

**Northward**

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

With a clear sense of purpose, he embarked on his journey back to the town. The weight of his past seemed to have vanished, replaced by a newfound lightness that fueled his every step. It was as if a heavy fog had been lifted. It was well deep into the night, and the streets were eerily quiet. The quarter was now settled, no sign of its usual liveliness. The absence of music and laughter, replaced only by the aimless occasional drunkard stumbling around. But for the most part, people had retired for the night. His intention was to covertly enter the saloon, swiftly collect his belongings, and make his way back to his real home. He felt responsible for dealing with the situation on his own, preferring not to involve his pirate crew. He arrived at the saloon and noticed that it was nearly deserted except for Orlando, tidying up the bar, and Tiny, the dog, playfully indulging in spilled liquor and leftover food scraps.

Ensuring he remained unseen, Jakob skillfully maneuvered his way up to his room, where his belongings awaited him. Entering his room, Jakob swiftly retrieved his cutlass and two hidden choppers. However, as he glanced at his reflection in the mirror on the wall, he paused. For the first time in a long while, he felt a sense of pride in the person he had seen in the mirror. His eyes then shifted to the tempting sight of a rum bottle and cigar, but this time, he made a different choice. Determinedly, he poured the bottle of rum down the drain and crushed the cigar in his bare hand, severing his attachment to the vices that had plagued him. With a newfound resolve, he made his way out to his Rover, ready to embark on a new chapter in his life. As Jakob prepared to leave the saloon, he heard a voice calling out to him.

**“And where do you think you're going?”** Gabriel's voice boomed from behind.

**"Not this time, brother."** Jakob replied, urgently in his voice. Suddenly, another voice chimed in,

**"Where in tha bloody fook do you think you're headed, mate?"** Jakob turned around to see Bobby and Jerms standing there, their eyes wide with shock. Jerms whistled, desperately trying to grasp the attention of the crew. but Jakob quickly gestured for him to stop. Curiosity filled the air as Smiffy approached,

**"Yo, who we slidin on? Who we takin' care of, know what I'm sayin'? Let me know, slime."** His hand instinctively reached for the chopper at his waist.

**"This is my fight. I must do this alone,"** Jakob explained, his voice trembling. Confused, Dukes spoke up as he approached,

**"What is he talking about, captain?"**

The room filled with more members of Jakob's crew as Simko, Killshot, Martin, Fern, Jabbari, Sefu, and Darrell entered, their faces reflecting a mix of surprise, disbelief, and concern. Darrel questioned,

**"Is it true? Are you really a king?"**

Jakob's voice rose above the chaos, his tone a desperate plea for understanding,

**"Enough! I must do this. It's my responsibility, my burden, my fight."** His words reverberated through the room. But Cassi's voice broke through,

**"But, Tato, you can't do this alone."**

**"My name isn't Tato,"** Jakob corrected, with a newfound strength and resolve. The room fell eerily silent.

**"It's Jakob... Jakob Stryder."** The realization rippled through the crew, their eyes wide with shock and awe. This revelation caused a stir among the crew.

**"You're a Stryder? Like thee Derrick Stryder, the line of kings?"**

Confused, Jerms asked, **"Who the fook is this, Stryder?"**

Jakob paused, **"I'm sorry for hiding who I am. I ran away from my past, but now I gotta go home. I have to face this alone."** The weight of his words hung in the room. The silence was broken only by the sound of their collective breaths.

**"My father was the king. I am the Guardian, next in line to be the King of Legion, but I stepped away from that path a long time ago. I have to make this right."** Realization dawned on the crew.

Gabriel spoke up, **"Have you learned nothing of the stubbornness of pirates? You might as well accept it. We're going with you."** His words held a sense of unwavering loyalty, a testament to the bond they all shared. Jakob looked around at his crew, he finally understood that they were more than just a crew. They were his brothers, his family. In that moment, he finally understood that this was where he was meant to be all along, surrounded by people who accepted him for who he truly was. Their loyalty and faith in him over the years overwhelmed him.

His voice quivered, **"I can't express my gratitude enough. This is personal boys. I know I have asked of you that is more than required, and never once have any of you hesitated or doubted. You are my family. I love all of you."**

Gabriel's voice cut through the air, **"Tato, we've been with you since the beginning. You led us out of The Hoods, to where we are now. You should have been the captain, and you know it. We've been through thick and thin. You can't do this alone. We'll follow wherever you lead."** The rest of the crew echoed their agreement. The crew members exchanged glances, a silent understanding passing between them. They were a family, bound by loyalty and love, and they would face whatever challenges awaited them together.

Jerms couldn't help but crack a joke, **"And sure, we don have to be calling yah Tato anymore mate."** His attempt at lightening the mood was met with a few chuckles, a brief respite from the weight of the situation. The crew quickly scattered to gather their belongings for the upcoming adventure. The room buzzed with energy; the Men of Mayhem were always up for a fight.

**"I've never been to the Legion nation before,"** Simko admitted.

**"The Guardian, that's crazy!"** Nando exclaimed, **"We're about to witness history in the making."**

**"For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. Mata knew the way."** Martin whispered words from the Scriptures as he admired Jakob.

**"I have something for you,"** Gabriel said, pulling out a piece of parchment. **"Your girl left it for you. It seems like she knew you would come to your senses."** Jakob took the paper

that read "*Jackson Guard*" and instantly understood what she meant. As he read the note, a smile spread across his face.

**"Well, at least now I know why you have a thing for brunettes,"** Gabriel joked.

**"Shut up."** Jakob replied with a slight smirk on his face. He folded the note carefully and tucked it into his pocket. The path ahead was not going to be easy, but Jakob held onto hope. He wasn't sure what awaited them there or what the plan was to save his kingdom, but he had faith that they would make it in time.

After a quick preparation the crew stood on the deck of the Dauntless, contemplating their next move. The journey by boat to the mainland seemed tempting, offering a relatively short passage. Alternatively, they could set sail directly to the Legion nation, aiming to reach their destination. However, the presence of relentless patrols from the Republic and The Twelves loomed over their plans to head directly to the Legion capital. Even with the Dauntless, a formidable vessel, navigating through enemy lines would prove to be a perilous endeavor and may take too long. After careful consideration, they concluded that their best course of action would be to embark on a daring mission: sneaking through the mainland of The Colonies and reaching Jackson Guard on Rovers. Celeste had left Jakob with the coordinates of an old watch tower on the outskirts of the capital of the Legion Nation. It held the promise of an easier path to infiltrate Stryder's Keep, the heart of their mission. However, they knew that before venturing any further, they would need a reliable ally to help them navigate the treacherous landscape of The Colonies.

**"Do you still have contact with Rico?"** Jakob inquired.

**"Yeah, I ain't even seen o'll boy since Cyrus got taken out, you know what I'm sayin. It's been a minute since we crossed paths type shii."** Smiffy replied.

Gabriel chimed in, offering a glimmer of insight. **"I've heard whispers of Rico's deep involvement with The Families."**

**"Send him a message,"** Jakob commanded, **"Let him know we are in need for his assistance. We can't get through The Colonies without a trustworthy guide."** With their plan in motion, they set sail towards the mainland. The sea breeze whipped through their hair as they navigated the sea, careful to avoid the watchful eyes of enemy ships. The crew's hearts pounded in their chests, their senses heightened, as they evaded the clutches of The Twelves.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, they glimpsed the shores of the southern mainland. The port of The Colonies sprawled before them. The city had undergone a transformation since their last visit. The west-end area, once known as the Hoods, had become the imposing prison complex. The Republic, in alliance with The Convent, had firmly established control over the south mainland, successfully eradicating the presence of most pirates.

However, remnants of the Syndicate persisted, adapting to the changing landscape and continuing their illegal activities in the dark. Their contact with Rico proved to be a stroke of luck. As they approached the mainland, a small boat approached their ship, and to their relief, it was a friendly face - Rico, who had now become Ricardo Villasenor, the influential Shot Collar of the Villasenor family within the Syndicate. Ricardo had a better plan in mind. With his strategic connections, he held the key to their safe passage. He explained that their journey by sea would take too long for their urgent mission, as there were too many Twelves ships patrolling

the western coast. It would be wise for the crew to abandon the ship and opt for a faster and safer mode of transportation.

They would briefly dock at McMillion port of Fontania, where he would have Rovers ready for them. With Rico's extensive knowledge of the city's underbelly, they would skillfully evade the authorities and slip away unnoticed. By avoiding a security checkpoint at the city of Free Fair, they would be able to travel through open plains leading straight to the Great Divide mountains, which guarded the territory of the Legion Nation from the south. As they got into the mountain range the journey through rugged terrain became challenging, even with the Rovers. The landscape transformed to dense foliage, towering trees and rocky outcrops. However, if the crew pressed on without rest, they could reach a pathway nestled in the forest mountains closest to Jackson Guard in just a day and a half.

Finally, they arrived at a hidden pathway that led the crew right up to the watchtower. The Jackson Guard tower stood as a silent sentinel, a relic of a bygone era. The tower, one of the eight towers-built centuries ago by the Legion nation to protect the mountains from Goblin incursions. As the crew hid on the edge of forest, they discovered sizable congregation of men, their figures cloaked in black hooded robes and adorned with black leather tunics.

**"Rangers,"** Jakob whispered under his breath, his mind racing with questions and anticipation. The Rangers, renowned for their unwavering loyalty to the Legion nation, were a revered and formidable force. Known for their stealth and mastery of the wilderness, they were the watchers of the Shadowlands, defending the nation against any threat that dared to encroach upon its territory. Jakob's heart swelled with a mix of relief and apprehension. Their presence could either be a blessing or a curse, depending on their intentions.



**"Tato?"** Smiffy whispered.

Ignoring him, Jakob continued his search for Celeste.

**"Jakob?"** Gabriel called out.

**"What?"** Jakob turned back, only to find his crew surrounded by men with blades at their necks. The Legion Rangers pushed Jakob and his crew out from behind the trees, drawing everyone's attention. They were brought in front of the man in charge, who had a peculiar scar on his cheek.

**"Who are these men?"** the man inquired.

**"They approached from the south sir. They don't seem to be Fred's spies,"** another man responded.

**"General Frizela, you haven't aged a bit,"** Jakob exclaimed, breaking the tension in the air. All eyes turned towards Jakob, and the general regarded him with suspicion.

**"My name is Jakob, son of Joseph. I have returned,"** Jakob declared confidently. However, instead of the response he had hoped for, the men burst into laughter. From behind the group, a figure emerged. It was Master Hanes, the Bowhunter.

**"I knew Jakob. He is dead. We've encountered imposters like you before. The Guardian is no more."** Master Hanes stated firmly, his voice carrying a hint of disdain.

**"He's telling the truth,"** Celeste interjected, pushing her way forward, her voice filled with conviction.

**"Celeste, he's lying. It can't be true,"** Aleki protested, his disbelief evident in his voice.

**"You still like Beignets fat boy."** Jakob yelled out to Aleki, instantly recognizing his best friend from a lifetime ago, now a grown man and noticeably thinner.

**"He's telling the truth. I found him in the south. The King has returned. I can guarantee it,"** Celeste insisted.

**"How can you prove it?"** Aleki asked.

**"You know how,"** Celeste replied.

**"We can't. The last time we summoned the beast, he killed two of my men,"** General Frizela objected.

**"This is the best way. If it's really him, the beast won't hurt him, or us."** Celeste explained.

**"Ahh, damn it. Get him up,"** The general commanded. The rest of the men were pulled aside, leaving Jakob alone.

**"What's going on, Lest?"** Jakob asked.

**"Trust me, you'll be okay,"** Celeste reassured him, her eyes darting towards the approaching danger. Abruptly, a haunting sound came from the depths of the forest, causing even the birds to stir. A rumbling growl vibrated through the air, accompanied by the crackling of tree branches. And then, with a gradual emergence, a monstrous creature revealed itself. A Fontania Tiger, said to be extinct.

**"Tiberius?"** He thought to himself.

Once a pet of Jakobs, now had transformed into a formidable beast, a monstrous incarnation of terror. Towering and muscular, his once plump form had changed into a menacing silhouette. His

ebony fur now gleamed with a dark, sinister sheen, while his paws were now adorned with razor-sharp claws that could rend flesh with ease. The snowy undercoat, once a symbol of innocence, now contrasted starkly against the beast's ferocious features. Moving with a predatory grace, Tiberius prowled on all fours, his eyes glinting with hunger. Gone was the curiosity that once twinkled in his pointy ears. They now stood upright, alert and attuned to every sound, every movement in his domain.

**"Tiberius,"** Jakob exclaimed, his voice cracking.

**"Tiberius, it's me, buddy,"** he called out. The cat circled him, emitting a low growl. Then, it gracefully lowered itself and pounced on Jakob. Witnessing this, most of the men shut their eyes in fear, but when they dared to open them again, Tiberius was affectionately licking Jakob and purring. Jakob laughed heartily and rose to his feet, gently stroking his beloved old friend, before the beast settled himself on the floor rolling to his stomach in submission. The cat now an ally, the men stood in awe.

**"It cannot be."** someone murmured.

Suddenly, everyone began to bow.

**"The Guardian has returned! The true king of Legion!"** Aleki declared.

Jakob stood there, moments of awe washing over him as he finally grasped his own importance. But this was just the beginning of the journey ahead.

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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