony having concluded, William can now celebrate his lifelong goal having been achieved. He is formally a part of the Mountain Guard. Charlotte offered her congratulations, and gave some advice as to how to do a good job on the force. But ominously, her parting words to William were "Never forget where your loyalties lie" followed by a long stare in the eyes. It was a rather serious statement for a jolly occasion, but William took the advice to heart regardless.

Departing New Everett, William now joins the warfront at the continent of Ahgila, where the Monts are currently fighting for control. He arrives at the headquarters of the Monts operations in Ahgila at a ruined town called Fall Springs. What could've only been a city caught in a battle, the settlement is nothing more than rubble with the Monts setting up camp among the ruins. William is brought in to his first briefing, where the general goes over a town the Monts seek to gain, and only goes over how the naval approach will operate. The rest is left unexplained. William found this strange, but figured it is due to most of the battles in the war being naval, so the land front will hardly matter in the long run.

The Guard is a major improvement for William on a social standard, not once has any of his fellow Guardsmen called him "un-mountainlike" or mocked his stature in any way. They are a brotherhood in arms, and William feels as if he's found a true family. Talking with his fellow guardsmen, he learns about all their backgrounds. Apparently, Mountain Guard recruits come from all over the continental Empire, with some even being from the desert city of Mahledun or

the tropical continent of Khoraso. William himself was from a small farm town in the homeland called Stoneshire, but never had the best of childhoods there.

A few days of sea travel and the target town is in sight. A slight naval skirmish ensues but the Ahgilans retreat. William then thought the day was won, but then a horrifying revelation occurred. The town had no defenses, no fortifications, no soldiers of any kind. Nothing but civilians living their lives. That's when the Montibian ships opened fire on the town, without an ounce of mercy. This cannot be! This is the inspiring Mountain Guard, where duty and loyalty make one a hero. Why are they massacring innocent civilians?!

Not a single one of his fellow guardsmen said a word as they came ashore and open fired on fleeing villagers. No mercy or hesitation. This was truly a nightmare. The Guard that William fought and struggled to be a part of is committing the most horrible atrocities imaginable. Knowing that he was the only new recruit among this crew, his deduction from the lack of hesitation from his fellow mates is horrifying: this has happened before, probably thousands of times. The ruined town where HQ is wasn't caught in a two-way battle: it was deliberately destroyed by the Montibian Empire.

This was horror on an unimaginable scale. William couldn't process this. Was he truly groomed by all his inspirations to become a monster? He realized what the parting words of Charlotte truly meant: stick to the Guard despite what they do. But how could he? He could not stay here among the guardsmen and commit more atrocities in the name of valor, he had to leave. He had to escape. He deserted the Guard as they secured their control over the town, and never looked back. The Guardsmen in turn labeled him a deserter and a traitor. William just threw away everything he had struggled to achieve.

CHAPTER 6: THE JUSTICE OF AHGILA

The crew of the Ivory Raptor is struggling through the literal and metaphorical doldrums they are currently in. Ever since Las Tormentas, they haven't been able to replicate their previous fortunes. And as the quartermaster, Benjamin advises they make a hit, or else the crew might get a cut in pay. Jaxon knows this, and he needs to find something to make some fortune.

As it turns out, the crew comes across a naval struggle between the Monts and the Ahgilan Navy. From the looks of things, the Ahgilan vessels are surrounded, and are in danger of being plastered by the Monts' guns. Arata implores that Jaxon turn sail and rescue them. Jaxon denies this, as any damage to the ship could hurt their already diminishing money, and even then, he never much cared for the arrogant people of his home of Ahgila. Arata persuades him by buttering him up, saying that a true dashing and heroic buccaneer like Jaxon would never pass up an opportunity to save the day, plus it wouldn't hurt to send some Monts to the abyss.

With Jaxon knowing full well the merciless nature of the Monts, he just concluded "Why not?" and charges into battle. The current situation is three Mont galleys surrounding two Ahgilan ships, so Jaxon surprise attacks the first Mont vessel and destroys it, allowing the other two ships an advantage as they both destroy one and the Raptor destroys the other. The battle is

won, and as the Ahgilan ship personnel board the Raptor, Jaxon assumes they come for thanking him. Instead they ask for the captain, and when Jaxon steps forward they arrest him.

The crew are appalled, and Jaxon tells them to stand down and follow them to Borough City. Although strange that Capt. Jaxon knows the procedures, they follow his command. When they arrive, Jaxon discovers they are holding trial against him for attacking and sinking two Ahgilan ships during the struggle. He has no idea what they're talking about since there were only two ships left before he got there. Of course, he isn't believed. The brief time he has to see the crew, he orders them to sail back to where the naval skirmish occurred, and see if they can find anything. There will most likely be a trial held against him, and anything they can find to prove his innocence would help.

Jaxon meets his attorney, and during that meeting they are visited by the opposing council. They offer a plea bargain: in exchange for a lesser sentence, Jaxon would have full employment as a privateer under the jurisdiction of the chief minister's office and the Ahgilan navy. Jaxon's attorney thinks that's more than a fair enough deal, but Jaxon rejects. He knows his father is behind this. His father, Henry Jaxon, is the chief minister of the Ahgilan government, which is essentially the main executive figurehead. However, he and his son have a rocky relationship, so the captain would rather risk challenging the sentence then spend a second employed under his old man.

With Jaxon currently unable to serve, Arata is left in charge as his position of first mate leaves him second in command. He'll have to act responsibly in order to maintain the typical work environment, but clearly proves he isn't Jaxon in terms of inspiring leadership. Benjamin helps out the stand-in captain a bit and helps him make their way to the site of the skirmish.

The trial begins, with the opposing council being led by a naval admiral whom Jaxon assumes was probably groomed into taking that position by his father. The judge makes clear the charges held against Capt. Jaxon, and the penalties he's liable for if found guilty. The testimony of the prosecution's witnesses does not help, as they're all Ahgilan crewman who had a bias against Jaxon. And with Jaxon's attorney being outclassed by the pure authoritarian manner of the prosecution, the trial is not going well for the captain at all.

The crew arrives at the scene to do some nautical investigating. They patrol the area in lifeboats to see what happened to the other two Ahgilan ships, but nothing comes to mind. Arata then has the bizarre idea to dive in one of the ships' wreckages, which Benjamin highly advises against in the risk of drowning. Left with no other options, Arata takes a deep breath, and starts looking. He makes a few rounds back for air, and decides to go for the big play and investigate under the hull where drowning is more likely. He looks in haste, but finally finds something incriminating. He's low on air, so he quickly nabs it and swims for the surface. He almost doesn't make it before Benjamin dives in and brings him topside. Catching his breath, Arata reveals a shocking truth that will turn the case around: one of the ships that sank was an imposter. A Monty flag was hidden in the hull while the ship was flying false colors. Benjamin wagers the imposter ship fired upon its fellow ship and sunk it, but got sunk in the process from

the ship retaliating. With the two other ships occupied battling the Mont vessels, the crew on those ships wagered the nearby Raptor was responsible.

Before they can get ready to depart for Borough City, a triad of Monty ships attack, leaving Arata to make a hasty decision. He wagers that engaging them would be suicide, and hightailing it from the bulkier Mont galleons into safer Ahgilan waters is their best shot. Benjamin agrees, and they barely manage to escape the Monts' wrath. Between days of proceedings for the trial, the crew manage to make it back to Ahgila, and turn in the Mont flag.

During the trial the following day, the defense seeks to admit the flag as evidence. Assuming that the flag is a remnant of one of the Monty ships, the prosecution accepts the motion, and the judge admits the Mont flag into evidence. That proves to be the major kill, as during the testimony of one of the captains, the attorney reveals to the court the truth of the phony ship. The prosecution seeks to shoot down the claim by having the evidence not be considered, but unfortunately the judge iterates that the prosecuting council already approved of it. Whoops.

The jury deliberates and comes back with the ruling, and deem Captain Jaxon not guilty. The crew celebrates, and the prosecuting admiral extends his apologies and his gratitude for saving the Ahgilan vessels. Among the adjourned room, a bearded man of official looking status comes to Capt. Jaxon and gives him a mandatory invitation to see the Chief Minister. Jaxon knew coming here he'd eventually have to see his old man, so he goes with it.

At the chief minister's office, a not-so-warm reunion occurs between father and son. The animosity is clear as Henry Jaxon mocks his son's gallivanting pirate career and his love for getting into trouble, and Capt. Jaxon retorts with mockery of his father's upper-class snobbery. A woman breaks the two up, her being Senator Sylvia Jaxon whom is Capt. Jaxon's mother, and tells her husband to get on with why he summoned the captain and his mates. He starts off by introducing the bearded gentlemen as Boman Farceur. Commenting on the strange name, Boman reveals the reason for that is him being from the Montibian Empire.

Jaxon is appalled, and demands to know why his father let a Mont into his office. Henry Jaxon informs his son that Boman was once a high-ranking advisor to the Mountain King himself, and knows vital information about inner workings, plans, and exceedingly helpful information concerning the Monts. Jaxon suspects where he's going with this introduction and Boman confirms: they are planning an invasion on the Montibian Empire.

CHAPTER 7: THE WARRIORS OF TAS DA

The invasion effort has spent years in the planning process, and now they have the means to begin preparations. Capt. Jaxon is perplexed as to why he and his crew are brought in for this, and Henry confesses that if the Ahgilan Navy does any of this, then inevitably their movements will be sought out by spies and the Monts will see the invasion coming. However, if a singular pirate crew makes all the "invasion errands" then the Monts won't suspect a thing and the element of surprise will be with the good guys.

Boman lays out the preparations the crew is responsible for: first, they must recruit an infantry force from the tribal nation of Tas Da, which is located upriver to the Red Desert. Then they must sail south to the icy continent of Lidanya Moor and acquire ships and steel from the Lidanyans, for weapons and “hull-tearers.” Next is to the tropical continent of Khoraso where they can get the bulk of their invasion force as well as a plethora of ships, due to their bountiful lumber. As for the steel, they’ll need experts to fashion the resources and their greatest bet is to get smiths from the volcanic island of Tahnia. Finally, they need to acquire funding to make this whole thing doable in a foreseeable time, though from where they do not know. However, Arata suggest that they visit his father at his home in Kinoko, where he is the owner of a bank and can secure a loan from him. Settled on the game plan, the crew first makes way upriver to Tas Da.

They arrive at the tribal city of Tas Da, which is an indigenous city state both on top of and carved into a plateau in the middle of a lake. Benjamin isn’t too ecstatic on returning here, as he shares a similar situation with his parents as the captain. Benjamin’s mother, Chieftress Tahoma, leads the tribe and has held animosity toward her son for leaving his people when he was next in line to be chief. Benjamin always hated the warrior-oriented social construct of Tas Da, as all chiefs led their tribe in battle. But he always had a heart for science, and for seeing the world and its wonders. He even shed his name “Pako” for the less tribal name of “Benjamin” whenever he arrived in Borough City. Capt. Jaxon can relate to having an overbearing figurehead parent, and the two bond over roasting their parents. They may have their quarrels and differences, but even some as polar opposite as Jaxon and Benjamin can bond over bad parents.

The Chieftress is not too keen on joining the war effort, as she maintains the success of security through thousands of years staying isolated on the Tas Da mass. The tribal city state has no existing conflict with the Montibian Empire, so any agitation would be unbeneficial to Tas Da in the long run. Benjamin begs his mother to reconsider, as he knows of the Monts’ evil and ruthlessness from Capt. Jaxon and what he’s been through. The Chieftress has made up their mind, and the crew is forced to think it over during lunch.

Benjamin volunteers to discuss with his mother one on one to see if there’s any way they can gain her support. He leaves, and Jaxon and the rest of the crew are left. The captain reminisces over the time he spent as Tas Da, as he explains he and his family spent a year here as refugees after the Monts destroyed their home. He goes over how the upper-borns (Tas Da residents that lived top-side in the village rather than in the subterranean tunnels inside the plateau) had it so much better, and his harsh experience living as refugees thanks to the Monts before having been deported to live in Borough City.

The following morning the crew is summoned for an audience where they meet back up with Benjamin. The chieftress comes forward with a deal: she will agree to meet with Chief Minister Jaxon about the invasion if the crew of the Ivory Raptor leads a battle to capture Las Tormentas. The people of Tas Da have held animosity towards the City of Lies due to the malicious things it commits on the sacred land of the Red Desert. Jaxon opposes, but is forced to agree due to it being the only way to convince Chieftress Tahoma. The crew lays out a plan to the forces they are provided for a possible way an attack could work

CHAPTER 8: NEW LEAF AT THE MIRE

William Gardien is left completely alone in exile. After deserting the Monts at the village they attacked, he was left to head north into the marsh where it would be difficult to be tracked by the Monts. Everything he had ever hoped to achieve has just been abandoned, and William had no idea what to do other than disappear. The swampy wetland known as Truett Mire had a welcoming community whereas he could make a new life, but he had to shed his identity so he adopted the persona of Oliver Smith.

He was now ashamed of his Montibian lineage. Every single one of his fellow soldiers, be it new or experienced, had no hesitation in attacking the village on that fateful day. Is this just the true nature of the Monts? Are they so desensitized from the conquest that they were practically raised to be monsters? And if that is the case, why is William the only one who realized how horrifying it all was? Was he never a true Mont? All these ideas rushed through his mind like a typhoon, he would never sleep right again.

Fitting in at the Mire was no easy feat. He took a job among the famed architects and carpenters of the Mire, who are renowned for constructing the stilt villages that this region of Ahgila is known for. Unfortunately, he has no skill in the art whatsoever, and all it took was a misstep in the construction to send a build collapsing in the marsh, causing William to lose his job. This is where William realized that he dedicated so much of his life to being in the Mountain Guard that he never learned the fundamentals of doing practically anything else. He'll need to find another job, and one that is hopefully easier to pick up at that.

Fortunately, one such job would open for William. In a local café, he made a friend in a retired militiaman for the Ahgilan army known as Simon Thompson. He lost his good arm in the war against the Monts and was forced to retire, but before he enlisted, he was a skilled hunter. He now has settled at the Mire with a family, but has yet to teach his children the art of the hunt due to them both being too young. With the main food supply of the Mire being meat from the wildlife, William can make a living by becoming a hunter, and Simon was eager to show him the ropes.

It took some trial at first. Having trained for an army of heavy armored titans William's art in stealth was underdeveloped to put it mildly. He also could not just shoot or duel any of these foes outright: hunting required both a respect and understanding for the opponent. Over a month, he would slowly pick up the stealth factor, and was able to become more agile. He also studied the wildlife in the area more carefully, leading him to graduate from small game to great swamp beasts that could feed a man for a month. It may never replace the aspirations of serving a code of valor and strength that he once pursued, but William may have finally found an alternative to the life he once lived.

CHAPTER 9: RETURN TO THE CITY OF LIES

Capt. Jaxon is leading the three Tas Da ships through the Ahgilan river ships toward Las Tormentas, and voices his reluctance to return to the place where he and his crew almost became

the Deceiver's gladiator entertainment. Benjamin isn't too keen to the idea either, but glad he's going there to shut down the whole operation this time.

The Deceiver will not be an easy foe on the field of battle. Once he gets word of the incoming force, he puts the whole city on lockdown. The Ivory Raptor and the Tas Da warriors are up against the entirety of the Deceiver's goons. The Ivory Raptor leads by blowing the gate before it can shut them out, then taking out the cannons along the canals so that they can get Tas Da warriors on the ground.

The tribal warriors certainly prove themselves to be an exceedingly viable infantry. They prove to be worth five men each in combat, despite their disadvantage in numbers. The force has to fight their way to the Deceiver's mansion and secure it for the rest of the warriors to swoop in and annex the city. The problem lies in everything the Deceiver throws at the force. He tries everything: unleashing the gladiators, exotic animals, even using fireworks as cannons!

They get to the mansion, where they encounter the main man. They engage in battle, with the Deceiver proving himself a threat in one-on-one. He's extremely evasive, and uses all sorts of unorthodox tactics against the enemy. Not to mention the home advantage, where as he can easily use the various tricks and traps to confuse his foes. Despite his advantage in his unpredictable fighting tactics, the force proves too overwhelming for the Deceiver, so he does what magicians are known for and makes a miraculous escape. He has lost the battle, however, and Las Tormentas is captured.

The mansion is captured, but Jaxon has other motivations. Being the wealthy owner of an entertainment paradise, the Deceiver has to have some loot lying around. He orders the crew to look around for a possible safe or cache of sorts. Aidan finds something in the museum gallery, and suspects there's a safe room hidden behind a tablet display. Benjamin removes the tablet for the captain to discover the switch. However, Benjamin out of curiosity looks at the tablet and finds something shocking.

On further examination, Benjamin pulls aside the captain to discuss the etchings on the tablet. The rest is all some elden language poem nonsense, but he can make out the key words "path of snow" and "the Origin." Jaxon is perplexed by those two phrases specifically, and the odd capitalization of the word "origin," but Benjamin inquires that this could be a tablet detailing the Life Spring, the legendary location Jaxon dedicated his life to searching for. Jaxon is over the moon at this revelation, and nabs the tablet among the loot in the safe room. He was in complete disbelief. He can finally begin his search for the Life Spring.

The crew returns to Tas Da to bring home the good news. Chieftress Tahoma thanks the crew for their efforts, and sends some warriors to help secure and annex the city. As thanks, she agrees to talk to the Chief Minister about the war effort and see what she can do to contribute. Benjamin even reconciles with his mother, with her finally accepting the pursuit of purpose her son has adopted. Captain Jaxon can now return to Borough City with the good news, and above that, can lay out a plan to begin his search for the Life Spring.

CHAPTER 10: THE CURSED HOMELAND

After returning to Borough City, the Chief Minister congratulates the crew into making headway into the invasion effort. However, he gives the news that Boman Farceur will be joining the crew to oversee the rest of the invasion errands. This understandably angers the captain, as he sees this as his father not trusting him to do so. He doesn't budge though, so Captain Jaxon is left with a new "team manager" for his invasion errands. Despite his presence, he still plans to go through with making some stops of his own first.

With Benjamin being unable to interpret the tablet they found at Las Tormentas, they are left with finding someone who can. Captain Jaxon has the idea of going to Nightfall Island to find a historian or archeologist who could transcribe it. He isn't too ecstatic about the idea, and neither is Benjamin, but admits it is all they can do at the current juncture. Arata, Boman, Aidan, and the remainder of the non-Ahgilan crew are perplexed by their unease, as they have no idea of the location they're embarking for.

Nightfall Island appears over the horizon, and Benjamin thinks it necessary to catch up the rest of the crew on why he and Jaxon are uneasy about it. Nightfall has a dark history of sacrificial ritualism and death, and the forefathers of the cultures of Ahgila passed down stories of warnings to never revisit the homeland of the Ahgilans. The superstitious crew deduces the island is therefore haunted, but Benjamin and Boman doubt that notion.

The crew docks and sets up camp at the shore ruins. There, they meet a lone archeologist who claims he hails from Borough University to make research rounds. He and Benjamin become fast friends due to their shared alma mater. Though it is strange, the ship docked at the ruins other than the Raptor looks as if a greater crew manned it. When asked of this, the archeologist explains that he actually came here with a team of researchers initially, but when they went deeper inland to the downtown ruins they never returned. This heightens the superstitions of the crew with claims that the dead are harvesting on the living. But Benjamin and Boman still doubt that.

Captain Jaxon ignores all the haunted hubbub to get down to business, and inquires if the archeologist can translate the tablet they found. He takes a minute to himself, and is amazed at the results. Wasting no time at all, he provides the crew with the translation:

SHARDS SHATTER'D BETWEXT THE BLUE
 MAPPING OUT THE ROUTE T'BE TRUE
 THE STRIKED SEA BOASTING BUT THE SPIT
 ON THE OASIS WOULD BE YOUR FIRST HIT
 STILLWATER'S GAZE LIE IN TIME OLD
 DARK DEPTHS PATH T'WARD THINE GOLD
 THE PEAK WHERE SONS KNEEL FOR THE CHAIR
 FINDS THE SHARD BURIED IN FROZEN AIR

THESE SHARD ILLUMINATE THE JOURNEY OF SNOW TOWARDS THE ORIGIN WHERE LIFE WILL GO

Captain Jaxon is amazed by the archeologist's ability, but still desires to know the meaning. The archeologist explains that to find the Life Spring, you will need to find the three shards of a map that paths a route through the Lidanyan Ice Caps to the Life Spring. The first piece is thought to be in an oasis of some kind, like Angel's Oasis, but the archeologist points out the "striked sea" verse deducing that the first piece is in fact on an island in the Mar de Trovoh, which is a lake in Khoraso prone to thunderstorms. The second shard is deduced to be in a dungeon or crypt of some sort at the stillwater resorts of Terbiar, which is part of the Mezuo Islands. The last shard's location is not one that pleases the crew: the archeologist figures it's a mountain of some kind but is certain it is on the summit of the Peak of Kings, which is the tallest mountain in the world. Also, the part that irks the crew, it is located in the Montibian Empire right next to the capital of New Everett.

Captain Jaxon is ecstatic to know the route toward his life goal, but not as so about the whole hiccup of having to go to the Monts' capital city to find one of the shards. But there's more. The sixth line with the phrase "t'ward thine gold" intrigued the archeologist. He theorizes that due to the existence of a recorded route already, that the Life Spring has been visited before by ancient civilizations. The real catcher of everyone's attention is that the archeologist theorizes that in a time of global peace between the existing civilizations, they used the Life Spring as a cache for their most precious artifacts and items of intrinsic value. In other words, there is a chance that the Life Spring could house the biggest treasure trove the world has ever seen. If Captain Jaxon's goal of pirate fame wasn't enough! Now his life goal is heightened by the fact he could become both the greatest AND richest pirate in the world!

The crew decides to camp for the night as their travels have exhausted them. Overnight, the eerie atmosphere turns from ominous to potentially threatening. Captain Jaxon wakes up to find a good number of his crew have vanished, along with the historian that helped them out. This leaves Jaxon, Arata, Aidan, Benjamin, and Boman to trek into the island to locate them while the rest of the crew gathers up their things and return to the Raptor. Jaxon and the boys arrive at the Valley of Hands, where corpses perfectly preserved in pyroclastic flow hauntingly reach out to the sky.

What they find in an underground ruin at the Valley of Hands is beyond horrifying. A haunting séance circle of corpses line a sacrificial altar, with various candles set up around it. All of the bodies were previous crew members. The superstitious sailor in Jaxon wagers that the souls of Nightfall are beginning to feed, and they need to leave immediately. They start to hightail it out, but the ruin doors slam shut. Turns out Benjamin and Boman's basic logic won out in the end, as no ghosts perpetrated this horrifying scene, but the truth isn't any more pleasant.

The archeologist reveals his true nature, as he's been on Nightfall for far longer than just a meager research round. He's been here for years, driven mad with isolation. He's under the delusion that the ceasing of sacrificial rituals from the ancient Ahgilans was the cause of their

volcanic destruction, and that luring visiting researchers and explorers to the ruins to sacrifice them is his way of protecting the rest of Ahgila from a similar fate. He puts on the persona of a benevolent neighborly scientist to lower his victims' guards.

The boys are now trapped in a subterranean, pitch black ruin with a homicidal scientist out for blood. They are separated, but try to find each other with sound as to also lure the researcher to them. Boman is quick of thinking and ask if he can have the Captain's flask of rum. He takes it, pours it out, then ignites it with a blank fire from a pistol, causing a fire that illuminates the room. As the researcher leaps out from the cover of darkness, Boman slips a second pistol from his sleeve catching the researcher off guard and shooting him to his death,

They make it out of the ruin and back to the Ivory Raptor, where they can depart for Lidanya Moor. The entire crew is haunted by the events that have transpired, those that initially did not know the dark nature of Nightfall Island certainly do now.

CHAPTER 11: THE BATTLE OF THE MIRE

William has made a good life in Truett Mire. He's become a family friend to Simon Thompson and his family, as well as adjusting to the new hunting career life. The culture was infinitely better than the Monts, he never was mocked for his stature or called "un-mountainlike," he was a part of a community. Unfortunately, his previous life would never just leave him alone. One day, a Mont scout was spotted by William on one of his hunts. He pursued him but the scout escaped. A scout so close to the Mire village could only mean one thing: the Montibian Empire is planning to invade. And William knew damn well what they were going to do to the people of the Mire.

Under no circumstances could William let the Monts do what they did to the poor Ahgilan town a month prior. He immediately returned and informed Simon. Simon got together the leaders of the town to discuss the impending invasion. William proposed a plan: the Monts don't tend to attack the towns in the Mire due to bad terrain, so they will be at a heavy environmental disadvantage. He suggests that while any able-bodied adults can keep the Monts occupied on the Boardwalk plaza, anyone that otherwise wouldn't be up against the Monts will plant gunpowder under the supports of the Monts. And with a group of well-timed musket shots, the floor beneath the Monts will shatter and send them plummeting to the marsh water.

Simon is surprised by the military intuition of William, but backs the plan by volunteering to lead the gunpowder effort beneath the boardwalk. William will lead the forces above to keep the Monts at the boardwalk. The battle plan is set, and Truett Mire awaits the impending forces of the Montibian Empire. The Monts attack, and the majority of the Mountain Guard clash with William's forces above as Simon and his people rig the supports below. It's a surprisingly close tussle, as the tough-as-nails marshmen can hold their own against the well-trained Mountain Guardsmen.

Shock soon hits the Mire side as some of William's former trainees recognize him, and in doing so reveal William's true identity to the people of the Mire. That doesn't deter William however, as he gets an opportunity to absolutely clobber all those trainees that mocked and

demeaned him back when. It was the purest definition of cathartic; William's dedicated training regimen as well as newly acquired agility and mobility allowed him to outsmart, outmaneuver, and outmatch his former trainees. As the battle comes to a head, the signal is given and the Mire forces fall back as the Monts are blown to smithereens. Those that weren't killed in the explosion or didn't drown in the marsh are forced to retreat. The day is won.

William knows he'll have to come clean now that everything's settled. He tells Simon and the rest of the town of his Montibian lineage, and how he deserted the Mountain Guard due to what happened a month prior. He wagered that hiding a false identity under Oliver would give him some closure and allow him to move on with his new life. It didn't work. Once they knew of his true lineage, all the events that had transpired were blamed on him, that his desertion led the Monts to track him here or that he was still loyal to them and brought them here to blow up their town and weaken their defenses. All the accusations were ridiculous but fueled by several years of anti-Mont sentiment. He looked to Simon, the only friend he's had. He'd hoped he would come to his defense. But all he had to say was this:

“I'd soon rather lose my other arm than let the likes of a Mont bastard like you sit with my family.”

William was given no benefit of doubt, no belief, not even time to collect his effects. He was demanded to be exiled from the Mire. The welcoming close-knit community of Truett Mire has banished William Gardien; he is once again completely alone.

CHAPTER 12: THE MYSTERY OF GHINET PRUD

A frigid wind hit the crew of the Ivory Raptor as they arrived at Lidanya Moor, the frozen continent at the southern part of the world. They must make sail to the capital of Mokry Gorad, a subterranean city suspended on a ravine above an underground river. Only the Ice Caps where the Life Spring is said to be is colder than the frigid continent. Many of the tropical men of the sea, including Aidan and Arata whom have spent their lives in warmer climates, are out of their element.

They seek out the Ice Baron, the head of the operations at the capital and subsequently the leader of the Lidanyans. Captain Jaxon and Boman hope to get the Baron on board with providing steel for weapons and hull-tearers for the invasion force. The Lidanyans' alliance is critical, as they are the only nation with an abundance of steel that isn't the Monts. Unfortunately, the Ice Baron declines, as his country has no hostilities with the Monts and joining the invasion force would throw the Lidanyans in a war they didn't need to fight. They pleaded, but the stubborn Ice Baron wouldn't budge. They are left with returning to the ship empty-handed.

Now that the Lidanyans have rejected their offer, they will have to put the invasion force together sans a reliable source of steel. Another problem arises: the trip from Borough to Mokry

Gorad was a long one, and they are short on supplies and coin. So, the captain is left to find any jobs that would make easy money. After looking around town, he finds one that would suit the crew's talents: the dockmaster has been losing workers he sent to investigate the lake of Ghinet Prud after reports of nomads and spelunkers have mysteriously vanished. He's willing to pay pretty for any information or items the crew is able to bring back. They accept, and to help navigate the Lidanyan waters he sends one of his trusted workers Natasha Savyni.

While Boman elects to stay behind and see if there's any way the Ice Baron can be convinced, the crew departs for Ghinet Prud with a new teammate by making their way up Ghinet River. Natasha fits in well with the crew with her taste for the drink and entertaining stories of her career as an estate carver. Many of the sailors advocated to "get to know her" but find no luck as she's into women. Regardless, a friendship sparks between her and the crew, particularly with Aidan whom both share stories about their inspired careers and legend-status fathers.

They arrive at Ghinet Prud and are amazed at the natural wonder. This lake has confounded explorers from all over, as the lake being under a frozen tundra is eerily warm. The crew spots a group of crow's nests breaching the surface of the lake, and Natasha dives in to see if there's anything worth finding. Aidan makes a shocking discovery as he scans the wreckages: one of the ships is Monty. Natasha nabs the flag and all doubt is clear: the Monts have been to Lidanya Moor, and it was recent by the looks of the ship. This will be the ultimate leverage to convince the Ice Baron!

Their celebration is short lived, however. Benjamin notices something strange at the center of the lake. The water is becoming more turbulent and agitated, and it begins to bubble. And it's spreading fast. He implores that they make it back to the river immediately. Once Natasha gets back on board, they make fast out of the main lake body. The boiling water is catching up fast, and with a lack of substantial wind the sails are doing no favors for the Raptor. Captain Jaxon orders that sweeps be run out to give the Raptor more movement, but the boiling water isn't slowing down. The chase is close, but the Ivory Raptor barely makes it back to Ghinet River.

When they make it back to Mokry Gorad, they bring the Mont flag that Natasha got before the Ice Baron, and the news shocks and angers him. He had no idea how or why the Monts would be here in Lidanya Moor, but swears to take immediate action. He agrees to join the invasion effort, and thanks the crew for seeking him out by outfitting the Ivory Raptor with a galleon-customized hull-tearer. The captain is awed by the craftsmanship; Lidanyan hull-tearers are engineering wonders as they are enormous plates of steel attached to the bow of a ship allowing the ship to smash through ice or enemy ships while not weighing the ship down significantly enough to reduce speed. The Lidanyans certainly know their metal. Captain Jaxon and the crew have succeeded in their first mission, and now seek to make the long journey north to the Mezuo Islands where he can both get Arata's father to provide financing for the invasion and locate one of the map shards at Terbiar.

Before they leave, Natasha resigns from her job at the docks to join the crew on their adventures. Having been an invaluable ally, Captain Jaxon accepts Natasha as a part of the Ivory Raptor's crew. Benjamin theorizes that the mystery of Ghinet Prud was that a volcanic vent existed at the lake bottom, and all the unfortunate nomads that disappeared there got caught in the boiling wrath. Having now acquired the Lidanyan alliance, the crew of the Ivory Raptor sail northward.

CHAPTER 13: THE BUSTLING METROPOLIS

William seeks to head to the island city of Boling City to start a new life after having been exiled from Truett Mire. Problem is that the city is annexed by the Montibian Empire, so he will have to once again go by the name of Oliver and keep a lower profile. When he arrives, he's overwhelmed by the scale of Boling City. It's one of the most populated cities in the world, and the size of it all is nothing that William has ever seen, even at New Everett.

Due to William's shortage of coin, he is forced to start his life here at the guttered corners of the outer rim of the city. He does land a job at a local café, which makes him a decent enough living. But even a month after hard work at his job, he's getting nowhere. The tales of the shining economic paradise that is Boling City certainly have stretched the truth. He wished he could at least have a decent dormitory or good enough place of living in the inner rims of the city.

However, fate would finally prove to be his friend as he overhears a conversation between two of the customers at the café. He finds out they're part of an underground organization called the Patriot's Guild, which is a group of thieves and mercenaries leading a freedom effort to liberate Boling City from the Monts, and that they were arranging an exchange for weapons about 2 blocks from the café. William knew this was his chance to finally fight back against the Monts, and perhaps redeem himself in the eyes of the Aquanor populous.

When the exchange occurred later that night, William approached the members and casually introduced himself. He was met with gun barrels and being tackled to the pavement. The guildmembers interrogated William on his identity and motivations, and William came clean with everything. He told them of his name, his Mont lineage, his exile, and the fact that he wanted to join them in their fight. William figured honesty was the better approach here since that was what got him exiled from Truett Mire. They responded by taking them to their sewer hideout, although as a prisoner. The tiniest shred of trust allowed him to keep his life, but he would spend the next week in a cell due to the obvious mistrust from the Guild. Despite his honesty, William was still a Mont and he still did just waltz in on a discreet meeting.

Once the week has passed, a guildmember of high authority approached William with some questions. William further elaborated on his time as a Mont navy man and a Guardsman for what brief time that lasted, and that he still has good memory of both experiences due to them being the only notable times of his life. The guildmember took interest with him, and decided that perhaps his knowledge of the Monts' inner workings can be useful to the Guild. She introduces herself as Margaret, the guildmaster of the Patriot's Guild, and that there is a mission that William can help with to earn trust.

The Guild is planning a raid on a Mountain Guard barrack in the outer rim of the city. Intel suggested that weaponry from Tahnia was just imported, and that would give the Guild an extra edge in their future operations. Fortunately, William's time as a hunter taught him the skill of stealth, and his knowledge of the Guard routine allowed him and the Guild to slip out unnoticed with the new weaponry. William more than proved himself a dependable ally, but it was only enough to get him out of the cell. He would need to do a bit more to be fully inducted as a Guild member.

CHAPTER 14: SECRETS OF THE STILLWATER RESORT

The crew's long expedition has landed them in Terbiar, where they can rest from the travel and invasion errands and search for one of the shards to the legendary map. They book a stay at the oldest and most popular resort in the world, Stillwater, and figure out if this place holds the dungeon where the shard is. It's likely the hotel staff would not be keen on their patrons tearing apart the place, so Captain Jaxon and Benjamin will stay and put up a front as honored guests while Arata, Boman, Natasha, and Aidan all scour the resort for the hidden crypt.

During the night, the crew stumbles on a catacomb hidden beneath the lobby, and venture inside. The staff notice and pursue the crew inside while seizing Captain Jaxon and Benjamin for blowing a hole in their lobby. The crypt is riddled with ancient traps and confusing layouts, so the crew is able to lose the staff. Captain Jaxon and Benjamin's relaxing stay abruptly shifts to being in cuffs in the middle of a wine basement.

Jaxon and Benjamin have a long conversation about how ridiculous the situation there is. Benjamin questions why a hotel staff is so equipped with security measures and the captain just shrugs and guesses "protocol?" He admits the worst part about being confined in that basement is that he is just a short distance away from the booze but is tied down and unable to reach it. The ultimate torment.

Arata, Aidan, and Natasha make their way further down the crypt. The staff are hot on their trail, so they must hasten their search. Arata leads the crew into an open sewer room with a blank wall hosting nothing but a group of protruding bricks sticking out of it. Aidan wonders if this could be some sort of puzzle. Arata attempts to figure it out, and while he does so Natasha and Aidan fight off the hotel workers as they attempt to seize the crew. The brick puzzle is solved, and a stone door turns open.

The crew are able to locate the first shard. However, the problem now arises as to how they are going to get out with all the resort's workers hot on their trail. Luckily for them, Captain Jaxon and Benjamin break from their confinement and hold off the staff for the rest of the crew's escape. The staff is well armed. The hotel staff. Armed. Captain Jaxon has to make do-or-die decisions in a shootout with armed hotel workers. They are chased out of the resort, but are able to make it back to the Raptor. They can now resume their journey by making their way to Kinoko.

CHAPTER 15: BECOMING A TRUE PATRIOT

William has yet to earn the complete trust of the Patriot's Guild, but he has made substantial progress towards that goal. He even strikes the fancy of Margaret, whom he has impressed through his wit and reliability. Another mission is brought before him, and Margaret makes clear that if William can succeed here, he can officially be inducted into the Guild.

The mission is thus: a galleon is set course for Boling City from the Montibian Empire with a new batch of Mountain Guardsmen to reinforce the Guard present in the city. The objective is to destroy the galleon and everyone on board as both a way to prevent the Guard from gaining more men and as a show of intimidation to establish the Patriot's Guild as a force to be reckoned with.

In order to catch the galleon off-guard, the Guild must strike at the late hour while most of the awake personnel on board is just navy men and not armed Guardsmen. They do this by waiting until one hour before the ship is scheduled to arrive at Boling Harbor. They then sneak into the lighthouse and dim the lamp. Without the lighthouse, the ship is completely blind and cannot make berth at the harbor. In the confusion, William and a group of guildmembers sneak aboard and commandeer the main deck.

Now that the upper deck is captured, they get out the explosives. William starts to get cold feet, however. The Guardsmen are doing nothing, they are sleeping soundly in the barracks below completely unaware of what's transpiring topside. In an instant, the Guild would light the gunpowder and their lives would end. It felt cruel. One of the commanding guildmembers would knock some sense into William. That's when William would remember the village. Was the Mountain Guard merciful then?

In that moment, William did one better and chose to light the powder himself. As the rest of the guild vacated the ship, William ignited the powder trail in a moment of anger and vengeance to what had transpired that day. He jumped ship, and climbed aboard the dingy with the guildmembers and watched as the pitch-black, tranquil bay area of Boling City was suddenly illuminated by a fiery explosion that obliterated the galleon. The explosion shook the entirety of Boling City. An entire ship of Guardsmen was wiped out in an instant, and the people of Boling City now knew the Patriot's Guild.

The mission was a success, but off the heat of adrenaline William had come to terms to what he had just done. He had just slaughtered an entire ship of Guardsmen in a singular merciless blow. They didn't even fight back or die in battle; they were peacefully asleep until an eruption of fire ended their lives instantaneously. It felt wrong what William had just done. But they were Mountain Guards, right? Had William not killed them they probably would have gone on to slaughter another town of Ahgilans, right? That's what William would keep telling himself, but it didn't make the sleepless nights any easier.

But with the success of the mission came the promise to be fully inducted into the Guild. After a brief oath, William officially became a member of the Patriot's Guild, and he got to finally become a friend among the Guild. The Guild had brought an enjoyment out of William he hadn't felt since the Mire. It wasn't as prestigious as the Mountain Guard but it had true justice and comradery. Not to mention, William had no secrets to keep from his new mates unlike back

at the Mire. He felt like he had belonged. In a way, it is what William thought being a Mountain Guard would be like.

CHAPTER 16: THE CITY OF NOHCHI

On the crew's journey through the Mezuo Isles, their next destination is the island of Kinoko, where they can meet Arata's bank-running father to secure a loan for the Ahgilan government. Arata is excited for the chance to see his parents again, but is still left deep in thought about something that had happened before he'd left to explore the world.

The island of Kinoko is bizarre. The island is covered in forests of gargantuan fungi, making the island one of the most perplexing locations on Aquanor. Within the mushroom forests lies the city of Nohchi, where Arata departs to meet with his father. When they reunite, Mr. Tanaka doesn't share the enthusiasm of his son. Before Arata can even make an attempt to negotiate, he is told to leave. The negotiations didn't even begin.

To resolve this, Boman and Jaxon tag along for the second attempt, but Arata's father is as abrasive as the first. He doesn't trust the likes of a pirate or a Mont, so negotiations for a loan are caput. Boman finds this concerning, if they cannot secure a loan from First Nohchi Bank than financing the invasion effort would be near impossible and leave the Ahgilan government bankrupt. They must find a way to convince Arata's father, and they look to Capt. Jaxon. He's perplexed by being looked to however, as it was Benjamin that negotiated with Chieftress Tahoma and sheer luck that convinced the Ice Baron to change his mind.

Arata is left as the one to come up with something. It is his father after all. He's left to discuss the reason why his father wasn't so keen on him returning to Kinoko. It all had to do with the Mezuo Wars.

The Mezuo Isles have been plagued by centuries of wars and feuds between the more prominent islands. The Great Conquest threw a monkey wrench into the whole debacle, and every side has some assortment of disdain with one another. The history is long and complicated, but the main idea is that there are no allies and everyone is against one another. The reason this is important in this scenario is that it was the reason Arata left his life to explore the world to begin with.

Arata grew up a sheltered boy in a wealthy household. He had rarely left the household and never set foot outside the city walls of Nohchi. The reason for his sheltered life was due to his elder brother. Before Arata was born, his much older brother grew up in a far more open environment, which led to him craving adventure and excitement. He went on to conscript in the Kinoko Navy to fight for his country. He never returned, and his parents were crushed by losing their son. As a result, when Arata was born his parents were far more overprotective and restrictive. But Arata had too much of his brother in him. He too craved adventure, and the only outlet he could experience that was with books and fables of great sea-faring buccaneers and pirate heroes. They became idols to the young boy.

The thirst for leaving the nest grew in Arata, and he would always be met with objection from his father. This caused a rift to form between them, and being the experienced parent

Arata's father knew he had to do something to close that rift. He and his wife had come to an understanding: Arata could leave Kinoko, but he could not return to the Mezuos Islands. Arata's father made it clear: he could pursue exploration and adventure on the sole promise that Arata would leave behind everything in the cluttered Mezuos Isles and never look back.

Now with the crew in need of Mr. Tanaka's assistance, it is up to Arata to come up with something to convince his father. He comes up with an idea that is nearly at Capt. Jaxon's level of insanity: what if the crew got Kinoko out of the Mezuos war? Or moreover, what if they were able to end it? The idea was impossible. The islands have been at each other's throats for generations, and one ship could not take on the entirety of the other nations. But maybe there is one way...

The idea came to Captain Jaxon after drowning his sorrows in booze with Aidan and Natasha: there is only one thing that has the potential to unite the war-torn relationships of the Mezuos Isles. That would be the Montibian Empire. The captain has always lived by the idea of "Nobody likes the Monts," and the Monts have already affected the region with desires to claim the green lands of Chaoyuen. This could work...maybe. The captain is glad that for once they didn't have to lead a battle.

A week passes and a meeting between the major figureheads of the Mezuos Isles takes place in Kinoko. The goal here is to create a truce between Kinoko, the forest isle of Hanel Su, and the Chaoyuen, as they are the three major powers in the isles. This was far from easy, as a boring tangent from Benjamin made clear the geopolitical history of the Mezuos Isles is long and complicated.

The meeting barely starts before the heated exchanges begin. Aidan jokingly comments how they cannot fish out another Mont flag to solve this one. Benjamin and Boman bend over backwards to settle terms as to how the islands can truce. But it will take more than a silver tongue to make it possible. Captain Jaxon is given the floor, and he knows exactly what can sway them. He elaborates on his childhood in Fall Springs, the town where he grew up, and how peaceful it was there up to his teenage years. It almost looks like the Captain has lost his point entirely. Then he gets to the Mont invasion.

His description is like a horror story: the cannon fire, the troops marching into town, the burning of buildings, and the shrieks of families as they saw each other butchered by the Monts' blades. They gave no quarter. Capt. Jaxon and his family were among the lucky ones. He then goes on to his pirate career and the ambush at Grey Fang. The skeptical leaders are unswayed by his tragic past, but the captain looks them dead in the eye and says "It will be not long before the Monts do this to your towns too. They can't be swayed or negotiated. They only care to see you and your families in tombs."

The terms of the truce were in heated debate, but the leaders saw eye to eye on one thing: alone they are helpless against the Monts. There was no way to avoid their wrath. The only way they could survive is fighting as one. The truce is made, and the conflicts of the Mezuos Islands come to a standstill until the Montibian threat no longer exists. Benjamin comments that Jaxon and his father may not be so different after all.

Mr. Tanaka is baffled that the captain was able to do the political equivalent of herding cats, and Jaxon replied the best way to herd cats is to scare them in with a big dog. Mr. Tanaka admits that this is an enormous favor for Kinoko as a whole, and as a man of honor he promises that he will talk to the chief minister of Ahgila about a loan. He also apologizes for the harsh judgement of the captain as well as the sterile welcoming of his son. He did not admit it at the time, but he was proud of Arata and he was ecstatic to see his son again. Mr. Tanaka bids farewell to the crew as they set sail for Khoraso, but asks Captain Jaxon to look out for his son. Captain Jaxon swears on his honor as a sailor that he'll be there for Arata.

CHAPTER 17: THE MONT AND THE GUILDMASTER

Now that William was officially inducted into the Guild, he was let in on the Guild's major endgame: how they are going to overthrow the local governor in favor of establishing Boling City as an independent state. It would not be an easy task, as the Monty-established system has the inner rim of the city well established and funded, not to mention the stunt they pulled at Boling harbor has the local Mountain Guard at high alert. But the inner rim is far outnumbered by that of the poorer outer rim, not to mention the growing anti-regime sentiment of the local populous.

Guildmaster Margaret admitted they also had one other secret weapon: William. Now that he's fully loyal to the Guild, his knowledge and skill makes him the most valuable asset in helping overthrow the Monty government. They had originally intended to procure that information from him through interrogation and force as a prisoner, but luckily William proved himself to be on the good guys' side. Margaret's growing interest in William didn't hurt his status in the Guild either.

William and Margaret spent many a time together off the job, despite their important positions. She showed him the many places around the city and the many good people that live there. As someone who had a limited exposure to the more vibrant parts of Aquanor, it was all astounding to William. Though he didn't quite harbor the same feelings Margaret had for him yet he still had built a relationship of trust with her. He no longer had to hide anything or prove himself as a "mountain," this was the first time he could be genuine to someone else since Charlotte.

One night on the town, the two shared a lovely evening of drinking and entertainment. Margaret had intentions of more intimate caliber but the oblivious William enjoyed time with his *completely platonic ally* Margaret without the same intentions. Eventually they went to a quiet place among the sea wall where they could see the entire city. In the middle of the illuminated metropolis was the ever-imposing statue of its founder Jacob Boling, it was almost as if he was watching the two from above.

Here, Margaret decided to open up about her past life. She admitted that despite her knowledge of the parts of the big city, her comradery with the Guild, and her general rebellious philosophies, she grew up a life of high-class elitism. It was almost unimaginable to William: Margaret appeared the type to break someone's jaw and then liberate the teeth from their oppressive mouth lives. Her only friend was her sister, whom had each other through the

emotional abuse of the family household. Their father treated them like managers of one of his businesses and not like daughters. They both decided to run away, but eventually split up. Margaret's sister had grown to accustomed to the elite life, and decided to go pursue it in the Montibian Empire as a noblewoman of the royal family. Margaret wagers that she's probably married to some advisor to the king, now living the same life they had growing up only now she could be the abuser instead of the abusee. As for Margaret, she disappeared among the vast outer rim of the city, became a part of a thieving clan and brought aspirations of liberty to the table, and the rest is history.

William's love bug finally decided to bite him. Their stories were one in the same: living lives of emotional abuse and expectation only to break away, either through having enough of it or a horrifying epiphany. Margaret was a version of William he had aspired to be. William opened up to her as well, sharing his life growing up at the small Monty town of Stoneshire. His constant mocking and belittlement growing up made him stronger as a person, but as a consequence he never fully placed trust in someone. Even his own parents were ashamed of having such an "un-mountainlike" son.

After having realized their feelings for each other, William and Margaret carried on with the long game of the Guild. Once they liberate Boling City, they can share their lives together in the new free city. Plus, the Patriot's Guild can throw one banger of a wedding with so much drinking they'd have to hide it from the authorities only that they would be the new authorities so they'd be hiding it from themselves. The goal was clear, as was Margaret and William's love for one another.

CHAPTER 18: THE RED-HANDED LETTER

En route to the tropical continent of Khoraso, Aidan had caught something done by Boman during a relaxed night of sailing. While the crew were all sleeping or in their quarters, Aidan had walked on deck to discover Boman giving something to a messenger albatross. Aidan finds this suspicious, so he looks among the various effects and finds letters marked for delivery to the Montibian Empire, though the stationary itself is blank. He is furious.

The crew is awakened by Aidan in light of this, proclaiming that Boman is a dirty traitor. Captain Jaxon doesn't know what to think, considering that he's the one leading the effort of the invasion. But he is a Mont. And the evidence that Aidan found doesn't lie. Boman is forced to confess: the letters are to his wife. Aidan calls malarky and says he's a double agent for the Monts, but Boman knew that he wouldn't be allowed to contact her if the crew knew about the letters.

This sends the crew into heated debate. Some have grown to trust Boman and understand being away from loved ones. Others are calling for execution. Captain Jaxon doesn't know what to think, and orders that Boman be put in the brig for now. They would resolve the matter in the morning when they're more awake and sounder of mind.

Dawn breaks and Captain Jaxon goes down to the brig to interrogate Boman. Boman tells Jaxon the whole story: when he was still a high-ranking advisor to the king, Boman had met a

girl that travelled into New Everett from seemingly out of nowhere. Her past being completely a mystery, he pined for her and eventually won her over in marriage. Knowing that he was serving an evil monarchy however, he was forced to disappear and leave her behind. He couldn't drag his beloved into the hardships that soon followed. Having been apart for what's been several years, Boman still writes to her with his personal albatross, Hector, that flies back and forth between the Montibian Empire and wherever Boman was prior.

Captain Jaxon wanted every detail about the wife. Boman said that she was significantly younger than him, had come from somewhere not in the Montibian continent and was suited to a high-class environment. Once he gets every detail, he goes topside to discuss with the crew. Aidan is still avid to give him the blade as well as other crewmembers, but others are advocating to believe him and let him go. Captain Jaxon concludes that while he is untrustworthy, they need him for the invasion effort regardless of his loyalties. He won't die, but he'll have to get comfortable being in the brig.

Boman asks if he can be allowed one more letter to his wife upon his albatross's next round trip, and Captain Jaxon begrudgingly accepts, under the agreement that Captain Jaxon fully examine the letter before its sent. Later in the night, Arata comes down to visit Boman and says that he believes him and doesn't think he's a traitor. Boman thanks Arata for believing him, and talks about how his wife had some ounce of rebellion in her, and that he hopes that whenever they land on the river banks facing the Mountain King's castle, he can win the day and see her again. Arata bids him good night, and Boman is left with his thoughts.

CHAPTER 19: FIGHTERS OF KHORASO

The crew arrives at the tropical Khoraso, and sail upriver to a dock town to meet a friendly ally. They bring Boman for the meeting, though at a close distance as the whole debacle with the letters still harbors mistrust upon him. The town was small and compact, and kept within the growth of the jungle as if to stay hidden. They make dock at a local tavern, where they anticipate to meet their friend.

Captain Jaxon and the crew find Khoraso a peculiar place. They've barely met anyone or seen anyone since they've arrived, and the town was so covered by the jungle growth that it's almost as if the town is hiding. But from what? They meet the man they were hoping to rendezvous with at a table accompanied by many other men of large stature. Their looks pierced the crew: this bunch seems to be the mistrustful type.

The man introduces himself as Francisco Livre, leader of the Furacões. He introduces his group as the organization yearning to free Khoraso from the hands of their puppet emperor Tristee Covarde, who is loyal to the Monts. This is quite a lot for the crew, as Arata points out they were here to get ships and men for the invasion. So why are they meeting with a rebel leader?

Captain Jaxon explains that during their errands, his father said that he would contact the Furacões to assist in their liberation movement. As Emperor Covarde is loyal to the Monts, they would get no help from him. Their only option was to sponsor the liberation movement and

overthrow the Covarde regime, so that Livre can take control of the Khoraso government and provide the necessary men and ships for the invasion. It was a large gamble, but then again as Aidan points out everything in this errand expedition is a gamble.

Livre also explains the hidden nature of the town. Ever since Emperor Covarde bowed to the Monts, the Montibian Empire has started an immense migration effort of Monts to Khoraso. They effectively banished all the local Khoraso from their homes in the major cities like the lake capital of Rehugio, forcing them to hide in grove towns like the one they're at. Captain Jaxon exclaims the cruelty of the Monts, elaborating on what they do: they attack without mercy and take the homes of your families as an added side of cruelty. Jaxon and Livre can identify with their struggles, and that is why the captain is so willing to contribute to the Furacões.

They agree to meet at Rehugio in two weeks for the operation to capture the emperor, which leaves Captain Jaxon some time to search for the next shard piece which is in Khoraso. As a show of good faith, Livre introduces Dante Santos to join the crew. He has knowledge of Khorasan waters, and plus the crew was lacking a good cook. Jaxon welcomes the new member with joy as having a good cook around can finally free the crew of chumming stale rations into their mouths for the past few months.

Santos is a strong and silent asset to the crew. He has a taste for all things fine and high-class, and has a sense of maturity to him. This leads to him getting along more with Benjamin than anyone else in the crew. Within his talent of the cuisine, he is also said to be a master at the rotisseur. He can make a mouthwatering meal out of any sea creature the crew can manage to fish up. Santos would definitely prove to be a valuable member of the crew.

All good feelings of meets and plans vanish as the crew spots a group of Khorasan ships heading towards them. The Ivory Raptor is against three Khorasan ships, which Jaxon bets can hold against the small fleet. However, the new teammate suggests an alternative. Further north upriver is what is known as the Mar de Dentis, which is a large lake residing at the heart of the continent. In it lies the most savage and bloodthirsty of marine life, which can make quick work of the Khorasan vessels. That leaves the problem of the Raptor being against the sea monsters too, but risking the ship against enemy fire isn't a better option.

They make quick to the savage sea, and after a good hour of pursuit the creatures begin to attack the Khorasan ships. The smaller vessels are overwhelmed by the large marine monsters, and are destroyed. The Raptor now has to make it back to the river whilst fighting the marine life as well, however. The Savage Sea earns its name with great fish with fangs the size of limbs gnashing at the hull and even leaping out of the water to attack the crew. The crew fight off the savage predators and make it safe and sound to the river. Now they head to their next goal: the second shard.

CHAPTER 20: THE SEA OF THUNDER

With the operation to free Khoraso ready to commence in near two weeks, the crew of the Ivory Raptor have time to detour to the Mar de Trovoh, where the next shard is said to be

located. The Furacões are making preparations at the capital of Rehugio, leaving the Raptor enough time to pursue the shard before the rendezvous.

Boman is still as trusted as far as he can be thrown. Captain Jaxon has slightly warmed up to having him back on deck again, but by the current looks of things he has yet to earn back the trust of the more skeptical crew like Aidan. For now, he'll have to make do in the brig.

As the crew sails upriver, they notice a storm ahead and ask the captain if this will become a problem. But the captain knows that the storm is their destination. The Mar de Trovoh is one of the many natural wonders of Aquanor, as the body of water is constantly plagued with lightning storms. The sea of thunder is turbulent and dangerous, and within it lies a lone isle where they can procure the second shard. The crew is anxious, as heading headfirst into a storm in search for an island is not exactly what they signed up for.

The crew's ability to make sail is put to the highest test. The perilous Mar de Trovoh proves to be a challenge for the crew, but Captain Jaxon is driven so deep in finding the next shard that he only commands to sail deeper into the heart of the storm. The mission was almost suicidal. How could they even find an island when they're so preoccupied trying to survive the perilous sea of lightning.

Real trouble rears its head when a rogue bolt of lightning strikes the starboard side of the Raptor's hull. It stuns everyone on deck and puts the crew into a brief daze. Captain Jaxon soon realizes the bolt hit where the brig is, and immediately runs below deck. An opening formed upon the wall of the cell, and Boman was knocked out cold from the sudden strike. Captain Jaxon hastens as Boman is in danger of being thrown into the sea. He knocks the cell doors down and drags Boman to safety.

Boman awakens without a shred of knowledge of what has transpired. With no time to lose, Captain Jaxon asks for Boman's help topside. If they can just get one more helping hand on deck, they have the slightest chance of navigating the lightning storm and finding the isle. Boman puts his trust in the captain and heads above deck to assist the crew.

Aidan is keeping lookout on the sails for any shred of land. The storm is too dark and the waves too turbulent, but something catches his eye. A dark mass is illuminated by a distanced lightning bolt, about a good mile from where the Raptor is. An island! Aidan is triumphant, and sets himself to tell the captain. But another bolt of lightning strikes near him and catches him off guard. He tumbles and grabs onto a small rope, preventing himself from falling to his doom. But with nothing but wet sail around him, he has nowhere else to grab onto.

Aidan spends the next moments hanging for dear life on that rope keeping him from his watery grave. But eventually, a hand reaches out to him and pulls to safety. He and the figure descend to deck via the mast, and Aidan tells the Captain of the direction towards the isle. He finds out that the figure that had saved him was Boman, whom was the first to notice Aidan be knocked out of balance by the lightning. Aidan owes him his gratitude and his life.

The Raptor makes it to the isle, where the waters are less agitated. Aidan and Natasha make haste to the altar, where the shard rests. They pry it from the altar, and make it back to the

Raptor. Captain Jaxon could hardly believe it: they had conquered the most perilous body of water on Aquanor and made the next step towards finding the Life Spring. With the shard in hand, the crew are eager to return downriver, and make sail towards Rehugio. First, they needed some deserved rest after the perilous Mar de Trovoh.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to the crew, their good ally Francisco Livre has been captured by the Covarde regime. Their tactics of interrogation are cruel and unrelenting, and within a matter of days, the spirit of the rebel leader is crushed. He spills the details of the operation. The plan is now ruined, and the Covarde regime reacts accordingly. The crew is walking into a trap, and they have no idea.

CHAPTER 21: THE PATRIOT'S GUILD

With much time having passed since William's arrival in Boling City, he is now approaching the turning point for the overthrow of the metropolis' subjugators. The Patriot's Guild has long instigated the fury of Boling City's populous against the elite class of the inner rim and the governing force of the island city. Now the time to overthrow it altogether has arrived.

This day has long been anticipated in the Guild. Margaret has put all of her faith into William to stand at her side as they lead a crowd to storm the governing district at the center of the city. William had more than just Margaret to think about on that fateful day, for this was finally an opportunity to strike back at the Monts in a significant way. William has regretted every part of aspiration he once had for the Guard he left behind and the part he played in making Aquanor succumb to the oppressive Monts. Now he could fight back. Not just to defend, but to liberate. This was his moment.

It started by guildmembers raiding and capturing the various albatross post office buildings around town, as to ensure communications with the empire are cut. With Boling City now cut off from the rest of the Empire, the major guildmembers assembled large crowds of lower-class citizens of the outer rim to storm the inner part of the city. Fires ignited, crowds roared, and a sense of dread filled the remaining Monts in the inner ring.

After effortlessly overwhelming the Mountain Guardsmen present in the area, the crowds successfully occupy the government district with the governor's building completely surrounded. Margaret and William gather a group of guildmembers and head inside. What's left of the Mountain Guard in Boling City come at the Guild with everything they have. But they are vastly outnumbered and outmatched. They are wiped out, and nothing stands between the Guild and Governor Jacob Boling XII.

They bust down the doors of the main office only to find the governor himself just sitting there, quietly looking out the window. He wasn't in a bunker or under his desk cowering in fear, rather he was nonchalantly sitting upon his office desk drinking tea. It was a perplexing site. William suggests that this might be a Ridge Corp setup, and that before they continue, they should have the other guildmembers secure the perimeter. Margaret heeds William's advice and

sends the other members to do as such, leaving her, William, and Governor Boling left in the room.

The governor starts by expressing his disappointment in Margaret. She could have easily fell in line and inherited all the fortune of the Boling family just for herself and her sister, regardless of how poorly he treated them as a father. He proclaims that power and order are the Boling way, not chaos and rebellion. It was no surprise to William that Margaret was the governor's daughter, he deduced that pretty early on after learning her story. Margaret doesn't care what her wretched father thinks of her methodology, as she is now in control and her father isn't, a circumstance she had desired for all her life.

She proclaims that the governor must be brought to justice, as Boling City is now for the people. The governor is in no position to oppose, so he asks for a last request: to look at the locket that once belonged to his wife. He lamented of how her loss led to the life he chose and the way he would raise both Margaret and Charlotte. Wait. Charlotte? William made the connection immediately. It was unthinkable! His former captain Charlotte Stewart was the sister?! Before he can continue, a suddenly furious Margaret shoots the governor clean in the torso and is killed.

William could not process all that had just occurred. But the governor! He had assumed he would be detained and put on trial, but Margaret just shot him instantly. Margaret had come forth with her intentions. She wanted to throw out the government of Boling City to incite anarchy among the populous. The organized Patriot's Guild would be the only force suited to fill the power vacuum that would result, and the city would be under the control of the Guild. Margaret looked William in the eyes and asked him to join her in taking Boling City, so that she can oust the Monts like they have the rest of the world.

William was horrified by all of it, and he could not believe what he was hearing. Margaret never wanted liberation, she wanted control. And after the moments they had shared together it was an ultimate betrayal. William refused to go along with Margaret's scheme. She expressed her disappointment and had the other guildmembers detain and muzzle William. The last words he would hear before being dragged into oblivion were the scathing words of the woman he loved:

“Put him with the rest of the treacherous Mont bastards.”

CHAPTER 22: AMBUSH AT THE LAKE CAPITAL

Having acquired the second shard of the ancient Life Spring map, the crew can now make their way to Rehugio with time to spare. Boman has gained the collective trust of the crew again after the events of the Mar de Trovoh (plus the brig was in shambles) so he was allowed to walk freely among the ship again. He anticipates the success of the Rehugio liberation as the support of the Khoraso is vital in ensuring the success of the invasion.

As the Raptor makes her way up the tropical waters, Captain Jaxon reflects on how he got his pet Khorasan Songbird, Sylvie. He was working on his previous buccaneer crew when they made berth at a small town on the southwestern tip of the tropical continent. He had just earned the rank of first mate, and one of the responsibilities as first mate is to lead the crew in sea shanties. Unfortunately, Jaxon was awful at both singing and even remembering the tunes of songs. He had the idea of getting a songbird from a local pet store, as the animal is widely known to tweet tunes it likes over and over, and if Jaxon had one of his mates whistle some shanties to the bird than it can help Jaxon with his crippling case of tone-deafness. He got the bird, named it in honor of his mother Sylvia, and the rest is history.

Several days of travel later and the Raptor approaches the lake capital of Khoraso, Rehugio. Just in time for the operation. However, Emperor Covarde knows of their plan and has a trap awaiting the Raptor and her crew. Several ships are in the general vicinity of the lake capital but do not attack. It was a strange sight. The crew wondered if this was a part of Livre's plan, or if it was just expected of the ships to do this.

But Captain Jaxon isn't fooled. He's been up against every might of foes in his years of buccaneering and he knows a set-up when he sees one. He orders the ship to turn around with all haste and make sail back to the river. But as they turn around, they notice some Khorasan ships block the entrance to the river. The trap has been sprung. Every other ship around the capital turn around towards the Raptor.

The ensuing conflict was brutal. Wave after wave of Khorasan ships battered the Raptor with fire, but the larger more enduring Raptor took those hits and fought back. Some of the Khorasan navymen even boarded the Raptor to little success. The Raptor was certainly holding her own, but the crew knew that she couldn't take on the entire armada. Boman pleaded for Jaxon to make his escape, but the captain was adamant about still succeeding in the operation. Boman said himself that the Khorasans' assistance is vital to the invasion, but he knows now that this battle is lost. He tells the captain that the invasion can still succeed, but they need to escape.

Captain Jaxon heeds his words, and turns sail towards the river entrance despite the ships blocking the way. At first the crew thought the captain mad, but they quickly remember the hull-tearer that the Raptor was outfitted with back at Lidanya Moor. Now they get to see the Lidanyans' work in action. The bulkier Raptor rams full speed into the Khorasan ships, tearing through them like paper. It was magnificent. They knew the hull-tearers had to have some usefulness to earn the name, but they worked wonders when put into action.

The Raptor makes it to the river and sails for open sea. Emperor Covarde may have foiled the liberation plan, but his scheme to capture the Raptor failed. Captain Jaxon laments the lost chance of liberating the Khoraso as he identified with their struggle against the Monts. Boman consoles the captain saying that if they succeed in the invasion the Khorasans will be liberated anyway. They just have to hold out hope.

CHAPTER 23: FREEDOM OR DEATH

William's only sense from his surroundings are the sounds of metal bars slamming and the moans of agony from his fellow prisoners. He cannot see anything. After the Boling Uprising, he was dragged down to a large dungeon where he and people native to the inner rim of the city are being held as prisoners. In his cell, he shares room with a retired Monty admiral who settled in the inner rim. He was separated from his wife and children, and ever since the uprising hasn't seen them since.

William has mixed feelings on his cellmate. He's been in the Mont military before and knows the horrors the Mountain Guard enacted upon the world. But William knows he's a bit short on allies at the moment. He tells the admiral that they need to escape, as he can wager the vengeful Patriot's Guild most likely has a grim fate in store for the Monts native to Boling City. The admiral congratulates William's sense of heroism, but doubts he can pull a mass escape of the entire Monty populous, as he estimates hundreds of people are probably being kept prisoner here.

William is going to have to think of something. How can he get hundreds of people out of prison and off the island city? He'll need intuition, cooperation, coordination, and most importantly, luck. He needs to lure the guards into at least one of the cells, as each cell has multiple prisoners that could overpower the guard who entered. They just need to lure him in. They think of starting a fight but that would just incentivize the guard to watch for amusement. They could fake an illness but that would only make the guard stay away. It seems all the brainstorming William and the former admiral are doing is just hitting dead-ends.

There was one idea however. The next cell over is a lady who was a maid in one of the Monty households. She was rather young, about in her 20s, and William thought if brawls and sickness can't lure in a guildmember, then perhaps libido can. William's been among the guildmembers for a while, and he knows how much they crave some action. They whisper to the next cell over to have the maid allure the guard and as he unlocks the cell and comes in her cellmates tackle him to the ground and nab his keys.

The raising number of liberated Monts overpower the guards, and soon everyone is free from their cells. Now is the problem of getting off this anarchist rock. There's fat chance that they can somehow sneak hundreds of Monts out to a ship without being noticed, so the admiral concludes that they'll have to fight their way out. The most able-bodied of the crowd procure the arms of the guildmember guards and volunteer to cause a ruckus outside in the city streets whilst the rest of the Monts run to the harbor.

The diversion was easier said than done. Boling's streets were infested with anarchists and guildmembers. They didn't have to win, they just had to hold out long enough for the Monts to evacuate to the docks. Many of the men here are killed, including the admiral. William and the remaining Monts are forced to retreat, and follow the crowds to the docks.

William and the men hold back the baddies while the crowd boards a nearby galleon. They make their escape, and William is put up to lead as captain on the voyage back to the empire. A woman with a girl approaches William and asks if he has seen her husband. He can wager who they are. He tells her that he died, but he did so knowing that the anarchists wouldn't

lay a hand on her or his daughter. The woman is distraught, but William tells her the best way to uphold his memory is to live their lives.

As the galleon makes port in a town on the western coast of the continental empire, William is forced to depart. He could not return to anywhere in the world. He knew now that he may have left the Montibian Empire, but the Montibian Empire never left him. He couldn't stay here either. It was a precarious situation for him. He looked north to unknown places, where he could figure out his future and his destiny.

CHAPTER 24: THE FIRE MASONS OF TAHNIA

After a long while of sea travel, the crew could see the ash plume poison the morning sky. Eventually the clouds would darken with the snow of soot falling upon them. They know by that point they are approaching their destination: the island of fire. Tahnia is widely known for its volcanic nature, with the island constantly spewing ash and lava. Though not in the destructive kind, the lava flows constantly from Mount Coelcerth, and snakes its way around the island akin to a river system. Aidan looked at the foreboding volcanic environment and said "Aye. Home sweet home."

Aidan Murphey had a plan to run the final "invasion errand" at the island of fire. He had to reunite the Fire Masons, the society of blacksmiths and weapon makers that the island is well renowned for having. No better smiths can be found anywhere. With the Fire Masons, the invasion force can fashion the steel received from the Lidanyans into weapons for the force. After the failure at Khoraso, they couldn't afford to leave anything off the checklist. However, like Khoraso, there was a slight hiccup in their ambitions here: the island is annexed by the Montibian Empire.

Captain Jaxon knew for a fact he couldn't leave the Raptor on a Mont-controlled port, so he entrusted Aidan to lead this operation, with his close friend Natasha to tag along. Natasha is crumbling in the sweltering heat of the island, not to mention the ashy air that had her hacking like a plague victim. Aidan whiffed the soot-covered air, and stood in the oven heat with pride. He could almost cry. He knew he was home.

Aidan and Natasha hit a local tavern where he reunites with one of his old family friends, Amelia. She was good friends with Aidan's late father, Donovan Murphey, who was a proud leader among the Fire Masons. Aidan looks to the belt on his person and laments the loss of his father, and the reassurance of hate for the Mont scum that did it. Natasha wants to know when they'll be meeting the other Fire Masons, in which Amelia responds that they've all been driven into hiding. When Natasha asks why, Aidan explains it's all due to the Mason's Revolt.

When Aidan was just a wee lad, Donovan and the other Fire Masons were subjugated to making arms for the Monts. A long history of oppression did enough for the Tahnians to hate the Monts, but after the Great Conquest, the Tahnians could not simply forge day and night for their overlords knowing they are using their crafts to pillage and slaughter. One day, Donovan finally said enough, and rallied the other Fire Masons to dump their next shipment of weapons for the

Mountain Guard into the lava river. The local Mountain Guard didn't take that too kindly, and conflict arose in what was known as the Masons' Revolt.

Donovan led the Fire Masons in a glorious battle against the Mountain Guard on the banks of the lava river. The way Aidan and Amelia described it was like something out of a legend: the heroic blacksmiths taking their crafted arms and fighting back against the evil Monts with the backdrop of a raging river of fire. Amelia wishes she could have been there, but at the time she was not old enough to be a Mason. She had only heard the stories. The Mountain Guard was defeated, and Donovan declared the island of Tahnia an independent nation.

At that time, Donovan had no care for the ensuing reaction of the mainland empire. He just wanted a home where he and his family could live in peace, and he could forge for the brethren he fought for, not the demons that had beckoned them in chains. Even for a brief time, he needed to have it. It was not long before the anticipated retaliation of the Monts came, and it was brutal. The Fire Masons fought 10-to-1, and while they fought valiantly, they were forced to surrender. A public execution was held for the Fire Masons that fought that day, and decree was made that anyone who identified with the Fire Masons would meet the same fate.

Aidan could barely stomach what occurred next. His proud father, the man he idolized and looked up to all his life, was hung by the neck and helpless as he received a short drop and sudden stop. He never forgave the Monts for what they did. He never will. Eventually, Aidan and his mother and sister moved to Ahgila where he made weapons for the Ahgilan militia and provided for his family until his sister became old enough to watch mom. He went to Marauder's Bay seeking action and purpose, met a quirky pirate captain who shared his hatred for anything with a mountain on it, and the rest is history.

Now the time has come to liberate Aquanor from the iron grip of the Monts, and they needed the Fire Masons back to do it. Amelia has the connections, but needs to know if this invasion will be a fleeting victory like the Revolt, or if it will truly free the island of fire from the mountain empire. Aidan looked her in the eyes and swears upon his Mason's Belt and the man who had previously worn it that the invasion was the real deal. Amelia sees Aidan's resolve, and vows to assemble the Fire Masons.

The Fire Masons assemble at the foot of the mighty Mount Coelcerth. Amelia takes a magma gauntlet and reaches into a pool of lava to pull a secret lever. Natasha is baffled by that insane sight, but Aidan ensures that Tahnian metal can resist all fire. In other words, magma gauntlets act as a sort of oven mitt for reaching into molten rock. The entrance opens, and all the Fire Masons are waiting inside. They are told that the time has come for them to liberate their island. They aren't given much detail, but when they hear their taking the fight to the Monts, the agreement is unanimous. One of the Masons asks if Aidan is the Mason that had brought them here, but Aidan is regretful in confessing that the belt was his fathers and never engraved one for himself. By right, he technically was never made a Fire Mason.

When the topic of belts was brought up, they notice something off. One of the "Masons" wasn't wearing one. Natasha asks if he misplaced it or passed it to an heir, but Aidan reassures that removing a belt is like removing a limb. In actuality, the man wasn't a Mason at all. He was

a *spy*. And the Mountain Guard had caught wind of the Fire Masons plan to leave. Aidan's at least thankful he didn't tell them the details about the invasion, but now they're going to have to fight their way off the island.

The Mountain Guard was awaiting the Masons at the outskirts of the town. They were primed ready to attack the Masons as soon as they left their hideout. Aidan had taken initiative and led the counter-attack gung-ho. The battle on the banks of the river of lava appeared as it did long ago, with the son leading the attack in place of the father. They are able to break through the Mountain Guard's line and hightail it for the harbor. Aidan, Natasha, and the remaining Fire Masons made it on board the Raptor and made it off the island. Aidan looks back woefully as he is forced to bid farewell to his home again.

Amelia pulls Aidan aside and asks if he can help with something. When he approaches, he almost tears up at the site. Amelia knew he was never officially made a Fire Mason, so before the meet up she had forged a blank Fire Mason's Belt for Aidan. Now she bestows it to Aidan, and asks if he will engrave the buckle as per tradition. He does, and once he is finished the crew watches as he puts it on. Amelia has Aidan recite the oath, and proclaims him a Fire Mason of Tahnia. The whole crew applauds, and Aidan stands proud knowing he will carry on his father's mission.

CHAPTER 25: RETURN TO BOROUGH CITY

After a good amount of a year the crew of the Ivory Raptor have finally returned to Borough City, where the major leaders of the nations contributing to the invasion have assembled in a meeting with the chief minister. Captain Jaxon is lukewarm about returning to the place where he was put on trial for destroying Ahgilan ships, and even more disdainful about seeing his old man again.

With the leaders assembled, they must discuss the details of the invasion. The failure at Khoraso has dealt a major blow to the invasion effort, and now they'll have to work with a fraction of their expected turnout. As the leaders and the crew are assembled in the office, Chief Minister Jaxon has a naval admiral for the Ahgilan navy brief the leaders on how the invasion is planned to succeed. Big surprise, it was the admiral that prosecuted the captain, but Jaxon isn't too surprised by his father's limited circle of friends.

The invasion is planned as such: A major portion of Ahgilan galleons, some Lidanyan frigates complete with hull-tearers, and various ships from Nohchi and Tas Da will rendezvous at a classified location en route to the Montibian Empire. Once the invasion fleet is assembled, they will begin their approach. Their first hurdle is getting into Crater Bay, the major body of water that houses all the ports of the empire including the capital. Crater Bay is connected to the ocean by a thin strait known as Celestial Passage. Here is the most fortified and armed location in the entire empire, as no one can nor has gone through without being an approved Monty vessel. Once they somehow make it past the passage, they must sail northward across the bay and up the northmost river system to the capital of New Everett. Here they will strike at the heart of the empire and capture the royal palace. Once they force the Mountain King into surrender, the battle will be won and Aquanor will be free from the wrath of the Monts.

Slight problem: the Khorasan fleet was expected to be the force to take down the passage for the rest of the fleet. But with their cooperation now off the table, they must somehow take down the fortifications on Celestial Passage for the fleet to enter the empire while compensating for the losses of the Khoraso. It was quite the major issue. Captain Jaxon, after long deliberation, suggests something seen as unthinkable to everyone in the room: a Saint Mary. Those that have military and nautical know-how are calling the captain insane for suggesting it, and those that are out-of-the-loop are wondering what the heck he's on about. Captain Jaxon uses his gift of the silver tongue to essentially ask if anyone's got a better idea, whereas the leaders are forced to go through with it.

After the meeting, Arata spoke for the crew when asking what in the devil a Saint Mary is. He winces at having to answer, as the answer isn't something that they're going to like. The tactical maneuver known as the Saint Mary is a high-risk naval tactic that involves rigging a ship about the size of a galleon to the brim with gunpowder and explosives and sailing headfirst into enemy defenses in the hopes of blowing a hole. The problem is if enemy fire makes contact with the ship the whole thing blows and the maneuver fails. No wonder the others were so hesitant at the idea of doing one.

Aidan asks if the captain is seriously going to use the Ivory Raptor to perform a Saint Mary, and Captain Jaxon assures that he'd never use the Raptor for anything like that. He'll instead go down to Marauder's Bay and buy a cheap ship from Sully's Ship Harbor to use for the Saint Mary, and head straight for Celestial Passage afterward. Before the Raptor departs for Marauder's Bay, Captain Jaxon has to tie some loose ends.

He meets with his father and apologizes for not getting the Khorasan support for the invasion. He's not sorry about choosing the life of piracy and buccaneering however, as he's proud of the experiences he got to have despite the low points of his life. Expecting another gruff retort from his old man, Henry Jaxon instead expresses his gratitude for Captain Jaxon taking the initiative to rally Aquanor for the invasion, and even prouder that he of all people will lead the primary attack against the Monts. Captain Jaxon may never get along with his dad, but in the end their hatred for the Monts brought them together. And now they can finally get justice for the impact the Monts left on their lives.

With the Raptor arriving in Marauder's Bay, Captain Jaxon, Arata, Boman, and Dante will all head to Sully to get the ship for the Saint Mary maneuver while Benjamin will take charge and lead the rest of the crew to the rendezvous point. They purchase a ship known as the Baleful Gull, which looks as if the whole thing is held together by toothpicks and glue. It has some good speed though. Captain Jaxon looked at the tattered Gull and proclaimed "Aye. I want it."

Now aboard the Baleful Gull, Captain Jaxon's crew departs Marauder's Bay and sails east to meet the invasion force. When they load the explosives onto the Gull, they will head directly to Celestial Passage. They know in their hearts this is the one shot they have at striking back against the Montibian Empire. They sail forth knowing all of Aquanor is counting on them to win.

CHAPTER 26: THE BATTLE OF NEW EVERETT PART I

The voyage on the Baleful Gull was a long one, as the Montibian Empire was far from where they began in Marauder's Bay. During that time, the boys on the Gull enjoyed some quality R&R as they knew of the storm that was to come. Boman thought it strange that he would be returning home as an invader, but then again that was among the strange ways life worked. He hopes that he can meet his wife again and live in peace, after the tyrannical Mountain King has fallen of course. Captain Jaxon stated that the chances of her still being around might not be too likely due to Boman's turn, but Arata objects to the captain's glass-half-empty take and assures that Boman will see her again.

The Ivory Raptor enjoyed some leisure time too, as approaching a battle where chances of death are from high to absolute often makes someone want to ease the stress. Benjamin questions why the chef had to go with the Captain as the crew are back to whatever rations they can fish out of storage. Aidan and Natasha are drinking like it's their last day on Aquanor, which in perspective to what's coming it might very well be. Natasha was excellent at the brew, and learned everything there is about the drink from her father. Aidan and Natasha identify with each other as they both had fathers they looked up to as heroes.

Something about the conversation of daddies got Natasha down, as the later nights she drunk more than usual and spent time sitting alone on the mast. Aidan was concerned for his friend, so he asked what was the matter. Natasha shared the story of her father with Aidan, as he would probably be the only member of the crew to understand.

Natasha's father was a proud estate carver of Mokry Gorad, who'd be well regarded for his ability to carve entire manors into the ice walls of the city. He was also one heck of a drinking buddy, as everyone who knew him in life expressed how joyous of a lad he was. Though none were more inspired by him than his daughter Natasha. However, unlike Aidan's father, his end wasn't as legendary as his life.

His love for the drink was his downfall. He had work stresses and family issues that he dared not open up to his daughter about, and his drinking habits got the better of him. One day his liver gave out, and he was brought to the infirmary. Natasha can remember vividly the sight she saw the day she last saw her father. The proud, macho lad of Lidanya Moor laying on a bed unable to breathe, unable to speak, unable to move. The greatest figure of Natasha's life died there, not with a bang but a whimper.

Aidan couldn't possibly imagine a sight like that. He revered his father throughout his life but couldn't visualize flaws that were so...human. The only consolation he could offer was that it was how he lived that resonated with everyone, and someone who had made the woman that's about to punch the Montibian Empire straight in the mouth would definitely earn anyone's respect. Natasha could only thank whatever higher being was listening that she had a friend like Aidan.

The Baleful Gull arrived at the rendezvous, and the Ahgilan militiamen loaded the gunpowder onto the vessel. It was kind of unnerving to Captain Jaxon and his mates seeing so

much explosive material be loaded on deck. It felt like they were sitting next to a man that could snap their neck at any time. Without a moment to lose, they head for their next destination: Celestial Passage. The battle is ready to begin.

A thick fog formed on the strait that day. It was perfect. The Monts patrolling at the wall won't know what hit 'em. Unfortunately, their cover doesn't last long. The patrolmen in charge of the main gate are chewed out by their commanding officer before they notice a mast poke out of the fog for a split second. No Mont colors. The entirety of Celestial Passage is put on alert as the gate closes, and the Monts on the wall ready their guns. Boman hopes Captain Jaxon can improvise well, as he reminds him that their ship is filled to the top with explosives and if so much as one cannon hits them it's over.

Captain Jaxon knows now more than ever it's time to prove his mettle as a sailor. Every man on deck takes different positions as they have to weave their way through the cannon fire. It was a glorious sight, but too bad the fog blocked the view. The time came. Everyone on deck abandoned ship as Jaxon used a blank shot to light the gunpowder trail. He would soon jump ship as well. At that point, the Gull was too close to the wall for the cannons to hit them. It took a good second before the commanding officer recognized the Saint Mary. He booked it, and it was an infuriating silence before Celestial Passage blew sky-high.

It was an explosion that rocked all of Aquanor. The ancient wall that guarded the Montibian Empire from the world went up in flames, and any unlucky saps patrolling the wall that day were wiped out. The Saint Mary worked. Now the rest of the fleet can make their way into Crater Bay. Jaxon, Arata, Boman, and Dante were all helped aboard on the Raptor, and the invasion fleet sailed northward.

With the Monts alerted of their presence, several ships intercepted the fleet as they made their way up the bay. The bigger ships were blown to smithereens by the Ahgilan galleons and the Raptor, and the smaller ships were torn through like paper by the mighty Lidanyan frigates and their hull-tearers. The navy of the invasion force was small but proved to be a challenge to the Monty navy due to their strategy and diversity. All the efforts of the Monts to stop the fleet were futile, as they made their way to the northmost river and sailed up to the capital of New Everett.

CHAPTER 27: THE BATTLE OF NEW EVERETT PART II

The journey upriver to New Everett was a haunting tour of the Montibian Empire's history. The entire way was lined with ruined houses and entire settlements buried in enormous piles of rock. It was a rather sorry sight for the mighty empire that has taken over half of Aquanor. All the personnel of the fleet looked at the mighty mountains penetrating the heavens as they approached the capital; they can see why the empire is so obsessed with mountains. They arrive at New Everett.

Here at the capital of the Montibian Empire is where the fleet would experience true pain. The Monts unleashed all assortments of cutlass and cannon fire in a desperate bid to halt the invaders from making landfall. They blast all defenses on the river banks, and make landfall

where they can establish a position and start their march to the royal palace. With luck, they can storm the castle, capture the Mountain King, and defeat the Montibian Empire once and for all.

The Mountain Guard throws all their might at the invasion force, but now on soil the Tas Da warriors can flex their infantry talent and outclass the Monts. The warriors are quick and evasive, and easily prove to be the superior soldiers compared to the slow and unwieldy Monts. Captain Jaxon couldn't bear to part with the Raptor in the middle of the lion's den, but he knew the invasion force needed every man they had, so he and the crew stormed into the chaos.

It was every bit of intense and bloody. The Battle of New Everett would easily prove to be one for the history books. The Monts knew how to fight in their home, but the invasion force fought tooth and nail and marched through everything to get to the royal palace. The Ahgilan militia fired everywhere to clear the way for the force to gain ground, as the Mountain Guard fired upon them from everywhere: in homes, alleys, or even from openings in the ground.

The crew of the Ivory Raptor fought just as fiercely. Captain Jaxon didn't live as long as he did fighting the Monts to be cannon fodder. He can easily beat the Monty goons, but then a cannon from the rooftops takes aim directly at him. Before he can comprehend what had transpired, the cannon opened fire and he was pushed to the ground. He seemed to be alright, but as he got himself up, he noticed someone took the fall. It was Boman Farceur, he had taken the full force of the blast and it looked serious.

Boman grasped the Captain's hand and tried to speak, but could barely mutter a word as his torso was mashed to oblivion. He layed down cold and dead on the pavement. Jaxon couldn't take the time to mourn his friend, as it was do-or-die on the battlefield. He had to push forward and win, for Boman. But he knew that the rotten king would pay for what his men did to his friend.

The invasion force takes a savage beating from the impeding Mountain Guard forces, but they make it to the hill road and march their way up to the royal palace. They blast down the doors and head for the throne room. It was all happening so fast. They were about to confront the king of the Montibian Empire, the man that had caused so much pain and suffering in Aquanor for decades. It was almost too good to be true. After fighting off more Mountain Guardsmen in the royal palace, the invasion force busts in to the throne room.

As the doors flung open, they took in every sight at that climatic moment. There he was. The Mountain King himself. Just sitting on the throne unfazed and unyielding. All he did was cling to an enormous claymore and stare daggers at the invaders before him. Captain Jaxon walked forward and told the king to surrender. The Mountain King looks upon the men and congratulates them for breaking headfirst into the beating heart of the empire. He laments all the men that have died for the Mountain Gods and their king, but their sacrifices were in vain.

Captain Jaxon ordered the king to surrender. The Mountain King also laments all those that died during the Great Conquest. It wasn't a desire of dominance or power that he wanted to invade Ahgila or Khoraso, he just needed to save his people from destruction. Captain Jaxon demanded the king surrender. The Mountain King asks if they saw the carnage of all those

settlements as they traveled upriver. He explains that it was all due to a harsh series of earthquakes and landslides that have plagued the kingdom since he was born, and he knew the land was actively killing his people. He had to do something to save them.

Captain Jaxon screamed at the Mountain King to surrender. The Mountain King had heard about the crew of the Ivory Raptor, and was surprised that a bunch of thieving pirates would leave such a mark on the world. They brought down the City of Lies, brought together the feuding Mezuos, fought countless of the Monty Navy, and even stormed the heart of the Montibian Empire. Quite the valiant effort for a bunch of bilge rats.

Captain Jaxon walked forward and held a pistol to the king's head. He commanded him to surrender or else he would fire. The Mountain King admitted he could do no further to stall the inevitable, and so he conceded. He tells the force that he concedes to the truth of the matter, and that putting it off would do no good. He admits:

“I confess. It is time for all of you to die.”

At that moment, an unseen foe crashes through the windows and from every entryway of the throne room. These weren't of the Mountain Guard, they were different. They were elite soldiers, weaving their way around all fire and cutlass easily killing or subduing all of the enemies in the room. They were known as the Ridge Corp. And the force had walked headfirst into their trap.

Back at the city, exponential numbers of Mountain Guardsmen emerged from the homes along the streets and captured every part of path the invasion force had secured. Everything they had just fought for was undone in a matter of minutes. The crew of the Ivory Raptor and the remaining forces in the room were brought to their knees. The Mountain King finally stood up. He was enormous. The king had dwarfed every single person in the room by simply getting out of his chair. His presence was impossible to ignore.

The titan would then pick up the claymore he was grasping. Only a man of his size could wield a weapon as heavy as that. He informs that everything the crew had done was all in vain. It was planned from the very beginning, all in an effort to bring the king's enemies before him. It was impossible. All those journeys, all that struggle, every part of the invasion was a set-up?! There was only one person who could have made that plausible...

Then who would emerge but Boman Farceur, who had miraculously survived the cannon fire from back at the battle. Captain Jaxon was appalled and livid. He trusted him. Aidan was right to question his secret pen pal. He was conspiring behind their backs, all under the guise of a special someone that never existed. But that wasn't the only part. Boman's "wife" wasn't the only fabricated persona. Boman himself lied about who he was.

It can't be. It couldn't have been. No amount of logical thinking or memory could possibly conceive this truth. But it all made sense at that heart-stopping moment. It was the

Deceiver. The head honcho of the City of Lies had finally exacted his revenge. He had risked his entire entertainment empire and being in the presence of his enemies for over a year all to bring them here. It was all in a deal for the Mountain King to reclaim Las Tormentas and put the Deceiver in charge once more. And now that he knows of the significance of that tablet he had in his house, he'll earn a bit more when he takes Jaxon's ship and dream as well.

The Mountain King at that moment declared that the enemies of the Montibian Empire be executed for their crimes. As he passes the sentence, he shall make the blood spill. He sees death as a punishment of mercy, and that those that receive it first do not endure the pain of watching those they care about die before them. On that logic, he demands that the boy, Arata Tanaka, be brought forth.

Captain Jaxon struggled to break free of the guardsmen's hold on him. He could not let Arata die. He begged him not to do it. He pleaded. He could not have someone else pay for his fatal mistake again. Arata was at the mercy of the imposing Mountain King as he picked up his claymore. He didn't want to die. He looked back at his idol, but even he was helpless at that moment. The claymore swung down. It slashed through Arata like paper. Arata Tanaka was slain.

Captain Jaxon lost it all. He screamed at the king, swearing that he would die for what he just did. Every part of the crew was in shock. Benjamin heard the stories of the Monts and what they did to people like Jaxon and Aidan, but he never knew their very leader could do something so evil. Aidan's rage towards the Monts was unfazed as they had just murdered his friend before his eyes. It was seeing his father hang all over again. Natasha was destroyed by it. She was close to Arata as a sibling she never had, and he was cut open before her. Even the stoic Dante couldn't hide his terror to what had just happened.

Before the Mountain King could bring forth another victim, a soldier of the Ahgilan army broke free of his hold down and lit a bomb. He threw it on the ground as everyone jumped back. The explosion knocked back everyone in the room, but the Deceiver and the Mountain King just watched unfazed. Everyone of the invasion force knew that this was their chance to escape. Captain Jaxon had led the crowd blindly to an exit behind the throne, and they ran with no stop or shortage of speed. They ran for their very lives.

The Mountain King had wagered they would pull a risky maneuver like this, but doubts they'll get far from the heart of his palace. The Deceiver asks that in case the crew does escape if he'd be allowed a crew of soldiers and the Ivory Raptor to track them down. The Mountain King accepts the terms but purely out of necessity. Their alliance is that of convenience and nothing more, as otherwise the king would jail someone as shady and underhanded as the Deceiver.

The crew escape from the northern entrance of the palace, as looking back did no favors. Captain Jaxon was torn from his ship, but knew there was no chance of getting it back now. The crew of the Ivory Raptor and the soldiers that were left were forced to look north for their escape, but it was about as merciful as the capital city. They'd have to scale the Peak of Kings.

CHAPTER 28: BROKEN

Without a ship, supplies, or even a destination, the crew of the Ivory Raptor's chances of survival are nearly none. They have to somehow summit the tallest mountain in the world with no preparation whatsoever all to escape the entirety of the Montibian Empire hot on their trail. They just had to press on. No matter what. For all those that died at New Everett, for all those that died from the Great Conquest, for Arata, they just had to keep moving forward.

Captain Jaxon was unfazed by the harsh conditions of the Peak of Kings. He was broken. He had let Arata die. He broke the promise he made to his father. He had failed the entirety of Aquanor. Now that the Monts were attacked by a collaborative effort all those that contributed to the invasion would soon endure the savage vengeance of the Montibian Empire. Everything counted on the invasion to succeed, and now having endured the harshest failure of all they had nothing.

The rest of the crew were struggling to survive. Benjamin had concern for his captain, but with him completely broken he was the one who had to lead. Aidan was driven by pure rage: the Monts had murdered his father, his people, countless others across the world, and now his friend. Not to mention the only Mont he ever trusted stabbed him in the back. Despite him probably not even being a Mont, there still was little case to quell Aidan's anger. Natasha was heartbroken, as she was close to Arata and never felt a true sting from the Monts like Jaxon or Aidan. Dante stood in silence as usual, but he too could barely hold his grief. He lost his cause, his leader, his country, and his friend.

The Peak of Kings is one of the harshest places in the entirety of Aquanor. Temperatures that can freeze blood, slopes of death-defying angles, ice that can give way, and air that gets more and more thin the further the crew climbs are just the many savage characteristics of the mountain. The crew of the Raptor were barely making it through, and the men that had survived through the battle with the crew were starting to drop dead. There was no doubt that this would be the crew of the Ivory Raptor's darkest hour.

As they made camp one night, Benjamin noticed the captain wouldn't sleep. He would just stand out in the cold, looking down upon New Everett. He couldn't comprehend the thoughts that the captain had shouting in his head. He said no words; he only stared daggers upon the capital of the Monts. He tried to get the captain to rest, but he wouldn't have it. Benjamin wondered if the man that is leading them through the mountainous trek was the same man that led them into New Everett.

The Peak only increased its savage conditions as the crew made their way further up. The captain still had not faltered, as they wagered that he's after the shard that rests upon the summit. They had almost completely forgotten about the Life Spring quest. But with the Raptor in the hands of the enemy as well as the other two shards, who knows if it is still possible. Perhaps it wasn't the shard at all, perhaps it was a drive to show strength as the captain, or perhaps it was a primal urge for survival. Or maybe it was just pure hatred: hatred against the Mountain King, against the Deceiver, against the whole Montibian Empire. Perhaps scaling the Peak of Kings without faltering was a way to prove how pathetic their mountain culture really is. The crew can only ponder what had driven the captain through the icy slopes.

It came to the point where the crew could not go any further. The air was too difficult to breathe in, and the temperatures were so low they were forced to halt. And yet the captain persisted. He marched slowly up to the summit. When he reached the peak, he approached the ancient altar that lay there and pried the shard from it with his frostbitten hands. As the crew remained, they witnessed their captain descend from the summit with the shard in hand, driven purely from all that had transpired. He truly was a legend.

The crew would descend to the less harsh valleys of the Montibian range and head north. Despite being alone on the mountain, now that they are at ground level, they are in danger of being pursued by the Monts. A few days into the trek Benjamin gave the strange order for everyone to scoop up as much snow as possible. It was a strange order. They're already limping from battle and voyage, and now he wants them to scoop up a bunch of snow? Benjamin looked to the captain, despite everything they still trusted each other with their lives. The captain repeated Benjamin's order.

Only several days later would the significance of Benjamin's command be clear. The mountain range of the Montibian Empire was not the last trial the crew would have to endure. Before them was the vast Reaper's Waste, an unforgiving desert that took up the northern half of the continental empire. The snow they had collected would be their only source of hydration in the coming days. And after the harsh mountains, now they must journey through the blistering sandy waste.

CHAPTER 29: THE BARREN WASTE

These cruel lands were not finished with the crew. North of the vast Montibian mountains was the Reaper's Waste, a desolate wasteland where life is near impossible to sustain. The desert has claimed many over millennia with its blistering heat, savage serpentine predators, and barren lands without an ounce of water. As someone who closely studied geography as a scholar, Benjamin knew there was only one place in this godforsaken waste that can give them a sliver of a chance: Angel's Oasis.

The snow they had collected in whatever containers they could carry wouldn't last them forever. They had to find the Oasis with all conceivable haste or join the immeasurable fossils that are scattered across the dunes. The majority of the crew could tolerate the dry heat as they all became used to scorching environments growing up, except for Natasha. She might have been in her element back at the mountains, but this is a different beast altogether. She struggled to stay conscious in the unforgiving sun.

Though the most out of element arguably was Captain Jaxon. He was a man of the sea, a buccaneer who understood the ins and outs of Aquanor by taming the tides. What good could he possibly do in a desert? The clever captain could also scamper from any escapade his foes threw at him, but how could he escape from this? The crew is trapped in the middle of a domain of death, and even if they somehow left the most powerful country in the world would hunt them like dogs. What escape is there?

The few men that had survived with the crew were depleting fast. They turned on each other for rations of the snow they carried, and resorted to violence by being maddened by the heat. Only the truly determined of mind could conquer the desert. Benjamin's knowledge of biology also informs the other reason they need to stay in motion: Whitebacks. In the very short list of life native to the Reaper's Waste is the apex predator known as the Spotted Whiteback. This python was massive, and retained that size by eating anything that breathes including humans. To other animals a group of humans is a threat, but to a Whiteback it was the best meal he would have in months.

Night falls and Natasha can rest easy back in the freezing cold. But it was hardly a time for leisure. Rogue Whitebacks tend to track their prey beneath the dunes during the day, and actively hunt them during the night. Someone would have to stay up and keep a lookout as the beasts pose a threat during the dark hours. Captain Jaxon took that role, as he had little to no sleep during every bit of strife they hiked through. Benjamin held concern for his friend and decided to talk to him during his lookout.

Jaxon remained silent. There was too much racing through his mind. He would just stare into the dark wasteland and occasionally stare at the shard he acquired at the Peak of Kings. He expresses his desire to dump the shard in the desert and leave it behind. With the two shards and his ship in the hands of the Monts, what's the point of pursuing the Life Spring anymore? Plus, the man that had failed Arata and failed Aquanor doesn't deserve to make such a historical achievement. The physical desert was harsh, but even harsher was the barren waste Jaxon had emotionally struggled with since New Everett.

Benjamin pleaded that the captain keep the shard. He urges his friend to not submit to despair, but there's little encouragement he can give. He looks to the crew as they rest, and suggests that as long as they live, he isn't failing as a captain. It does hardly anything to Jaxon, as he just resumes looking out in the dark in silence.

A few hours in the night, and the resting crew were frightened awake by a blood curdling scream. An Ahgilan soldier that had trekked with the crew was being constricted by a slender, spotted figure and dragged into the darkness. It was horrifying. The crew were now awake and on guard, as it seems the Whitebacks have begun their hunt.

The crew forms a defensive circle of swords and bayonets. The Whitebacks were out there waiting to pick off the crew one by one like flies. It was like something out of a nightmare. A long agonizing silence and another Whiteback lunges at the crew. They jab the monster with every bit of weaponry they have, but the snake's tail weaves to grab Dante by the leg and drag him on the ground. Captain Jaxon immediately jumps out of the circle and lunges at the python with full force.

He has no hesitation as he fights the beast tooth and nail. He impales it rapidly with his sword and dagger, and the snake seeks to crush the captain under his weight. The fight is too vicious for the python to retain his grip on Dante, and therefore lets go of his leg. The battle ends when the captain disembowels the serpent and removes his head with his sword. He pikes the

snakes head onto his sword and holds it up towards the darkness. It was savagery that was inhuman, but it was a motivated effort to protect the crew.

Although disturbing, the captain kept the piked head on their trek. As horrid as it was, Benjamin wagered it was a good method of keeping the Whitebacks at bay. Man and beast may never be able to communicate but no language is more universal than death. Although the Whitebacks were kept away, the conditions of the desert were still around. The snow they used for dehydration has completely depleted, and the crew only has a matter of days to find Angel's Oasis or be claimed by the desert. If they could keep their sanity before then.

They day became worse. There were countless days in their travel, with rations depleted, unable to go much further. Natasha could barely walk with heatstroke threatening to overtake her and the rest of the crew could not last much longer against the savage heat. That's when they noticed something. The further they went on; some shrews would pop from the sand and all scurry in a certain direction. It was weird. But Benjamin observed this, and told everyone to follow the direction the shrews were heading in. Another confusing order, but Jaxon repeated the command as his resourcefulness saved them before.

The tiny rodents proved to be the crew's salvation. As they looked over the dune, they found a luscious spring with trees and vegetation orbiting a lake. This was no mirage. The shrews had led them to the Angel's Oasis. The crew almost believed they died and this was a sort of paradise they had arrived at in the afterlife. The water of the Oasis was the most fulfilling thing they have ever partaken in, and the broken spirits of the crew finally started to heal. Captain Jaxon was indebted to Benjamin for solving the mystery of the inescapable desert as despite their opposing personalities they were like family. Now with the crew hydrated and sound of mind they can follow the river to the city of Mahledun.

CHAPTER 30: OASIS AT MAHLEDUN

The final challenge of the crew was to escape the continental empire. Once they got to the city of Mahledun, they would find a ship and sail as far west as possible to escape the wrath of the Monts. Captain Jaxon wagered that considering the time of their travels somewhere remote in the Mezuo Isles would be suitable. They have allies over there as well, so once they reach it, they can lay out a plan for the next course of action. At least the worst of it was over, or so the crew thought.

They arrive in Mahledun and overlook the city from a sand dune next to the river. The view was immense, and they could even spot the sea. However, in the shore of Mahledun they could also spot a peculiar white galleon that stuck out of the ocean blue like a sore thumb. The Ivory Raptor! Captain Jaxon isn't too ecstatic about seeing his old ship again as that means the Monts are here looking for them. Once they entered the city the crew would have to keep a low profile.

They go to town square looking for anything to trade. A decorative taxidermist took the head Jaxon had for some decent coin which could buy them some food and rest. Getting a ticket

out of the oasis city has yet to be determined. Their down time in town square would soon turn ugly.

The Ridge Corp, the elite force that ambushed the crew back at New Everett, identifies the crew and begins to attack. The ensuing chaos was brutal, as Captain Jaxon has fought off Monts before but is an even match with the elite training of these soldiers. They are outnumbered and outmatched, and the crew is driven into a corner. That's when a hooded figure throws a bomb into the group of soldiers and throws them off their balance. In the confusion, the hooded figure leads the crew further in the city helping them disappear.

They settle down at a local inn where they are able to keep a low profile. Captain Jaxon sees that his troupe is down to just the original crew, plus a Tas Da warrior and ironically a private in the Ahgilan militia. It seems the captain is their CO now. They had to deliberate, with the Ridge Corp combing the city for them it has made their already difficult task extremely harder. The hooded figure explains that the Corp has been in the city for a good week looking for them, and they have some kind of weird bounty hunter in charge of their effort. Aidan asks the question everyone has been wondering after the explanation: just who is this hooded figure?

It was William Gardien! The crew aren't able to recognize him *at first* but he explains that he's a fugitive of the Montibian Empire and that he deliberated the oasis city was a perfect place to lay low. Now he shares his intentions to join the crew, as he wants to fight back against the Monts in a significant way. The crew is welcoming of his helpful nature, at least until Captain Jaxon puts two and two together. He takes a look at William, and remembers him as the Mont navy man that raised the alarm back at the crew's first outing as pirates.

The moment Captain Jaxon recognized him his rage skyrocketed. He drew his sword and lunged to kill William, with Benjamin and Dante trying to hold him back. He was livid. William had no intention of retaliation, and urged the captain that he was a friend and that he was on their side. The captain only had this as response:

“You think I would let you sail under my colors after the sins your kind has committed on me? After taking my home? After massacring my crew? After your king slashed Arata, a *boy*, through the heart?! After everything you've done, now you want me to call a Mont bastard like you a friend?!”

William had nothing to say. He knew nothing Jaxon described was any of his doing. But after remembering the day he deserted the Monts and the effects the Great Conquest had on places like the Mire and Boling City he knew the captain was justified in rejecting him. Especially after enduring such harsh betrayal at New Everett, there was no conceivable way Captain Jaxon would ever trust a Mont.

He looked to the others, but for their own reasons they all couldn't trust William either. Aidan's father was slaughtered by the Monts. Dante's home was taken from him by the Monts.

Natasha's friend who was like the brother she never had was cut down by the king of the Monts. They all shared the captain's denial of letting him join.

Then there was Benjamin. He had also experienced great betrayal at New Everett and had detested the evil things the Monts have done, but as a scholar who studied writings from all over Aquanor he had a sense of empathy the other crew members did not. He and the warrior who survived with them had no personal hatred towards the Monts that would influence their thoughts.

The two men of Tas Da looked to each other and knew that William might be their only way out of here. They had to convince the captain to take his guidance, but how would that be possible? Benjamin remembered back when the Deceiver, disguised as Boman Farceur, almost blew his cover with the messenger albatross incident. Maybe if they kept William as a prisoner, they could use his help to escape Mahledun and the Monts that are currently hunting them.

Benjamin and the warrior caught up to William in the streets and asked him to be their prisoner. William was baffled at the bizarre question. Benjamin explained that there is no way the captain can trust him at the moment, but if he were a prisoner maybe he can assist the crew in escaping the city. William was impressed by Benjamin's thinking, and was willing to go through with the plan. Perhaps the captain can trust a Mont bastard if he's clapped in irons?

Captain Jaxon is skeptical to the idea of lugging around a Mont prisoner. Benjamin argues that it's their only chance out, plus since he's a fugitive he can be used as a bargaining tool. William didn't hear that part during their deliberation. Captain Jaxon takes a long moment to think about it. He approaches William, who is tied, and says that any step out of line, misleading, or even any notion of treachery will result in his death. That seems to be the captain's way of accepting the plan.

Now the crew has to figure out a way to get out of the city without being detected by the Ridge Corp. William explains that standard Monty Navy procedure means that more than one ship has to be docked at a major port at a time. In other words, they may not be able to take back the Raptor but they can commandeer one of the smaller Monty frigates stationed at Mahledun. They'll have to make it to the harbor, and strike while the Monty soldiers are resting.

Evening approaches, and the crew make their way to the harbor of Mahledun and target a Monty frigate. The ship is smaller compared to the Raptor, with the mast being much closer to the upper deck, the below deck levels being much smaller, and so on. The Monty crew is lounging about, drunkenly chatting about women and military quarrels. That's when the crew ambushes them and throws them overboard. It was almost too easy.

Suddenly, a platoon of Ridge Corp personnel line the harbor dock and open fire on the crew. After the initial shots, the Deceiver steps forth from the line. He commends the crew for somehow surviving both the Montibian mountains *and* the Reaper's Waste, as likelihoods of survival for both are slim. The Ridge Corp board the ship and the Deceiver tells the crew if they surrender perhaps the Mountain King will offer them clemency. He goes on to laugh and says "Or perhaps he'll just gut you like that Mezuo brat! I know I would!"

William gives a nod to the rest of the crew, and they all attack the Ridge Corp soldiers. Fighting more ferociously than at the marketplace, they slice, shoot, and throw overboard the Ridge Corp soldiers. The Deceiver goes for Captain Jaxon, who uses the same tricks and unpredictability he did in their last fight at Las Tormentas. The cunning magician pins the captain behind the wheel. He rambles about his hatred for the captain in taking away his city and having wasted all that time serving him in disguise. But mid-monologue, Captain Jaxon makes the pirate play and gives the helm a good spin, which drives the mast directly at the Deceiver and throws him overboard.

The Captain shouts at the crew to make sail with all haste. They turn sail towards the sea and escape before the Deceiver and his goons can retaliate. Captain Jaxon, having gotten the frigate to a safe spot approaches William. He recognizes his skill in fighting the Ridge Corp and helping them escape Mahledun. But that didn't change his position. He had Aidan and Natasha put him in the brig. He trusts William enough to have him on the same vessel, but nothing more.

Back at New Everett, the Mountain King is contemplating the events of the invasion. During a military meeting with his royal council, one of the members commends the king's heroism and valor against the invaders, and that the ambush of the enemies in his throne room was a stroke of genius. The king takes offense to that, and exclaims that the invasion set-up was a plan that should not be celebrated. He had to sacrifice good men, a wall sacred to the empire, the risk of losing the capital, and on top of everything he gutted a boy in his throne room which the king has come to regret. He leaves the meeting, and goes to a balcony to overlook the city that had endured battle not too long ago.

CHAPTER 31: PURSUIT

The following weeks for the crew aboard their new vessel was a struggle. They were relentlessly pursued by the Deceiver and other Monty forces. What's worse is that ever since the Battle of New Everett the Monts struck back in parts of Ahgila and occupied many of their ports. The crew relied on the ports of Ahgila for their long journey to the Mezuo Isles, so the Monts owning them worked to the detriment of the crew.

What's worse is that they're being hunted like dogs by *their own ship*. The Ivory Raptor was dependable and strong, as well as serving the purpose of fighting the Monts with a fast yet powerful vessel. Now one of the greatest ships to ever sail the sea is captained by a maniacal madman and used to chase them to the ends of Aquanor. It was humiliating. They could always look to the white as snow galleon as a home but now it's their greatest threat.

Captain Jaxon ordered immediate retreats every time the ship came into view. The crew questioned this, but Jaxon would rather die than attack his own ship. Plus, if he loses the Raptor he loses the other two shards. He needs to get the Raptor back. But at this point it's damn near impossible. It's captained by a magical mastermind and crewed by the elite forces of the Montibian army. There's no way they can successfully take it back right now.

The only thing the crew can do is run. Run to the edge of Aquanor. Run like the forces of nature are chasing them and disappear in the Mezuo Isles. It is their only course of action. They

set sail for the city of the Great Sea Wall: Dahaidi. This metropolis is the capital of Chaoyuen, the biggest isle in the Mezuo Isles, and the crew hopes that their mutual allies can assist them there. Ahgila is falling to the Monts for its participation in the attack on the empire, as is Lidanya Moor. They can only hope that the distant Mezuo Isles can be their refuge. First, they'll have to make it there in one piece without the Raptor chasing them like a shark.

William still remains in the brig, as the captain can trust him as far as he can throw them. But occasionally, the captain will question him on Monty naval tactics and strategies. He seems to throw little slivers of trust, but only every so often. The crew not heavily affected by what happened to Arata seem to have warmed up to him, as Benjamin, the Tas Da mutual, and the Ahgilan militiaman usually come down for conversation. They hope Captain Jaxon can warm up to William, eventually.

Eventually, they notice the Raptor is no longer on their trail. The crew takes this as a good sign; that the Deceiver has either lost them or simply given up. But Captain Jaxon is no fool. The Deceiver is planning something, and as sure as the world turns, they will see him again. They make it to Chaoyuen after countless days of endless sea travel. But when the iconic Great Sea Wall comes into view, a horrifying revelation is made.

The capital of Dahaidi has fallen to the Montibian Empire. The crew is immediately informed of this as several Monty galleons come into view and the Insignia of the Mountain Empire flies over the gargantuan wall. It's all lost! The greatest power in the Mezuo Isles have fallen, which doesn't bode well for Kinoko or Hanel Su either. It seems even the Mezuo Isles united couldn't fend off the empire. Captain Jaxon is at a loss. He truly has no idea what to do.

He goes below deck into the brig. He looks to William. He asks for anything they can do in light of this, as with Chaoyuen occupied there isn't anywhere else to go. William looks to the captain. He knows the man is asking from the heart and is in desperate need of guidance. Jaxon may despise him, but he needs to help him. Perhaps it would get him out of the brig too?

Captain Jaxon assembles the crew below deck and William elaborates on what their dealing with. Luckily, their obtainment of a Monty frigate might come into use here, as they won't suspect a ship of their own. There's bound to be people in the city against the Monts, so the crew simply needs to find them. William pauses. The crew can guess there is a peripheral asterisk coming up. William explains that the Monts don't invade places for the heck of it, they do it for a purpose. With Chaoyuen, it's their technology and luscious green lands. Most likely, they're going to either relocate the locals or...get rid of them. Either way, their homes will be empty for the incoming waves of Monty migrants.

So, in order to find allies in the city, they'll need to find out where the Monts took them. If they can get the frigate to the harbor, they can send a group of crewmates to find the locals and therefore anyone that can help the crew. William volunteers to go, as he is of Mont descent and won't look conspicuous. Captain Jaxon is reluctant towards that idea, and agrees only if Aidan and Dante go with him. Aidan swears he'll keep a close eye on the dirty Mont. Captain Jaxon and the rest will stay with the ship, as knowing their luck they'll need to prepare for a possible getaway.

William, Aidan, and Dante enter the city and look around. The ornamental town is a sight to behold, but the streets are barren aside from the patrolling Mountain Guardsmen. They're getting nowhere with their search before a hooded man pulls them into an alleyway. He pulled them aside due to Dante not looking like a Mont, and holding a knife to Aidan and William's throats he thinks they're part of the Guard hauling him away. They explain they're not with them, but ask where all the locals disappeared to.

The man leads them to a sewer refuge where huddles of Chaoyuen residents are gathered. It was a whole labyrinth of refugees. The man explained that these were the locals that got away, rather than the rest who didn't make it. William knows what he's talking about. He didn't know why he'd even think the Monts would spare the locals, as he knows what they did back at the Ahgilan village. Aidan asks if they can speak to a leading figure of sorts, and the hooded man takes them further in.

Back on the frigate, Captain Jaxon is looking at the Sea Wall on deck, sitting down and drinking rum. Benjamin approaches the captain and strikes up conversation. He's far more interactive since the desert and has slowly gotten his personality back after everything that has happened. But the wounds are still there, and they become the most apparent when it comes to William. Benjamin tries to explain to him that William isn't like other Monts, with the captain retorting he's heard that one before. Benjamin says despite what the Deceiver did to him that William can actually be trusted, and he can tell that he's here to fight for good rather than for some other ulterior motive. Captain Jaxon goes back to gazing out in silence.

William and the gang meet the leader of the underground Chaoyuen, who was a former general for the emperor of Dahaidi. He elaborated that he is here on behalf of the major figureheads of the Mezuos Isles to look after the people of Dahaidi as the Monts hunt them. William asks where the leaders are, to which the general scoffs at telling a Mont something like that. Dante said that they're with Captain Jaxon. The general's mood changes. He notes the captain is well respected among the Mezuos for what he did back at Kinoko. He tells them that the leaders of the Mezuos Isles have all gathered at Hanel Su where they are hiding from the Monts. The crew must now sail for Hanel Su, where they can plan the next course of action there.

The sound of gunfire grabs the attention of everyone present. They hear screams and guns coming from the upper levels of the sewer. The Monts found them. The general urges them to escape, as they'll protect the citizens. William, Aidan, and Dante all hightail it back to the frigate while fighting their way through the ambushing Mountain Guardsmen.

The crew escape on the Monty frigate, which loses the larger Monty galleons due to its smaller size and the captain's cunning. William tells the captain of the leaders at Hanel Su, which begets the captain into turning sail there. The captain scowls at William, saying that this doesn't change his position in the brig. William understands and returns below deck. The crew set sail for the sky-piercing forests of Hanel Su.

CHAPTER 32: THE IVORY RAPTOR

When the crew arrives in the forested isle of Hanel Su, they gaze in awe of the mighty forests the island is known for. The Hanel Evergreen is the largest living thing on the planet, with the gargantuan tree being well over two hundred meters tall. The cities are built within the forest canopy, making Hanel Su boast the greatest architectural feats on Aquanor. It was clear why the forest cities were so secure, as Hanel Su is now the only nation in the world safe from the Monts.

The crew arrived at the forest floor and were pulleyed up to the capital city via elevator. The buildings were built into the great Evergreens, with the sturdier trees hosting the larger buildings and the lesser ones hosting single family houses. The leaders of the Mezuo Isles were likely gathered at the large monastery built into the largest tree. Captain Jaxon was uneasy. Among those leaders would most likely be Arata's father. He'll have to tell him what happened to his son.

The leaders all looked at the crew with the upmost seriousness as they entered the chamber. The Hanel Su chairman stood up and told the crew that they're being sought out. The crew are complexed by that statement. The chairman explains that messenger albatrosses were sent all over with the same message for the captain of the Ivory Raptor. Captain Jaxon asks for the letter, and the contents are disturbing.

It's from the Deceiver. The letter explains that he is at the lake capital of Rehugio in Khoraso, and that he must come out of hiding and surrender to him and Emperor Covarde, and he must bring the shard he got at the Peak of Kings. If he does not comply, the Deceiver will begin a killing spree of captive Khorasans until Captain Jaxon arrives. The captain was appalled. Dante wasn't as shocked; their cruel emperor cares not for the well-being of his people as long as the Monts keep him in power.

Captain Jaxon had to do something. Many innocents will die by him if he's a no-show. However, this could present an opportunity. William tells Jaxon that according to the letter they're only expecting *him*. By this information they don't know that the likes of William are a part of his crew. In other words, if they play their cards right, they can hoodwink the Deceiver at his own game and get the Raptor back. Captain Jaxon liked his thinking, but the plan requires putting a lot of trust in William. But what choice did he have?

Before they depart for Khoraso, Captain Jaxon has to do one more thing. He approaches Mr. Tanaka to tell him the news of his son. It was an interaction of few words. He figured his son's absence meant the worst. It only took the captain confirming it to make it set in. All the captain can say is that he swears on what little honor he has left that the Mountain King will pay. But Mr. Tanaka doubts the claim, as the last promise he made was broken. He is told to leave.

It was in no way an easy conversation. But the captain had to do it. The crew departs Hanel Su, and departs east for Khoraso. Now it was time to plan. Khorasan ships tended to be smaller and less powerful than galleon-class ships like the Raptor. Their dinky frigate will do nothing, but if they can commandeer the Raptor they have a chance. So that's the goal: get the Raptor back at any cost. If Captain Jaxon turned himself in with the crew members the Monts know of, i.e. Aidan, Natasha, and Dante, they can pose a front of surrender to the emperor and

the Deceiver while William leads the rest in taking the Raptor back. If they succeed, they can unleash a barrage of gunfire at the capital causing chaos, allowing the captive Khorasans escape as well as the crew. With a successful escape, they have the Ivory Raptor and finally all three shards of the map to the Life Spring.

A couple of weeks of travel later and the crew are en route upriver to the lake capital. The last time they were here they were viciously ambushed. They drop William and the gang off before they approach the capital. The rest of the crew wishes them luck, as they have relatively warmed up to him, but Captain Jaxon can only give him a look. William departs, and Captain Jaxon, Aidan, Natasha, and Dante all sail forth to “surrender” to the Deceiver.

Captain Jaxon and his crew arrive at Rehugio. The royal guard brings them to the emperor’s monastery, where Emperor Covarde and the Deceiver awaits them along a crowd of chained Khorasans. The Deceiver welcomes the crew and informs them that they only had to kill 12 of them before they arrived. This is just another attempt of the Deceiver to get a rise out of the captain, as he ensures every word stings.

Meanwhile, William and his crew take a dinghy to Rehugio harbor. The majority of the Ridge Corp are serving as security to the emperor, leaving the Raptor undermanned. The soldiers stationed there are rather relaxed, and while they are expertly trained in comparison to a former Mountain Guardsman, a Tas Da warrior, and an Ahgilan Militiaman, William’s crew have surprise on their side this time. They engage the soldiers, who are beaten and thrown into the brig. William brings the Raptor about towards the part of the lake capital facing the palace.

The cherry on top of this surprise attack is that they expect the Raptor to be in their control. So, when the Raptor unleashes hell on the monastery plaza, it will be completely unexpected. As the emperor is reading the demands of the surrender, the sound of cannon fire silences them and forces them to take cover. The crew now goes for the attack. They take out the guards on the Khorasan prisoners, and once freed the Khorasans cause all chaos on the plaza. With the guards occupied with the escaping prisoners, Captain Jaxon goes for the Deceiver. This fight will be their last.

The Deceiver is far less imposing. Every time he ever came into conflict with the captain, he was always in control. At the gladiator arena, at the Deceiver’s mansion, and even at Mahledun, he had surprise and preparation with him. But this was different. The attack on Rehugio was out of nowhere, and so too was the fight with Captain Jaxon. He tries desperately to confound his foe, but Jaxon stands firm and gets slashes in with his cutlass. The Deceiver almost ends him with the second sleeve pistol trick he used back at Nightfall Island, but before he can Captain Jaxon fires first in a singular shot he saved for that moment. The Deceiver was slain.

It was time for the crew to leave, but Dante urged to stay behind. He had personal matters to attend to. He wishes his mates luck in finding the Life Spring, and the crewmates bode him farewell. Dante tells them that if they’ll excuse him, he has to take back his home. Dante leads the Khorasans to storm the palace. They seek out Emperor Covarde, who is cowering in his cellar. Covarde gets on his knees and proclaims surrender, begging the Khorasans to spare him as a prisoner. They weren’t having it. The typically silent Dante retorts:

“True leaders die in the face of danger. Cowards die hiding in a cellar.”

The Khorasans all unleash fire on Covarde, taking his life. The Covarde regime falls, and the capital of Rehugio belongs to the uprising Khorasans who overwhelm the royal guard.

Captain Jaxon can hardly believe it. The Ivory Raptor is back in his control. He couldn't be happier to be at her helm. He approached William, and decided that he has more than proven himself as a member of the crew. He's ready to let go of his dissonance towards him. Captain Jaxon says that William might be the only bloody Mont on the entirety of Aquanor that can earn his thanks. William could hardly believe the moment either. The captain has finally accepted him. The captain says he's still going to skewer his king, however, with William retorting “Are you kidding? I'll give you the spear to do it.”

The Mountain King is informed of the events that transpired at Khoraso. He knew entrusting the Deceiver was a mistake. It all was. Sparing the captain, setting up the invasion, it was all a gamble to gather the king's enemies that had more harmed him than helped. Now with Khoraso thrown into lawlessness, this rather miniscule bilge rat pirate was proving to be a major irritant. He brought forth one of his oldest advisors and ordered him to send a message to all navy personnel: all ships of the Monty navy must drop everything and pursue the Ivory Raptor. The advisor is baffled by the command: does he mean *every* ship? They would lose gains in Ahgila and the Mezuo Isles, and not to mention the Khoraso situation that has now arisen. The king states the Conquest can wait until these enemies of the empire are dealt with.

CHAPTER 33: THE BATTLE OF BOLING CITY

Charlotte Stewart has risen in the ranks of the Montibian armies since Williams' inauguration into the Mountain Guard. She has proven herself thrice over and elected to be a commander in the elite Ridge Corp by the Mountain King himself. She heard of William's betrayal and had mixed feelings about it. To this day, she harbored remorse and anger about everything that had transpired. But everything about William became moot when she heard about what happened at Boling City.

Communications with the island city just stopped one day. No albatrosses ever arrived from there nor came back. It was when a galleon of Monty civilians arrived that the entire empire was thrown into shock. Everyone aboard the vessel described the whole affair like a horror story, with crowds of bloodthirsty chaos agents bursting down their doors and dragging them and their families down to a dark crypt. The city is now a cesspool of anarchy and mob rule.

The Mountain King declared that a fleet of ships and a division of the Ridge Corp be sent to Boling City at once. Once they were prepared, they would have to take back the city and allow more Mont forces to help annex the island. The Ridge Corp was short-staffed however, as the king needed a division for a classified mission. Charlotte would have her work cut out for her.

The trip to Boling City felt like the longest trek in existence. All the crew aboard heard the stories. They're up against raging anarchist and Ahgilans who would see them burnt at a stake for their Monty lineage. They were terrified. But Charlotte was contemplating. This sounded like the work of her sister Margaret.

After they ran away from home, Margaret shared her plan with Charlotte. She wanted to take their father's work and destroy it. She wanted his power, and wanted to use it against the Monts. She hated them all. Charlotte was horrified by it. She despised their father as well, but she had aspirations to migrate to the Montibian Empire and start a new life. Margaret wanted revenge and slaughter. She never saw her again. Could this be the work of her sister?

One foreboding evening, and the resting crewmen were soundly awakened by bells. Enemy ships were spotted heading their way. Charlotte looked forward to the horizon. It seems the Patriot's Guild have been busy with their newly acquired resources. They had repurposed the Monty galleons at Boling City into their own fleet, which orbited the island like an encircling predator. They had anticipated their attack, and now the Monts would have to engage the Patriot's Guild in naval combat.

The ensuing battle was chaotic and brutal. The Monty navy was well trained and disciplined, but the Guild was ruthless and unleashed nonstop cannon fire. Two Monty ships were already sent to the abyss. The remaining ships would make it out beaten and exhausted. Their untrained anarchists did not prove to be superior at sea, but they didn't count on the Monts to be defeated, just damaged.

The situation was not in their favor. The Monts would make port at an island city infested with an anarchist militia. How were they supposed to take it over? Charlotte was looked to lead the assault, as the highest military commanders and strategists were slain at the naval assault. The key was capturing the inner rim. It was smaller and holds a more defensible position compared to the rest of the city. That's where the major figureheads of the Patriot's Guild are. But the harbors would need to be held for when Monty reinforcements come to secure the city.

Once they made landfall, the Monts fought tooth and nail. The waves of anarchists and armed mobs loyal to the Guild were endless. The Monty forces were going nowhere. They had to hold their position at the harbor, but at this rate getting to the inner rim was damn near impossible. Charlotte layed out an alternate approach.

The Mountain Guard, who were the more populated military division, would hold their ground at the harbor and draw the majority of the Guild's forces to them. Charlotte and the Ridge Corp would infiltrate behind enemy lines and secure the inner rim by capturing the Patriot's Guild leaders. It was a risky plan, but not much options were left for the Monts.

As the Monts fought ruthlessly against the endless crowds, Charlotte led the Ridge Corp off the harbor and into a tunnel within the city's outer walls. They would have to lay low until the inner rim, as the crowds of the outer rim of the island vastly outnumber them. Once they reach the inner rim, they fight their way to what was the governing district. It no longer serves that purpose, at it is now the home of the Patriot's Guild.

The Guild would be far more fearsome opponents. Unlike the mobs, they were organized and trained. They might be in smaller numbers, but they would prove difficult for the Ridge Corp to fight off. The battle was a blood fest, as soldiers on both sides were slaughtered. The Ridge Corp would fight with everything they have to reach the governor's mansion.

Charlotte was baffled at the sight of her home. It was a strange sight, seeing the mansion she grew up in being the center of a ruthless war. When she entered the building, she would fight through one guildmember after another to reach the main office, where Margaret awaits. It was a confrontation for the century.

Margaret was far different. She was nothing like the sister Charlotte grew up with. All they had was each other in their home environment lacking in compassion. Now even she has succumbed to cruelty. Charlotte pleaded for her to surrender peacefully, as Monts and Ahgilans alike are tearing each other to shreds in the conflict. Margaret doesn't care. The Monts deserve to have their numbers slaughtered after what they have done to Aquanor, and Charlotte was a traitor to her people for joining their ranks. She was drunk with power. There was no way she would give up her position as ruler of Boling City.

Charlotte had no choice. She had to engage her sister in battle. It was a savage and relentless duel. The two sisters fired all manner of cutlass and attacks on each other. Their battle was a heart wrenching duel to the last breath. Charlotte might have been more well trained, but her sister didn't fight fair. Charlotte couldn't handle the emotional consequences of killing the only family she ever had. It was at the end of her duel when her sister had her at the edge of a sword.

But the malicious Margaret had to worsen the wound before making the kill. She taunted her with all the horrible things she did to the Monts to get to where she was. Especially the one Mont that made it all possible: William Gardien. He was blinded by love and honor in helping overthrow her father and the Mont government, and she knew that mentioning him would hurt Charlotte the most. It was the mention of Charlotte's name that Margaret knew William had met her. She constantly referred to William as a "Mont bastard," as she knew the slur would anger her sister even more. That would lead Charlotte to knock her sister off balance mid-taunt and stab her in the throat.

It took only a moment for the weight of what she had just done to set in. She had murdered the only family she ever had or would have. It broke her. She had to gather herself up and help secure the district, but would mourn the loss of her only family.

The Ridge Corp secured the governing district, and what was left of them had captured the leaders of the Patriot's Guild. They would have to hold their position for days before the Mont reinforcements arrived. They were the longest days of their entire life. The guildmembers in the outer rim were endless as they fought to reclaim their control of the central governing district.

When the Monts finally arrived, the forces present at the city could breathe a sigh of relief. The bountiful reinforcements fought off the crowds and had them dispersed. Conflicts and

clashes would continue to ensue, but for the most part the Monts were back in control of Boling City. Charlotte would remain there to oversee the reestablishment of the government and to bring the status quo back to the island.

After several weeks there, an incoming messenger albatross would be a call of action for the Ridge Corp present there. It was a decree of the king, ordering all Mont personnel to head to a rendezvous point in anticipation of the Ivory Raptor. It was perhaps the strangest order they have ever received. The entirety of the Mont navy is to be pinned against a single pirate ship? Does the king want them dead that badly? Charlotte rallied the Ridge Corp and a division of Mountain Guardsmen and sailed forth.

CHAPTER 34: BATTLE OF THE STORM PART I

Captain Jaxon and his hearty crew of buccaneers had done the unthinkable. They survived the most treacherous places on the entirety of Aquanor, and despite having the whole world against them they had slain the Deceiver, freed Khoraso, and gotten the Ivory Raptor back from the clutches of the Monts. It was a sight that could make a grown man cry. Jaxon laid a hand on the helm and could barely hide the tears. He had his ship back. All the loss, and all the strife, it was finally coming to an end. Captain John Jonah Jaxon was back.

The crew had important matters to attend to. With all three shards in hand, the route to the Life Spring can finally be made clear. Here rests the origin of all life on Aquanor, the center of the entire ocean, and a trove so vast and so valuable that not a living soul on that vessel or their families would have to work a day in their lives ever again. Benjamin having been a scholar of geography was always the go-to for navigation and map interpretation. But even his knowledge was challenged here. He'd have to examine the tablet long and hard to figure out where the route starts.

Meanwhile, the crew could relax at open sea after endless weeks of being chased and beaten. It was a breath of fresh, salty sea air. William had finally made a circle of friends among the crew, even including the captain. After he had gotten Jaxon's ship back, William had garnered respect from the captain despite his Monty lineage. Soon it would form into a strong friendship. Ironically, the one thing they would bond over the most was making fun of Monts. William hated their culture as much as the rest of the world. His quips about "being a mountain" and mocking the superiors he had over his life was comedic gold for the crew.

One night, the crew were sharing drinks and engaging William about his life. He told them all about his abandonment, his life in the Mire, Boling City, and his false aspirations to be in the Mountain Guard. The only person he could even remember *slightly* fondly was his former training captain Charlotte Stewart. He even considering seeing her again after Boling City, but decided not to as the reunion would likely end up literally killing him. The crew was fascinated by his tale of the black sheep, calling him the "least Montibian Mont there ever was." Despite her misleadings about the true nature of the Guard, William still did miss her.

A few weeks of sea travel south, and Benjamin alerted the crew that he had finally figured out the map. He made out an ancient peninsula of Lidanya Moor that he researched back

at Borough University, and pinpointing from that point he located the start of the ancient route. The crew was impressed by his intellect, but Capt. Jaxon asked why it took him weeks to figure that out. Benjamin retorted that Jaxon clearly doesn't know what being a scholar is like.

A storm had come into horizon view, and it was massive. Most likely a typhoon, Captain Jaxon opted to turn westward and sail around it so they could continue south. The crew agreed with that notion, but it would be half an hour later that something would occur to change their minds. The Ahgilan militiaman, who took a position in the crow's nest, screamed at the crew for their attention. There was something way off from the bow that had thrown him into a panic. When Jaxon looked through his telescope, the sight was terrifying.

It was a fleet of Monty ships. A massive one. All heading straight towards their position. Captain Jaxon was unable to count how many there were. He thought there must have been hundreds. They turn eastward to avoid the fleet, but to the north and east awaited two more Monty fleets. Each as big as the last, the crew of the Ivory Raptor had found themselves surrounded by the entirety of the Montibian navy. And they were closing in fast.

It was the full, unbridled wrath of the Montibian Empire. After the attack on New Everett and Rehugio, the crew of the Ivory Raptor had evolved from a minor irritant to one of the most dangerous enemies to the Monts. On one of the leading flagships was Charlotte Stewart, who coordinated the ambush. With fleets to the north, east, and west and a raging typhoon to the south, the elusive Ivory Raptor was now trapped. When Charlotte look through a telescope on the Raptor, the sight that caught her eye was astonishing.

It was William Gardien, as a full-fledged member of the Raptor's crew. But how? The majority of the crew were Ahgilan, they would never accept a Mont among their ranks! This had not deterred her from her mission, as she ordered all ships full sail towards the Raptor to send it to the abyss once and for all.

Captain Jaxon had to think of something and fast. How could he possibly go toe to toe with the *entire* Monty navy? He couldn't. There was no way the Raptor could fight or escape from the incoming ships. Captain Jaxon would be forced to become the true pirate hero he was always enamored to be. How would the daring captain escape the wrath of the Montibian Empire. He looked south towards the typhoon.

The idea was every manner of insane. He had a reputation for mad plots like the Saint Mary and the surprise attack on Rehugio, but the idea he had come up with was the pinnacle of insanity. The crew would have to somehow comprehend the order Captain Jaxon was about to give. The Ivory Raptor may not be able to destroy all of those ships, but there is something that can.

Captain Jaxon, without an inkling of hesitation, commanded the crew to sail full canvas into the typhoon. That's it, he truly had lost it. Typhoons are the closest things to certain death in the entire sea, and the captain wants to sail headfirst into one in a desperate bid to escape the Montibian fleet. They would be up against titanic waves, apocalyptic downpour, and savage winds all while escaping from the largest fleet on Aquanor. They were being chased by a

predator into the jaws of a titan. The crew couldn't believe what he had just ordered, but considering the impending hundreds of ships all out for their heads, they wagered the storm might be nicer to them.

Charlotte and the Monts could not believe the sight. Was this among all the maddening plots that had proven the Raptor's threat time and time again? Were they seriously about to sail headfirst into a bloody typhoon?! Charlotte had suspected this as bait. The Raptor, unable to fight against the overwhelming numbers, is beckoning the fleets to give chase and ultimately be destroyed in the storm. They could easily weigh anchor and just let the typhoon do its work. But then she thought about it.

These insanely fortunate souls somehow survived both the treacherous Montibian mountain range, including its crowning coronet the Peak of Kings, as well as the scorching Reaper's Waste. Even with the world chasing them down, they came out of nowhere and liberated Khoraso all while defeating the maniacal Deceiver and getting their ship back in the process. So, was death *truly* that certain for the crew if they went into the typhoon? If they let them go, and by the powers of their ungodly luck streak make it out alive, the entire fleet would be left with bupkis and the greatest army in the world would have been humiliated by a small group of pirates. Not to mention the Mountain King's anger for failure on that part. Therefore, Charlotte swallowed her fears and in zero tolerance for the Raptor's possible escape ordered the fleet to pursue the Raptor in the storm.

The crew of the Raptor was about to face their greatest challenge yet. Behind them was a fleet of hundreds upon hundreds of Monty ships chasing them down and before them was a raging storm that could easily ensure their demise. They were in between a rock and a hard place if the rock was trying to actively smash them and the hard place was a gauntlet of fire and death. Captain Jaxon knew as well as everyone else that they surmounted impossible odds before. Putting their fear aside, they sailed headfirst into the storm.

CHAPTER 35: BATTLE OF THE STORM PART II

The typhoon was every conceivable portion of savage and relentless. The crew had conquered perilous storms before, i.e. the Mar de Trovoh, but this was far greater than anything they ever faced. The sea wasn't just agitated, it was wrathful. Waves and swells would grow to the size of ridges and winds would be unyielding in devastating the crew and the pursuing Monty ships. Captain Jaxon and his trusty crew would have to show the highest of valor and skill to survive. But it wasn't just the storm they were fighting.

Countless Monty ships all flocked into the raging storm in pursuit of the Raptor. Those less expert in the high seas were destroyed immediately. But some of the more persistent galleons would fire upon the Raptor and engage them in battle. The Raptor had to fight back, and the storm was not making it a simple feat. Benjamin had the idea of timing the cannons with the swell, and was able to get hits on pursuing Monty ships with proper timing. The typhoon became worse the further the Raptor journeyed in. Several of the Monts fleet would be lost to the storm.

Charlotte had to keep the crew together as they tailed the Raptor through the savage storm. The crew were struggling to survive against the true wrath of the seas. But Charlotte was dedicated to prevent the Raptor's escape, for her king and her country. Monty ships left and right were being claimed by the sea, but Charlotte refused to submit. She captained the crew to every whim to keep the ship alive.

The Raptor couldn't keep it up. Balancing navigation of the typhoon with firing upon the pursuing Monty ships was a position the ship could not endure any longer. Benjamin pleaded that the captain go into the eye of the storm. The Captain hesitated, as being a man of the sea, he knew of the intricacies of a typhoon, and knew that to get to the eye you would have to conquer the eye wall, which is where the storm is at its worst. But they had no choice. They sailed further into the typhoon.

Charlotte was baffled. How could this madman go *further* in?! She had no choice but to pursue, as letting the Raptor escape was not an option. The best thing she and her crew could do is follow the Raptor as closely as possible to the eye of the storm. Perhaps in the tranquil eye of the typhoon could the Monty crew recuperate and blast the Raptor to the abyss. But then it was looking upon her allied ships being destroyed in the storm did she realize what the captain was doing.

The mad genius was using the typhoon to fight the Monts. And it was working. The Raptor sails further in the storm, and the Monts unwilling to cease chase are being led to their doom. Meaning, when Charlotte engages the Raptor in the eye of the storm, the advantage of numbers will no longer be in her favor. All of the reinforcements that had sent the Raptor running in the first place would be destroyed in the typhoon.

The eye wall of the typhoon was the ocean at its worst. The swell of the sea was gargantuan, and the crew could barely keep their balance from the unrelenting gusts. Captain Jaxon clung to the helm for dear life. He'd be damned if he were to let his crew die now after all they've been through. He thought of his home. He thought of his old crew. He thought of his father and mother and all of his mates at Marauder's Bay. He thought of his loyal crew, clinging to the ship begging for salvation. He thought of Arata.

A water spout had formed in the vicinity of the Raptor. They had to make it to the eye. It was their only chance. The vortex pursued the Raptor and threatened to hurl it into the abyss, but the Raptor sailed forth to salvation. The sight was legendary. With enemies and the elements seeking to destroy the crew of the Ivory Raptor, they sailed forth into the bowels of the storm to find survival. They truly were pirates that would go down in legend.

The spout would destroy countless of the ships pursuing the Raptor. Entire galleons that got too close were hurled into the air and smashed into the tides. Thousands die chasing the Raptor into the storm. The carnage was devastating, and Charlotte had doubts of continuing her loyalty to the Mountain King if it meant leading good men into such a massacre. Through some manner of ill fate, Charlotte and her crew were the only ones who followed the Raptor into the eye alive.

The crew of the Raptor could hardly believe it. They had just conquered a typhoon! They were tired and exhausted, but Captain Jaxon encouraged them to regain movement as they looked from the stern. One Monty ship had survived the carnage. But unlike before, the numbers were not in their favor. They could engage the ship in battle.

Their munitions were low. All the cannon fire they unleashed to stow off their pursuers in the storm costed them dearly. They only had enough powder for one shot on each gun. They had to think carefully of how to proceed. Captain Jaxon had to pull off yet another amazing feat of piracy after doing the impossible. He had one idea.

The Ivory Raptor would wait until the Monts were close enough to open canvas again. They would lead the Monts in a chase around the limited area of the storm's eye. When the Monts were close enough, the Raptor would have their chance to use their shot. Captain Jaxon ordered every man to man a cannon and hold onto it for dear life and make ready to fire. He then immediately ordered the anchor be let go. When the anchor hooked, the Ivory Raptor was thrown out of its momentum and thrown in a clockwise rotation. When the Raptor's starboard side faced the pursuing Monts ship, the crew of the Raptor opened fire.

The insane maneuver worked. The Raptor's cannons made devastating work on the Monty ship's main portions. They were forced to halt. When that occurred, the Raptor would lift anchor and charge towards the Monty ship. It was time to board. The Monts were beaten and broken from the storm and the Raptor's line of fire, but they were still ready to engage in combat. Charlotte had the men prepare to fight against the Raptor's crew.

As the Raptor was board and board with the Monts, the Raptor crew and the Monts engaged in battle. All manner of pistol and cutlass were thrown at each other, as the high morale crew outfought the exhausted Monts. Captain Jaxon would stay on his ship and fight wave after wave of Mountain Guards and Ridge Corp goons. William boarded the Monty ship, as he had a confrontation that was a long time coming.

Upon the upper deck of the Mont's ship, the reunion was every bit of emotional as it was tragic. William was furious with Charlotte. She lied to him and countless others about the true nature of the Mountain Guard, and the nefarious conquest the Mountain King enacted upon the rest of the world. She had employed him to be a monster. Charlotte rebukes with William's treachery against his people. Despite the world's hatred for the Montibian Empire, and the countless Ahgilans that would see him dead, he still sides with the enemy. William proclaimed that the Ahgilans, the Khorasans, and everyone else who was affected by the Conquest had *every right* to hate the Monts. He remembered his experiences at the Mire and Boling City, it was the Monts who inspired their hatred in the first place. Charlotte laments William's betrayal, as she does the same for all the Monts that died in the storm. She asks if they truly have to destroy each other after all this tragedy? William doesn't say, as he prepares to engage his former mentor in battle.

The battle of former captain and trainee was long and relentless. Charlotte had the benefit of years serving the Mountain Guard and the Ridge Corp to give her strength and endurance, but William had learned from both friend and foe. He used the training he got from Charlotte to fight

her but also the nimbleness of his time as a hunter in the Mire, the tactics of footwork from his time as a member of the Patriot's Guild, and his insane tactics of swordsmanship from his current duty as a member of the Ivory Raptor's crew. The diversity of William's experiences ultimately made him a better fighter. After a long duel, he emerged victorious.

Charlotte was on her knees at a sword's tip. She looked up at William in silence. The rest of the Monts were either slain or put to surrender. The crew of the Ivory Raptor have once again done the inconceivable. Against all odds, they had emerged as the victors of the Battle of the Storm. They lined up the Mont crew on their deck, deliberating on their fates. They didn't have enough rations to feed themselves and prisoners for a long while, and their Mont lineage doesn't earn popularity points with any of the crewmates either.

But it all seemed so...cruel. After all that tragedy, were they truly going to gut them upon this deck, contributing to the countless lives lost to this conflict? They weren't even fighting or throwing their blades forth, they were on their knees unable to fight. William asked the captain if there was any way they could spare them. Captain Jaxon thought long and hard about William's plea. He hated the Monts with every fiber of his being, but then again, he trusted William who was a Mont. It was a paradox. The captain had nowhere to deliberate, so he trusted his friend.

He looked to the Monts. He stated loud and clear that they have two options: the deck or the brig. They must realize that the evil they have fought for no longer has any command over them. They must swear loyalties only to each other and no one else. They had to do what William had done long ago: let go of their lineage and become their own person. Some Monts opted to do this. Some were too hesitant. Charlotte sat in silence, as she opted to side with the latter half.

Charlotte and the loyalists were put in the brig. At least she didn't have to die. It would take a long time to change her from her loyalties to the evil Monts, but there was a chance for her. William took a sigh of relief. As for where to go next, Captain Jaxon decreed that they would have to remain in the storm's eye until it hit land fall. Then, they would brace it as it passes over them, then they would continue their journey once the typhoon is gone. They would have to stop at Mokry Gorad as the battle took a heavy toll, but once they were fully supplied and prepared, they could once and for all sail to the Life Spring.

At New Everett, the Mountain King receives word of what happened to the Montibian navy. The ships that sailed into the typhoon in pursuit of the Raptor never returned. That was the bulk of the empire's navy, now completely wiped out. Their gains in control over areas like Ahgila and the Mezuo Isles would soon be lost with their military might now limited. Upon delivering the news, the advisors thought the king would be furious. He would scold them for not being able to destroy a single ship of pirate scum. But upon that news, the king was completely silent. When told about the casualties, he didn't say a word. He went to his chambers, and remained there for days. After that period, the Mountain King made a declaration. It was clear that there was no one else to destroy the Montibian Empire's true enemy. And if he was to yearn for their execution, he should be the one to make it possible. The Mountain King ordered that his

ship be prepared for an expedition to the south, where he will personally oversee the death of the Ivory Raptor.

CHAPTER 36: THE MOUNTAIN KING PART I

Long ago, the heir to the Montibian Empire Prince Edric was young and frail, but lived a life of high importance and expectation. Being the only child of King Nedry Montibia, he was the next in line for the royal title of Mountain King. His father was one of compassion and mercy, but also strength and valor. The prince was inspired by his father as was the entirety of the empire. The prince could only hope to overcome his frailty and become a mountain, so whenever King Nedry's time is done he can prove himself worthy of the throne.

Edric had little social activity growing up. His only social interaction were the staff and members of the court, including one of the King's trusted advisors Jacob Allato. Allato would become a mentor outside of his father and teach the young prince all there is to know about the political spectrum. However, Allato was never privy to the art of combat and did nothing to improve on the young prince's fragile stature.

During the reign of Nedry Montibia, the Montibian Empire was riddled with the worst crises of all the empire's history. Entire settlements in the range were buried in landslides, the most steadfast of buildings and towns across the land were torn by quakes, and the farmlands of the Empire have yielded less and less, threatening the empire with famine and death. The very land of the Montibian Empire was conspiring to kill its populous.

The crises affected all aspects of the Monts, including the royal family. King Nedry jumped through hoops to keep the Empire from the threat of mass famine and death. His busy career allowed little to no time to spend with his son. Further and further did the rift grow between the prince and his father. Allato tried his best to console the prince during the trying times.

During a meeting of the royal council to the king, one of the advisors laid forth a plan that shocked the council, including the king. They suggested that the land of the Montibian Empire was becoming unfit for the citizens, and that there was only one solution: to capture the green lands of Ahgila and Khoraso for the people of the empire to migrate to. The king was outraged at the notion of this plan, as he proclaimed an insane plan like this would pin the Montibian Empire in a war against the entirety of Aquanor. He made clear that a course of action akin to this would never see the light of day.

The young prince was now in his teens, and his increasing loneliness grew worse. His life was nothing but education and high-class appearance. He was undesirable to all of the nobility of the empire, who scoffed at the idea of such a frail prince inheriting the throne. In that regard, the future king would most likely never find a queen. What is worse is the now absent relationship between father and son. They haven't had proper interaction in years, the king and prince were always separate. The prince could not even recognize his father's face.

On the 15th year of the prince's life, an opportunity to see his father again finally came. A farming town in the valleys of the Montibian range were struggling without food or crop yields,

and the king desired to lead a mercy mission to help out the subjects. Allato advised that the prince could finally see his father, but the prince was abrasive. He had no desire to spend time with him, and even if he wanted to it was during a political mission. He joined regardless, but was never ecstatic about it.

Prince Edric finally got to see his father, and the result was something unrecognizable to the prince. King Nedry was aged and worn, so much so that his complexion was tired and his locks were starting to gray. He could hardly recognize his strong, inspiring king of a father. Was this truly what the title of Mountain King has done to him during the Empire's darkest times? Is this what the title will do to him when he is Mountain King? All this time of not seeing his father, and when they could finally reunite face-to-face it was something deplorable and depressing.

As for King Nedry, he was overjoyed to finally spend time with his son. However, his duty as king overtaking his time to himself has made the king understand that his son would hold animosity toward his neglect. He tried to excuse himself by pleading of the Empire's crises, but was that all for not seeing his son's face for years? The prince didn't even want to be with his father, he just wandered into the town on his own volition, bored by the lack of response from his father.

They arrive at the worn town, and the king leads the Mountain Guard into handing out food and supplies to the villagers. The prince examined the land: the town was squeezed between two gargantuan mountains, and the streams that hydrated the settlement were drying. The quiet mission, however, would soon turn for the worst.

A quake would hit the town, and it was strong in magnitude. Buildings would crumble, but a good minute of a tremor would cease. The king was fine, as was everyone else. But the looming threat would soon make clear. The king noticed land departing from the high mountains, resulting in a landslide barreling directly towards them threatening to destroy the town. The king ordered for everyone to evacuate immediately. The king and the Mountain Guard got as many villagers out as possible, but then came to the horrifying realization that the prince was not among the crowd.

The king rushed into the town, with the landslide becoming more imminent, and discovering his son trapped under debris caused by the quake. His strength has lessened, but it was still enough to lift the prince free. The prince could barely walk, his frail body had sustained major injuries from the debris. The king would carry his son, but the landslide was gaining speed and was moments away from burying the town.

The Mountain Guard would rendezvous with the King, pleading for the Guard to carry the prince the rest of the way as his age was weakening his speed. As the Guard brought the prince to safety, the Guard hurried back to save their king. But it was too late. The king, as well as the Guardsmen who went in after him, were buried under a cataclysmic landslide. The king is dead. Prince Edric was without a father, and the Montibian Empire was now without their Mountain King.

CHAPTER 37: THE MOUNTAIN KING PART II

The death of King Nedry threw the Montibian Empire into shock. The crises of the land struck at the empire's core as it became responsible for the death of the Mountain King. Allato had to stand in as leader of the council and as a stand in for the king until Edric was officially crowned. But the prince was even worse for wear. Among his crippling loneliness, he had lost any chance of reconciling with his absent father for good. Now he must assume the throne. But, how could he? His recklessness and nonchalant nature got his father killed. Not to mention he had yet to "become a mountain."

The prince would go on to pilgrim into the Montibian range, putting off his coronation. He wanted to gain strength, train in the Montibian mines, and suffer through thick and thin. He didn't just want the title of Mountain King, he wanted to earn it. Within the mines, he suffered through hauling the heaviest metal ores known to man, thin air that could choke you from simply breathing, and training of the highest expectations set by his boss and crew. It would be precisely three-fourths of a year before he would return to New Everett.

The return of Prince Edric caught the entire nation off guard. It was an ordinary day, and while Jacob Allato had adjusted to the position of stand-in for the king, the royal palace would ignite in uproar as the prince returned ready to take the throne. He was barely recognizable. He had grown in height as well as mass. He went from being completely slim to becoming one of the literally strongest kings in history. Upon his return he wanted the coronation to begin as soon as possible, but it wasn't going to be here.

Ancient Montibian legend harks how the founders of the Empire would make pilgrimages to the Peak of Kings to prove their mettle as true leaders, and Prince Edric knew that to solidify his reputation among the nobles and to the Empire as a whole he would need a similar show of strength. He ordered that the coronation take place on the summit of the Peak of Kings.

Allato was dumbfounded at the idea, as well as the royal council. The idea was mad. Holding a royal ceremony on one of the harshest locations on Aquanor was not even feasible in the eyes of the council. But Prince Edric knew his command. He wanted to be coronated by a former pastor he befriended at the mines, and that the only part of the ceremony that would be necessary is the vows and the presentation of the royal claymore. The prince always hated ceremonies, and as a bonus of holding it on a freezing mountaintop he could skip to the good parts out of necessity.

An expedition took place a few days later to the Peak of Kings, with the posse having consisting of the prince, his pastor friend, Allato, many members of the royal council, and other guardsmen and nobles. The Peak of Kings is known as the highest mountain in the world, and one of the most treacherous places on Aquanor. In the ancient ages of the Montibian Empire, princes would trek up the freezing slopes to prove their worth as mountains and true leaders of the empire. It is said that to scale the mighty Peak of Kings, you must not only best the elements but have a purpose and dedication so resolute and unyielding that not even the thin, frigid air of the Peak can overcome it.

And as many of the expedition party begin to falter at the whims of the Peak, Prince Edric made clear his resolution. He was completely unfazed by the harsh climate of the Peak, and made his way up the Trail of Kings to the summit without being deterred at the slightest. Those who travelled with him during the expedition were in awe: not only had the prince returned in a completely unrecognizable physique, but he also was traversing the harshest place in Aquanor like nothing. It was something out of a legend.

There was barely anyone left in the party by the time they reached the summit. Those that have not elected to stay behind or collapsed in the freezing snow were worn out and weakened. Save for the prince, who was ready for his coronation. He knelt before the altar on the summit, and the pastor had him recite the vows. He presented him the royal claymore, and by grasping it and holding the heavy weapon in the air, he became the Mountain King. Those that saw the coronation describe it as something out of a fairy tale. The king said nothing. The very image of him holding up the claymore on the Peak of Kings summit projected strength that no Mountain King in history had ever shown.

The newly coronated King Edric descended from the Peak to return to the royal palace. Upon sitting on the throne, he wasted no time at all in being a king. As his first decree, he brought forth one of the advisors of the royal council: the very one who suggested the plan to invade Ahgila and Khoraso. He declared that the late King Nedry was kind and wise, but his current course of action against the land crisis did nothing to better the Montibian Empire. He made clear the only way to save the Monts is to acquire the luscious green lands of the world for them to make home.

Allato could not believe what had transpired. The moment Edric took the throne he had undone his father's objection to the plan. The Montibian Empire was to soon unleash its wrath upon Aquanor in what would be known as the Great Conquest. But the crisis had to be dealt with, and having been under the reign of Nedry he knew being passive about the matter would do nothing. The image of King Edric and the claymore resonated with him, he knew despite everything he would follow through with King Edric's plan. Because he had returned as the true Mountain King.

CHAPTER 38: OLD LEGENDS

The Mountain King is overseeing preparations for the expedition south in pursuit of the Ivory Raptor. Jacob Allato, his eldest advisor, is to look after the kingdom in his absence. King Edric asked him to do something important in absence: to withdraw all remaining troops from the Mezuo Isles and Ahgila. Allato was shocked at the request. Everything they fought to acquire for decades would all be lost. The king has grown tired of the Great Conquest, as he did it solely to save his people. But he realized the Conquest was killing more Monts then it was saving. After the Battle of New Everett and the typhoon, he long reexamined the Monts' purpose in the world of Aquanor. He was still to pursue the Raptor in order to avenge all of those lost in the Battle of the Storm. Jacob Allato was impressed by the king's decree. He may have loathed his father in some ways, but in the end, he became a king just like him.

The king's royal galleon, the Revenant, was in full preparation to set sail. For the first time in his entire life, the Mountain King would be leaving the mainland. Many in New Everett gathered to bid their king farewell. He hated ceremonies, and wanted to make the departure hasty. But all of the citizens of New Everett gathered not by obligation, but out of love and admiration for their leader. King Edric couldn't believe the sight. It was impossible. After all that happened to his people, and after all the times he had failed them, his people still adored him. He held out his hand, bidding farewell to the Monts of New Everett. As the Revenant sailed through Crater Bay and out of the now destroyed Celestial Passage, the King set forth on his quest.

The Ivory Raptor arrives at Mokry Gorad. It seems that the strategic position of their capital left them unaffected by the Montibians' retaliation. Natasha took a long breath of the frigid air, as she was ecstatic to be home. Captain Jaxon rallied the crew, and ordered them to go around the capital and prepare for their expedition into the Lidanyan Ice Caps. William elected to stay at the Raptor with the captain, while Aidan, Natasha, Benjamin, and the rest all scurried into the city. William went below deck.

He went to the brig, where Charlotte and the loyalist Monts remained. It had been weeks since the Battle of the Storm. There were as silent and defeated now as they were then. William would often visit them and bring food and drink. The Monts were grateful to William's kindness, but Charlotte never displayed any gratitude. William wanted her to change. He refused to believe that to her core she was as much of a monster as the Mountain Guardsmen who would cut down innocent civilians. It wasn't a thought he was willing to accept.

Captain Jaxon was intending to turn the prisoners over to the Ice Baron, as he wasn't willing to haul Mont prisoners all the way to the Life Spring. William wasn't too accepting of that idea, as he had no idea what the Lidanyans would do to them. He urged the captain to at least keep Charlotte if she assisted as a crew mate. It was hard to convince him. He wasn't going to let a Mont he didn't know wander willy-nilly around his ship, but he knew that William cared for her well-being. He made abundantly clear that she would be watched 24/7 and any sign of mutiny would result in her demise. The captain was serious.

The loyalist Monts were taken in by the Lidanyan government, and Charlotte was to be released from the brig once they departed the city. Captain Jaxon made certain she knew the terms of her release. The rest of the crew were doubtful about the captain's decision. Whenever she approached anyone, all of the crewmates would back away. William was the only ally on that ship she had. And yet their conversations were still nonexistent.

The crew reconverged at the Raptor, and once all preparations were complete, they were to sail to the Lidanyan Ice Caps and follow the route that Benjamin had interpreted from the shards. A hooded figure watched the Raptor depart the harbors of Mokry Gorad. He wrote a letter wrapped in a gold ribbon and attached it to a messenger albatross who then flew north.

The crew sailed to the gargantuan ice shelves of the Lidanyan Ice Caps. The sight was overwhelming. The glaciers were the size of continents, and they all shifted and crashed into each other in coverage of the southern tip of Aquanor. It was here where the mythical Life

Spring is said to be. No explorer in feasible history has navigated through the treacherous ice caps, but who better for the task than the crew of the Ivory Raptor?

Back at the Revenant, King Edric receives a message intercepted from an albatross with a golden ribbon. It tells that the crew of the Ivory Raptor have departed the capital of Lidanya Moor, and are currently sailing to a particular area in the Lidanyan Ice Caps. King Edric orders that the ship make sail to this location immediately. He also advises the crew to change into their mountain outfits, as the Ice Caps will unsurprisingly host low temperatures. The King looked forward, as the Revenant turned southward.

The Ice Caps were the coldest location in all of Aquanor. Not even the Montibian mountains or Lidanya Moor reached the subzero temperatures of the caps. It was a struggle to work on deck in the frigid air. Aidan and Benjamin were struggling to keep warm, as they grew up in far warmer climates. William, Natasha, and Charlotte were fine as they had both grown up in places with similar temperatures. The captain, while expected to not tolerate the cold, was unfettered by the freezing air. This was it. He was finally making sail towards the legendary Life Spring, a goal he has pursued for half of his lifetime. He couldn't care less about the ice, as his passion to reach the achievement of his life was hotter than any fire in the world. But he still spent more time in his cabin as to avoid standing outside for too long.

Days go by as the crew gets more worn by the harsh path of ice. Temperatures are below freezing, and the crewmembers more acclimated to warm environments can do little in the current climate. The captain, Natasha, and the Mont crewmembers are the only ones that can stay active. Benjamin and the others can only stay put and try to keep warm. He shares his doubts of the Life Spring's existence with the others. Aidan doesn't believe him, and asks if it truly didn't exist why then does the path leading to it exist? Benjamin cannot say. He has always lived by the laws of nature and science. He replies to Aidan's reasoning by asking why they assume a mythical place exists because of a piece of stone? The tablet they translated could've meant anything, even implying that it could be nothing more than a nursery rhyme to lullaby children to sleep.

Captain Jaxon overhears their conversation. He does not engage, but knows that Benjamin has to be wrong. After struggling so much and losing everything, there is no way he can believe that the Life Spring is a myth. He's been pursuing the place since he first stepped on a boat, and for half a lifetime he's scoured every country's history books for any evidence of such a place. He found nothing. Up until Las Tormentas, his efforts were fruitless. The doubt that Benjamin expresses starts to slowly seep into the mind of Jaxon. Perhaps there is no Life Spring, and Jaxon is just blindly leading his crew into an icy labyrinth to freeze to death. No, it cannot be. It exists. It *has* to exist.

The Monts, though able-bodied in the colder temperatures, are still struggling with them all the same. Morale is taking a nosedive, and William is trying his best to keep the spirits of his countrymen alive. Charlotte is sharing Benjamin's sentiments, in that the captain has no idea what he's doing and they're all going to die of frostbite chasing some fake legend. William refused to side with that. He trusted the captain after all they had been through. But as time

persists and the frozen winds bring the crew down more and more, the Monts start to see Charlotte's point.

The Mountain King is perplexed by the Raptor's lack of action. Was this truly the vessel that had slain the entire Mont navy through the use of nature itself? It was laughable! All they're doing is sailing blindly into the Ice Caps, what could they possibly be hoping to achieve here? Some of the higher command on the Revenant asked the king if they were ever going to break pursuit, as they were concerned that an icy grave for the Raptor would mean one for the Monts as well. The king wasn't buying that. Whatever happened after New Everett, whatever happened at Rehugio, and whatever happened at the Battle of the Storm, Captain Jaxon and his loyal crew made it through everything. He wasn't going to let them go.

More time passes by, and the crew are at their last limb. Not even the individuals tolerant of cold weather could stand it any longer. They could barely move. They must've been in the Caps for days. Captain Jaxon's small seed of doubt has now infested his mind. He's been following the route for so long, and not a thing was found. His crew will die of frostbite if they persist into the Caps. He was ready to give in. They all were. The captain would need rest, as he's about to submit on an achievement he has been pursuing for his whole life.

The Monts kept to their own. The crew still didn't trust their likes, aside from William, and they had all rallied behind Charlotte who had believed the captain was leading them all to their doom. William had to talk to her before she did something drastic. Their conversation had actual substance, as when William was willing to listen, he actually got response from her. He told her that come tomorrow, the captain will turn sail and head out of the Caps. Charlotte questioned how he was so sure of that, and William promised that he would be able to convince him. He didn't want to do this for someone who had lied to him about the Mountain Guard, but he wanted to do it for the well-being of the crew.

The conversation between William and Captain Jaxon wasn't a pleasant one. Jaxon still was unwilling to give up on his lifelong goal, but William argued that the crew will die if he doesn't make a decision. Even William, with his loyal dedication, was ready to throw in the towel. Captain Jaxon didn't want to believe it, but William had reason. The Life Spring was not to be found. He asked for him to leave.

On the break of dawn, something awoke the crew. A warm breeze? It couldn't be, they were in the frozen heart of the coldest place on Aquanor. But a bright light was beckoning ahead. Was it the morning sun? Everyone stood up as the sight that approached was something unprecedented. A warm light had covered the entirety of the Raptor. The Caps parted to reveal a large area. The sound of a large cascade roared in the distance.

Captain Jaxon couldn't believe his eyes. He almost broke down at the sight. All that believed him were overcome with joy. All that did not were in awe at the very sight that had disproved their sentiments. Benjamin, having knowledge of everything of nature from years of study, had nothing to say about what was before him. Charlotte, who held aggression and animosity towards what she believed was a madman, stood gazing without a word. The entire

crew, having previously differing sentiments, all stood as one overwhelmed at the legendary sight.

The crew of the Ivory Raptor had found the Life Spring.

CHAPTER 39: THE LIFE SPRING PART I

The Life Spring was truly a view out of a legend. A large cascading plateau stood in the center of a large opening of ocean. There had to be massive amounts of water pouring out of it. A vibrant light of various colors had shone at the pinnacle of the plateau. All the water in the area was flowing away from the Spring and spreading into all directions. This was the origin of the entire ocean. This was the origin of all life.

Some of Benjamin's mates looked to him for a usual scientific explanation as to what was before them. He knew everything of the bizarre locations they visited over their adventures. His knowledge as a scholar made the world of Aquanor make sense, but for once in his life, he had not a single sliver of information to share. The Life Spring was a complete and total mystery to the man that knew everything. No amount of science or knowledge could explain it.

Charlotte expressed her apologies for doubting the captain. She stated that she had let her animosity from her defeat at the storm overcome her morals and beliefs. Now that all of her doubt was washed away in the cascading sea, she could truly look at the captain of the Ivory Raptor not as a madman, but as a leader. The rest of the Monts had believed her doubts, but would also come to respect the captain after seeing the Life Spring.

Without a moment to waste, they sailed towards the cascades at full canvas. Within this legendary place holds the treasures of all of history after all. But a good distance behind them, the Revenant had approached the area. The Monts aboard were gazing with awe at the legendary sight, and the Mountain King stood in silence without an expression on his face. It was in his mind where everything ran. This was the destination that the captain had sought out? It was real? No wonder he and his crew nearly froze to death looking for it. The Revenant sailed forth towards the Life Spring in pursuit of the Raptor.

The captain had noticed the golden sails chasing them, and put the crew on full alert. They too noticed the gargantuan ship pursuing them. They readied themselves for battle, but looked to the Monts who were previously loyal to their enemy. Charlotte expressed that her loyalties are now to the crew, and that the king had doomed his men sending them into the storm. William believed that Charlotte had finally changed. They can now fight together against the true evil. The Ivory Raptor turned sail to engage the Revenant in combat.

This was it. After everything the Mountain King had done to them, it was time to finally pay him back. William was anticipating this; the king he looked up to ever since he was a boy had lied to him and his countrymen about the Mountain Guard and the Great Conquest. It was time for a good old-fashioned dethroning. The rest of the crew needed to only visualize how much struggle they went through with the invasion, how painful the consequences were, and the sight of Arata being slaughtered before the throne. They were ready to shove a sword down the mighty king's gullet.

Charlotte and the Monts were less vocal in anticipating the battle, as after everything that had happened, they were now charging at their king full sail to engage in combat. They had expressed their trust in the captain, so for this fight at least they are presumed to be allies. Charlotte told William he had better wipe the deck with the Mountain King's guts like he did to her back at the storm, and William swore to see to that promise.

The king rallied his crew in preparation for battle. He told them that charging straight for them was a band of enemies and traitors of the Montibian Empire, and that their one desire is to see all Monts burnt at a stake. Today, they avenge the Monts that died at the typhoon, and they fight for the Monts that sacrificed for the betterment of the empire. The king's words invigorated the crew, and they anticipated the incoming battle.

The Ivory Raptor and the Revenant exchange a ruthless line of fire as damage is inflicted on both vessels. The two ships encircle each other like vultures. It was until the crews on both ships prepared to board that the battle starting truly taking its toll. Captain Jaxon stayed to defend his ship while William led a team aboard the Revenant. The Monty crew were relentless, and amid the struggle William came face to face against the Mountain King. The two engaged in a duel.

William might have been nimbler and more experienced, but the king's raw power and size couldn't be competed against. He was a titan, and alone William was unable to best him despite being one of the best fighters on the crew. His cutlass paled in comparison to the sheer weight of the king's claymore, and there was no way William could beat an utter giant like the king in a fistfight.

The battle would worsen for the crew. Charlotte and her Mont posse would instigate a mutiny amid the chaos. The crew that had followed William aboard the Revenant were either killed or turned to the Monts' side. The battle was becoming impossible to win in these circumstances. Captain Jaxon ordered the crew to retreat to the Raptor and make a full escape to the Life Spring. They stunned the Revenant crew with another line of cannon fire and made escape, but left William behind on the Revenant.

William was brought before the king. He ordered that the traitor be brought to the brig, as their main focus is to pursue the Raptor. Their friend might prove useful as leverage. William looked at Charlotte. He thought she had changed. That expression of trust to the captain, and after the expedition, everything she said was a *lie*. He was betrayed. He thought Charlotte had more honor than that. She couldn't bear to look him in the eye.

With William now in the captivity of the Monts, the crew of the Raptor is left without half of their crew scurrying to the Life Spring. The Mountain King's forces were more savage then they could've possibly imagined. Captain Jaxon wished he had another typhoon to wear them down, but at full strength the Mountain King and his goons are practically unbeatable. They had to make sail to the Life Spring, and figure out what to do from there.

CHAPTER 40: THE LIFE SPRING PART II

The Raptor made anchor hidden in a large cave area behind an opening in the cascades. To buy time, the crew had to put as much distance between them and the Monts as possible. It was not a favorable situation. The Monts had them beaten in number and manpower. They had hoped to explore the Life Spring without having an initiative to stay alive, but they would have to hasten their journey into the mysterious world in order to survive.

As they journeyed into the caves, they gazed in awe at the strange land they were exploring. The dim caves were illuminated by vines that displayed a variety of bioluminescent colors. Shrooms and smaller fauna on the cave floor would recede into themselves when interacted with. Even the air they breathed felt...alive. Benjamin having known much about the biology of Aquanor was as silent as the rest as they were floored by this peculiar place.

A good hour into hiking through the cave systems of the Life Spring and they stumbled upon a wide clearing with a large glass ceiling. The ceiling above them was illuminated by vibrant lights glimmering as the sun light penetrated the crystal enclosure. Within this clearing was the mother lode: an endless expanse of treasures and artifacts, all in amounts that could make them rich beyond their wildest dreams. It was all worthless if they weren't going to make it out alive. The crew looked to their gung-ho captain for the ultimate way to deal with the Monts. The captain would need a moment to deliberate.

William sat in silence in the brig of the Revenant. After being backstabbed by the one other Mont he thought could change, he could only wish the rest of the crew well during this time. Charlotte went down to the hull to speak to William, but he would only turn his back toward her, sitting in silence while in his cell. Charlotte argued that she had to do the right thing, as before everything she was a Mont. Betraying her fellow countrymen was something she never intended on doing. All William could do in response was describe the day he deserted the Mountain Guard.

He shared every thought that ran through his mind on that fateful day. The horror, the betrayal, the question of morality versus duty. He asked if it was truly the "right thing" to contribute to the slaughter of innocents and a war that has proven harmful to all Aquanorians, Monts included. He saw the hatred the Ahgilans in Truett Mire and Boling City had for the Monts, including the only woman he had ever loved, Margaret. When that name was mentioned, Charlotte immediately stood up and left. She could barely hold back the tears.

The captain pondered, and after deliberation he had come up with a plan: surrender. The crew was perplexed. Just give up? Really? Captain Jaxon knew that beating the Monts in a straight fight was impossible. So, the plan was to make them *think* they won. If they surrender, the Monts will take them into custody, lower their guard, and proceed to pillage the massive pile of treasure that they conveniently discovered in the process. That is of course, only if a part of the crew surrenders, while a small team led by Aidan will return to the Revenant and prevent the Monts' escape. The Mountain King will most likely have the bulk of his soldiers accompanying him, so only non-combat navy personnel will remain on the Revenant. That would make it easier to commandeer the ship.

Once they have the Revenant, they can use it to ambush the troops returning to the ship and take out the Mountain King in the process. The plan had great risk, but it was the only way they would live to tell the tale. Aidan would make all haste to the large cave harbor while Captain Jaxon, Natasha, and Benjamin awaited the Mountain King for their surrender.

A grueling time of waiting passed. Eventually the Mountain King arrived, but with a small assemblage of Ridge Corp troops. Already the plan was awry. If he hadn't brought his forces with them, then that means there is still a huge number of troops awaiting Aidan and his team back at the Revenant. There was now no choice. If Aidan had to improvise, then so did they. The Mountain King ordered the Ridge Corp to swarm them, but after everything the crew went through, they were able to defeat the king's underlings. Now, they would fight the king.

The Mountain King unsheathed his gargantuan claymore. The crew were in for hell. The king fought off every one of them like bugs. His size, armor, and relentless swings was not something Jaxon or the others could fight against. They had to wear him down. Their long and savage fight consisted of exchanges of sword and claymore, with the crew even using the treasures as projectiles to slow him down, but the king was barely fazed by everything they tried. The Mountain King was a league far above any enemy they have ever faced.

Aidan and the others made it back to the cave harbor, where they saw the troops stationed around the vicinity. There was no way they could take the Revenant at this juncture. They looked to the Raptor. Perhaps there is *another way* to get the drop on the Monts? The Revenant was docked in full knowledge that the crew of the Raptor had fled into the caves. Therefore, only a few Mountain Guardsmen were stationed aboard. If they acted quickly, then their planned surprise attack could still work.

They infiltrated the Raptor and made quick work of the Monts aboard. Once they had control, they went below deck to prepare the cannons for an essential carpet bombing of the harbor with cannon fire. One of the crew asked about William, and Aidan said that he trusted William to take advantage of the chaos and make his escape. That is, if they don't accidentally blow him to smithereens.

Charlotte had been in deep thought since the conversation with William. She had initiative and loyalty to the enemy team the entire time she was aboard the Raptor. She had no feelings of remorse when she and the other Monts mutinied against Captain Jaxon. But after William invoked her late sister's name, and after all that he said, how could she possibly live with herself after what she done? Once Margaret's name was invoked, all the wrongdoings of the Mountain King and his men, all the trust William had put into her, all the morals and ideals she claimed to have held onto came rushing to her all at once. It was time to make things right.

Charlotte went below deck, and opened the door to William's cell. She told him to keep low and follow her lead. The numerous Monts aboard would eventually spot their escape, and William and Charlotte would have to fight off the bulk of the Mountain King's crew. Just when they were to be overwhelmed, a firestorm of cannons plastered the Monts on the Revenant and the harbor. The ship that was assumed to be empty had suddenly ambushed the soldiers occupied with William and Charlotte's breakout.

With the Monts now scrambled and confused, William and Charlotte could fight off the rest of the Monts and secure the area. Aidan and the others met with William aboard the Revenant. He was ready to throw hands the moment he saw that Charlotte was with him, but William pleaded with Aidan to back off. He recited Charlotte's betrayal, but William vehemently defended her by reciting all the things he had done. The argument would continue.

Back at the battle amongst the trove, Benjamin was severely injured by one of the claymore's blows. Now it was just Natasha and Captain Jaxon against a leviathan. They tried to desperately maneuver around the trove to avoid the king's attacks, but they couldn't keep it up for long. Captain Jaxon had one shot in his pistol, but couldn't get one opportunity to fire upon the king. He just needed one moment to aim for the head. It was all it would take to end his life and defeat the tyrant once and for all.

Natasha looked to the captain, and trusted him to make the shot. She engaged the king, and drew him away from the captain to buy him time. Her strength as a proud Lidanyan could help hold her own against the titan, which bought time for Jaxon. She and the king clashed, but the king was simply too strong. She went for an act of desperation. She lunged at him and attempted to tackle the king to the ground. This last resort was immediately thwarted, and the king had Natasha pinned. He briefly told her to apologize to the poor boy that died in his throne room for him when she would be with the Mountain Gods, with her reply to the king being to do it himself. A gunshot rang across the chamber, and with one bullet to the back of the skull the Mountain King was killed instantly. Captain Jaxon had made the shot. The response of the captain was only this:

“His name is Arata you tyrannical bastard.”

They ran to Benjamin. The strike from the claymore had done severe damage to Benjamin's abdomen. He struggled to hold back the loss of blood, and Natasha urged that they get back to the ships immediately. They could only hope Aidan and the others had done their part.

When the crew returned to the harbor, they had met with the others who were still at odds over Charlotte. All manner of that was dropped when they saw Benjamin was hurt. Charlotte insisted that she could tend to his wounds, but Aidan told the captain not to trust a dirty “Mont bastard” like her. The captain paused. He looked at Charlotte dead in the eyes, and only had this to say:

“I am finished with my hatred towards the Monts. I would've better seen William's guts ripped out of him than given him an ounce of trust. But I don't give a damn about your betrayal or your Mont blood right now. Just help him. Please.”

He couldn't let Benjamin die. He was the captain. His crew meant everything to him, and he wasn't going to let the Mountain King take Benjamin away with him like he did Arata. Charlotte ran to the cabin to treat Benjamin. It was a grueling wait, but after hours on end Charlotte told the crew that he would make it. The bleeding had stopped and due to the supplies the King had in his vessel they were able to save Benjamin's life. They all took a sigh of relief.

Now was the next order of business: carrying as much treasure as possible back to the ship. It wouldn't be easy, as the treasures were heavy and numerous and the trip between the harbors and the trove wasn't short. They would need to spend days here to load the ship. They didn't have anywhere else to go, so they got down to business.

Days would go by. The crew made huge hauls of gold and jewels to the Raptor while Benjamin rested and recovered in the Revenant. But eventually the crew were able to load all they could and make ready for departure. Benjamin could even interact with the crew again, but he was still bound to resting in a bed. The crew would spend time in the cabin of the Raptor as to keep their friend company.

Benjamin thanked Charlotte for her help. She kept apologizing to him and the rest of the crew for her betrayal, but after all they had been through the crew would come to forgive her. It wasn't easy, but she would earn the trust of the crew in time. William was proud of Charlotte for stepping up for them, and Charlotte expressed her gratitude to William for helping her see the error of her ways. She was indebted to him.

As the crew made their long journey back through the Caps, the crew reconciled on their entire journey. The trip would be significantly shorter and less gruesome now that knew their way out. Captain Jaxon reflected on how when they began, they were just a rag tag team of miscreants from Marauder's Bay that plundered a Monty navy ship. Now they had made the most historical discovery on Aquanor and had defeated the tyrannical leader of the Montibian Empire. They had gone through a lot since that time: the journeys up to Captain Jaxon's arrest, the adventures to prepare for the invasion, the loss of Arata, the dark times after New Everett, and their eventual takeback of the Raptor.

An eventual arrival to Marauder's Bay, and the crew drank and celebrated for hours on end. All the riches they had made, and all the victories they could claim, it was all something they could drink their livers to death to. Captain Jaxon had achieved his lifelong dream, Aidan had become one of the best Fire Masons in history, Natasha had done her father proud as a legend among the Lidanyans, and William and Charlotte had redeemed themselves as Monts. After all they had lost, they could finally start a new chapter in their lives.

Captain Jaxon looked to the sunset over the rocky shores of Marauder's Bay. He looked to his crew, who realistically, had no more obligation to make sail with him as they could go about their separate ways. They knew that their adventures with each other were over, so to cap it off, they would all share a drink together with a bittersweet farewell. They held their drinks up to honor everything that had got them there. To Arata. To their allies. To the friends that fought with them through everything. To the legend of the Ivory Raptor and her historic crew.