

Masked

Chapter Eight

"Pirates!"

A woman's voice screamed, sending shockwaves through the air. Suddenly, an intense explosion erupted at the heart of the marketplace. Chaos ensued as people scattered in panic. Amidst the mayhem, the three children rose to their feet, with Celeste finding comfort standing loyally behind Jakob.

“Is it really pirates?” Celeste asked, seeming to be scared.

As Jakob peered out into the dark clouds, his eyes widened in alarm as more ships emerged, their ominous shapes growing larger and more menacing by the second. His heart raced as he desperately scanned for any distinguishing flags that would confirm if it really was pirates. Though he couldn't discern the exact details of the flags, he caught glimpses of deep purples and burning oranges. Just as he thought he had seen enough, his attention was abruptly captured by the nearest ship, its flag unfolding in the wind. A dark red background bordered by a striking black edge revealed an intricate crest at its center - a sea raven benevolently entwined around a menacing sword. The canoes glided towards the shoreline, eventually coming to a halt just below the ledge they had stood upon moments earlier.

Suddenly, as if from a nightmare, hooks soared through the air, clanging against the rocky surface, and soon, fifteen figures rapidly ascended, effortlessly scaling the ledge. Panic rippled through the crowd, sending more people fleeing in terror. Each man bore a distinct appearance, exotic clothes, silks and black velvet jackets, while others sported red waistcoats over knee breeches, feathers in hat, with gold chains around their necks and choppers held in sashes across their chest, cutlass in hand, but what truly set these pirates apart were the masks

that concealed their faces, shrouding their identities in an unsettling air of mystery. These were not mere run-of-the-mill pirates.

“We better get out here.” Aleki said nervously.

“Hurry follow me.” Jakob immediately took charge.

Jakob led Celeste and Aleki back down the side of the building, helping each other get down.

“We shouldn’t go back to the main street, let’s take some of these smaller side streets to get back to my father!” Jakob exclaimed.

In the distance, the noise of explosions and terrified screams filled the air. The chaos unleashed by the pirates was overwhelming, as they ruthlessly plundered and ravaged everything in their path. Nervously, the kids sought refuge in the safety of the side alleys, cautiously peering out to catch glimpses of the unfolding mayhem. Jakob knew he had to keep moving, not only for himself but also to reassure his frightened friends. With their hearts pounding in their chests, they navigated towards a wider opening, a potential escape route that would lead them back to the safety of the platforms. Just as they turned the corner, their path was unexpectedly blocked by four formidable figures. It was unmistakable - these were pirates. Celeste, Aleki, and Jakob instinctively took a step back, their eyes wide with fear.

The first three pirates advanced, with the fourth lurking partially concealed behind them, sporting a striking crimson mask. The three pirates in the front wore a distinct black mask, their bodies with varying styles of armor and clothing. Yet, it was their peculiar movements that set them apart from the pirate that stood behind them. The smallest pirate of the group was hunching over uncomfortably, his skin a murky shade of dark green. In the middle stood a stocky figure, towering above any man Jakob had ever seen, with skin as grey as stone. Lastly, the pirate

on the right, slightly smaller than the others, had a complexion resembling mud, his mask barely concealing a set of protruding teeth that gave him an unsettling underbite. Aleki tried to convince the pirates to leave them alone,

"Hey, don't mind us, we're just three kids heading home. Carry on with your pillaging, Avast ye, matey! Arrgh!" Aleki said nervously.

"Shut up, Aleki." They both snapped at him.

"Parley, possibly?" Aleki replied.

As the group of four pirates approached them, the largest one in the middle spoke up,

"So, this must be the Guardian, eh?"

"The Guardian?" the kids exclaimed, exchanging confused glances as they slowly backed away.

"The chubby one?" the smaller pirate on the left chimed in.

"No, you idiot, not the chubby one. The boy with the grey eyes," the pirate on the right corrected, shooting an angry look at the smaller pirate.

"I'm not the Guardian," Jakob responded, clearly confused.

The three pirates continued their back-and-forth banter, seemingly oblivious to the kids' confusion.

"Can I eat the chubby one? He looks juicy," one pirate suggested.

"No, we're supposed to capture the kids alive. Or do you want to explain that to him?" another pirate interjected.

"No, not to him," the first pirate replied.

"What about his legs? He doesn't need those," the second pirate added.

"Enough! Both of you, shut up!" the third pirate finally snapped.

Amid the pirates' conversation, the kids took the opportunity to make a quick escape.

"Hey, where did they go?" one of the pirates shouted. **"Get after them!"**

Jakob, Aleki, and Celeste sprinted through the alleys as fast as their legs could carry them, desperately trying to find a way out. However, they soon found themselves trapped in dead ends, with the four pirates closing in on them.

"I'm the greatest warrior since Bordur! You can't outrun me!" The pirates' voiced echoed.

"The Guardian?" Jakob muttered to himself, his mind still struggling to comprehend the situation unfolding before him. In a desperate move for safety, the children dashed around a corner, only to be met by the fourth intimidating pirate blocking their path. Filled with fear, they quickly redirected their steps, screams echoing through the air as they sought an alternative route. Reaching the end of the path, the children were faced with three choices: one leading back to the marketplace, another ascending the side of a building, and the last disappearing into a narrow alleyway. In a flurry of panic, they all shouted simultaneously, each urging the others in a different direction.

"This way!" they cried, unaware that their desperate pleas had led them to separate paths. Jakob, driven by instinct, scrambled up a few dumpsters and scaled a nearby wall, ultimately finding shelter on the rooftop of a building. Catching his breath, he called out to his

friends, only to be met with silence. Anxiety gripped his heart as he realized he was alone.

Without hesitation, Jakob raced across the interconnected rooftops, desperately scanning the area in search of his companions. Suddenly, a scream pierced the air, and he instantly recognized it as Celeste's. Fear lending him strength, he sprinted towards the sound, finally reaching the edge of the building. Peering down, his worst fears were confirmed, Celeste was trapped, cornered by two menacing pirates. Among them, the pirate wearing the crimson mask had a mysterious aura, surrounded by swirling black smoke. With no escape in sight, Celeste frantically searched for a way out, her efforts proving unsuccessful.

“What do I do what do I do.”

“Jakob!” Celeste yelled as she caught his eye,

Jakob took a few steps back, then propelling himself forward with all his might. Launching himself off the edge of the building, he executed a graceful roll upon landing, swiftly regaining his footing. Without wasting a moment, he sprinted towards Celeste, who was perilously close to being captured by the pirates. In that moment, time seemed to slow down, as if reality had shifted. It was almost like an out-of-body experience. Jakob felt a strange connection between his mind and body, as if they were working in perfect harmony. Though his actions were guided by instinct, he was fully aware of what he was doing. With every ounce of strength, he could muster, Jakob positioned himself between Celeste and the advancing pirate. His voice vibrated through the air as he let out a fierce yell,

“Get away from her!”

Just as Jakob instinctively reached out to shield Celeste, the Pirate's hand tightly gripped his arm. A surge of warmth coursed through Jakob's veins, followed by a blinding flash of white light that

radiated from within him. Though the sensation was not painful, it erupted with an incredible force. The two Pirates were propelled backward, crashing into a nearby wall with a loud thud. Disoriented from the extraordinary display of power, Jakob felt a wave of dizziness wash over him. Celeste quickly held him, offering support as he struggled to regain his balance. Slowly one of the Pirate managed to pull himself up from the ground.

"What was that?" exclaimed the pirate wearing a black mask. He expressed his anger through grunts and drew his sword as the pirate approached the two children.

"Forget it, it's time to taste man flesh," declared the pirate.

"Get behind me Celeste." Jakob commanded as he tried to stand tall protecting Celeste.

"Your Light will end." The Pirate said as he was beginning to swing his sword.

As Jakob shut his eyes, a resounding clash of swords echoed in his ears. When he reopened his eyes, he beheld a remarkable sight. His father, King Joseph, had emerged out of nowhere, his sword locked in a fierce duel with the pirate. The timing of his arrival could not have been more perfect. With masterful skill, King Joseph skillfully parried the pirate's relentless strikes, effortlessly countering with his own precise movements. In one swift motion, he delivered a powerful kick to the pirate's chest, sending him sprawling to the ground. The King wasted no time dispatching him, swiftly ending his threat. Just as Jakob thought the danger had passed, two more pirates emerged from around the corner. Without hesitation, they turned around and hastily retreated, vanishing into the distance.

"You haven't seen the last of us!" The two remaining pirates yelled as their friends laid their slain.

“Legionaries hunt them down.” Joseph instructed the Legionaries that arrived with him. Joseph knelt and turned to his son.

“Jakob, are you hurt? Are you okay?” Joseph questioned grabbing his son inspecting him.

“I’m okay dad.” Jakob replied as Joseph hugged him. After a few moments, Joseph's concern for his son left him and now he became angry.

“Why the hell were you down here son!” Joseph yelled.

“We just wanted to get a better view of the race.” Jakob responded, lowering his head, he knew he was in for one. Suddenly Jakob heard Aleki’s voice,

“Jakob, Celeste you guys, okay?” Aleki came running from around the corner running towards them and immediately hugged the pair. Joseph looked down at both Celeste and Aleki and commanded to his guards,

“Guards take these two back to the Palace, their parents are waiting on them.”

Celeste and Aleki both had a concerned look on their face, as two Legionnaires came back to the King.

“My King the pirates have fled, we sent ships to chase after those that got away.”

The Legionnaire gave the news, and the King just nodded his head in approval. Startled by a voice that came from behind, the group swiftly shifted their attention. As they all turned around, it revealed none other than Jakobs uncle, Fred Stone, standing tall beside one of lifeless pirate's body. Breaking the silence, Fred spoke with a hint of uncertainty,

"I don't think these were normal pirates." His words hung in the air, piquing the curiosity of everyone present. Fred knelt beside the fallen pirate and carefully removed the black mask, unveiling a mysterious face beneath. As the mask slipped away, there was a collective gasp. It was indeed not a pirate. The sight before them was horrifying, an Ogre. A grotesque manifestation of the Shadow. The mere sight of it sent tremors down their spines. The Ogre's face was twisted. Its mouth filled with sharp, jagged teeth that seemed to gleam ominously in the dim light. A large nose with numerous metal rods protruded from its face, while additional metal rings in its ears. The gender of the Ogre remained uncertain, though it sported a pointed beard and several scars that marred its rugged face, green blood oozed from the Ogre's mouth, releasing a putrid stench in the air.

"When did you arrive, brother?" King Joseph seemed less interested in the Ogre and more focused on his brother, Fred Stone.

"We'll discuss that later, my King. There are more urgent matters at hand," Fred Stone replied, as he walked towards the body of the other fallen pirate, laying against the wall in the crimson mask.

"Ogres haven't been seen for centuries. Why are they attacking now?" Joseph questioned.

"These are Sea Raider Ogres, brother. They have a long history with the pirates of the south," Fred Stone confidently explained, as if he had all the answers.

"We need to discuss some urgent matters, in private." Joseph said as he removed the crimson mask from the second body. Jakob caught a glimpse of the pirate's face and realized it wasn't another Ogre, it was a man, but only a shell of a man.

"Jakob, look away," Joseph commanded.

"What is that!" one of the Legionnaires exclaimed.

"Get Magister Alderete immediately!" Fred ordered.

The man's face was unnaturally pale, as if all the life had been drained from it. His dilated pupils resembled dark voids, giving his gaunt and hollow features an even more haunting appearance. His face bore visible wounds and signs of decay. His expression filled instead with intense anguish and torment, as if he had been dominated by the Shadow.

"It's First Ranger Markell Cuevas. He's been missing for several days," General Frizela informed the king.

"I've never seen anything like this." Joseph said.

"Only in the Shadowlands do we witness such things. He was possessed," Fred answered.

The King continued to examine his body, his fingers were pitch black, and Shadow markings were carved into the back of his hands. Fred Stone turned to Jakob, he asked,

"Jakob, did they say anything at all?"

Jakob, feeling timid and unsure, struggled to express himself fully.

"They said... they said..."

"What did they say, boy? Spit it out," Fred persisted.

"They said they were here for me," Jakob finally managed to say, turning away as he spoke.

"Why?" Joseph stopped examining the bodies and redirected his full attention to Jakob.

"They said I am the Guardian," Jakob responded, his tone filled with anger, as if he had been deceived. Joseph and Fred exchanged concerned glances before focusing back on Jakob.

"Well... am I?" Jakob's irritation grew.

In a lowered voice, the King affirmed, **"Yes."**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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