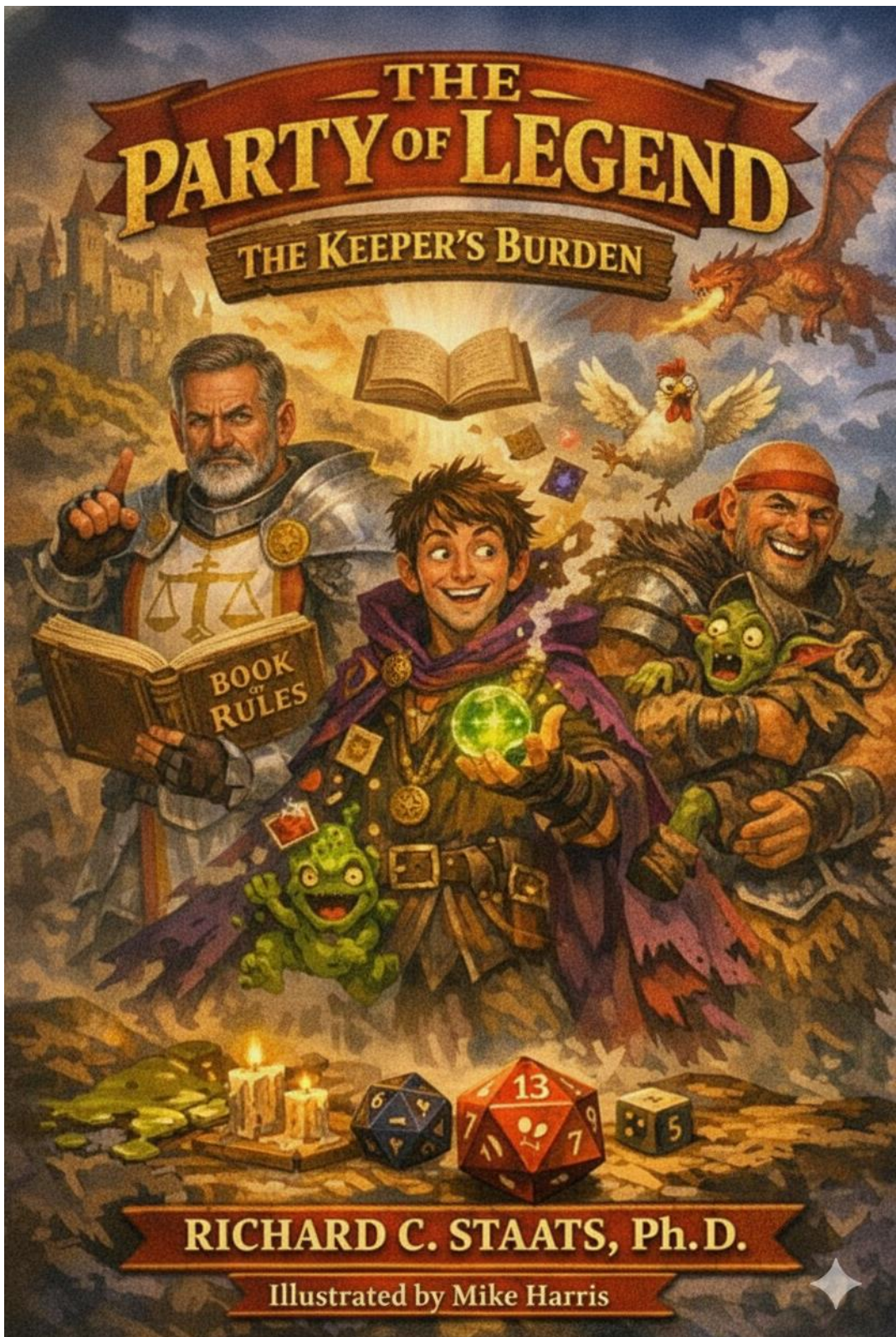




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INTRODUCTION

As Told by Merry Thom, Traveling Minstrel, Occasional Hero, and Full-Time Storyteller

If you're reading this, then congratulations — you've stumbled upon the greatest tale ever told.

Well... the greatest tale *I've* ever told. And I've told some pretty good ones. There was the time I sang so beautifully that a troll cried into his soup. Or the time I accidentally insulted a duke's mustache and had to escape through a window using only a banjo string and a loaf of bread.

But this story? This one is special.

It's the story of three heroes — unlikely heroes, if we're being honest — who traveled across islands full of monsters, mysteries, and magical mayhem. They fought chaos beasts, rescued entire villages, and even annoyed a few gods along the way. (Some gods are very easy to annoy. Trust me.)

Before we begin, you should meet them. After all, every great story needs great characters.

Let's start with the tall one.

Igný the Unbendable

Igný is a holy knight of Humakt, the god of justice, honor, and Very Serious Rules. Igný loves rules. He collects them the way some people collect seashells or shiny rocks. If there were a rule about how to collect rules, he'd follow it perfectly.

He's brave, noble, and always tries to do the right thing.

He's also about as flexible as a brick.

If you ever need someone to stand firm against evil, Igný is your man. If you ever need someone to improvise, bend the rules, or "just go with it," well... you might want to ask literally anyone else.

But don't worry. He gets better at that. Eventually.

Chance the Unpredictable

Chance is a warlock, which means he can cast spells. He's also a sorcerer, which means he can cast *more* spells. And he's blessed by Nikel, the god of luck, chance, and questionable decisions.

Which means he can cast spells *accidentally*.

Chance is clever, charming, and always has a trick up his sleeve. Sometimes the trick works. Sometimes it explodes. Sometimes it turns into a chicken. You never really know with Chance — and honestly, neither does he.

He pretends he doesn't need anyone. He pretends he's fine on his own.

But even the luckiest gambler eventually learns that the best bets are made with friends.

Xaras the Unstoppable

Xaras is a warrior. A mighty one. The kind of warrior who can lift an ogre, throw it over his shoulder, and then politely ask if it wants to wrestle.

He's honorable, brave, and surprisingly gentle for someone who names his wrestling moves things like "The Thunderous Turnip Toss."

Xaras doesn't talk much about his past. He doesn't talk much at all, really. But he fights for what's right, protects the people he cares about, and — though he doesn't know it yet — he's about to discover something he's been missing for a long time.

A family.

And Together...

Together, these three form the heart of the Party of Legend.

They don't always agree. They don't always get along. They don't always understand each other.

But they grow.

They change.

They become something greater than any of them could be alone.

And that, dear reader, is where our story begins — not with a battle or a monster or a magical explosion (though don't worry, we'll get to those), but with three heroes who have no idea how important they're about to become.

So sit back. Get comfortable. Maybe grab a snack. This tale has everything:

- enchanted islands
- giant hamsters
- mysterious scrolls
- witches, wizards, and warriors
- moral dilemmas
- magical disasters
- and at least one very dramatic leprechaun

And now, without further delay...

Let the adventure begin.

First, though, this is how they became the Party of Legend.

Here's an origin story that feels fun, heartfelt, and just a little chaotic — exactly the energy these three radiate when they collide for the first time.

How Igny, Chance, and Xaras First Came Together

A tale of rules, luck, and one very confused ogre.

The Rule, the Road, and the Wrong Turn

Igny the Unbendable was on patrol.

He wasn't supposed to be on *this* road — his official route was three miles east — but Rule 47b of the Humakti Field Manual clearly stated:

“If a traveler appears lost, a knight must ensure their safe passage.”

And Igny had spotted footprints.

Chaotic footprints.

Footprints that zigzagged, doubled back, and at one point appeared to dance a small jig.

Clearly, someone was lost.

Possibly drunk.

Possibly cursed.

Possibly both.

So Igny followed the tracks, muttering rules under his breath like prayers.

Chance Rolls a Natural Disaster

Chance the Unpredictable was, in fact, not lost.

He was *experimenting*.

Specifically, he was testing whether a spell of “minor conjuration” could be combined with a blessing of “slightly irresponsible luck” to create a shortcut through the woods.

It could not.

Instead, it created a glowing purple chicken the size of a horse, which immediately panicked and stampeded through the forest with Chance clinging to its neck like a man riding a feathery comet.

When the chicken finally vanished in a puff of glitter, Chance tumbled into a clearing, stood up, dusted himself off, and said:

“Nailed it.”

Then the ogre appeared.

Xaras the Unstoppable Meets an Unstoppable Problem

Xaras had been tracking the ogre for hours.

Not to slay it — oh no.

He wanted to *wrestle* it.

He’d heard rumors that this particular ogre, Grubnak the Wide, was undefeated in 37 consecutive grappling matches. Xaras respected that. Xaras admired that. Xaras wanted to suplex that.

So when he burst into the clearing and saw Grubnak looming over a dazed Chance, he didn’t hesitate.

He charged.

Grubnak charged.

They collided with the force of two mountains arguing.

Chance, caught between them, screamed something that sounded like “WHY IS THIS MY LIFE,” and accidentally cast a spell that turned one of Grubnak’s arms into a bouquet of daisies.

This only made the ogre angrier.

Igny Arrives, and Everything Gets Worse

Igny stepped into the clearing just in time to see:

- A furious ogre with one floral arm
- A warrior attempting to put the ogre in a headlock
- A warlock-sorcerer hybrid shouting, "I DIDN'T MEAN TO DO THAT"
- And absolutely zero rules being followed

Igny drew his sword.

"Cease your chaos immediately!" he commanded.

No one ceased anything.

The ogre swung.

Xaras grappled.

Chance panicked and cast something that might have been a shield spell or might have been a recipe for lemon tarts.

Igny charged in with righteous fury and perfect form.

It was, objectively, a disaster.

But it was a *coordinated* disaster.

Chance distracted the ogre with a burst of illusory fireworks.

Xaras used the opening to lift Grubnak clean off the ground.

Igny delivered a finishing blow that knocked the ogre unconscious without killing him — Rule 12: "Use only the force necessary."

When the dust settled, the three stood panting in the clearing.

The Moment Everything Changed

Xaras offered Chance a hand up.

Chance took it, still blinking soot out of his eyes.

Igny sheathed his sword and said, very seriously:

“You two require supervision.”

Chance grinned.

Xaras nodded solemnly.

And just like that — without ceremony, prophecy, or even a proper introduction — the three of them walked out of the clearing together.

Not yet friends.

Not yet legends.

But something had begun.

Something unstoppable.

Something unpredictable.

Something unbendable.

The start of a family.

CHAPTER ONE - The Scroll of Secrets

Point of View: Igny

Igny of Humakt stood as straight as a spear, hands clasped behind his back, while the village elder unrolled the ancient scroll. The parchment crackled like it hadn't been touched since the dawn of time. Or at least since breakfast.

"Behold," the elder said dramatically, "the prophecy of the islands."

Chance leaned over Igny's shoulder. "Ooh, prophecy. I bet it's about treasure."

"It is not always about treasure," Igny said, though he suspected Chance was probably right. Chance was annoyingly good at guessing things.

Xaras, towering behind them, crossed his arms. "If it *is* about treasure, I call first wrestling match with whoever guards it."

Igny sighed. "We do not wrestle guardians of sacred relics."

Xaras shrugged. "You don't."

The elder cleared his throat loudly, the universal sign for *please stop talking while I'm being important*. Igny straightened even more, which he didn't think was physically possible.

"This scroll," the elder continued, "describes the islands scattered across the sea. Each holds dangers, mysteries, and powerful artifacts needed to restore balance to our world."

Chance's eyes sparkled. "Artifacts, you say?"

"Yes," the elder said. "A magical hammer. Bracelets of incredible strength. Enchanted boots. A special amulet. And two keys — one gold, one silver — needed to return the islands to Zhalindor proper."

Igny nodded solemnly. "A noble quest."

Chance grinned. "A profitable quest."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "A quest with punching."

The elder blinked. "Well... yes. Probably."

He handed the scroll to Igny, who accepted it with reverence. The writing shimmered faintly, as if the words themselves were alive.

"This is a great responsibility," Igny said.

Chance peered over his shoulder again. "It also says something about a 'shipbuilding settlement' on Lucky Island. Maybe they'll give us a discount if we save the world."

"Or a coupon," Xaras added.

Igny ignored them both. "We must plan our next steps carefully. We should—"

He was interrupted by a tug on his gauntlet.

A small child stood beside him, eyes wide. "Um... excuse me, sir knight? Could you help us?"

Igny knelt. "Of course. What troubles you?"

"It's the green man," the child whispered. "He's trapped."

Chance raised an eyebrow. "Green man?"

Xaras perked up. "Is he big? Does he wrestle?"

The child shook her head. "He's small. And very angry."

Chance grinned. "Sounds like my kind of person."

Igny stood. "Lead the way."

The children guided them through the forest to a clearing where strange wooden creatures and towering iron guardians stood watch. They shifted nervously as the party approached.

Xaras stepped forward, cracked his neck, and gave them a look that said, *I could suplex you into next week*. The guardians wisely stepped aside.

Inside the cave, glowing purple bars formed a cage. And inside *that* cage...
...was a leprechaun.

A very irritated leprechaun.

"Finally!" he snapped. "Do you know how long I've been stuck in here? I've counted every pebble in this cave. Twice!"

Chance whispered, "I like him already."

The leprechaun straightened his tiny vest. "Name's Finn. And you lot must be the Party of Legend."

Ignny blinked. "We are... a party."

"Of legend?" Chance asked hopefully.

Finn waved a hand. "Close enough. Now get me out of here."

Ignny examined the glowing bars. "This appears to be a magical prison. We must proceed with caution."

Xaras poked the bars. They sizzled. "Ow."

Chance smirked. "Proceeding with caution, huh?"

Ignny ignored him and drew his sword. "Stand back."

With a precise strike and a burst of divine light, the bars shattered like glass. Finn stepped out, dusting himself off.

"About time," he muttered. Then he looked up at them, eyes suddenly softening. "Have you seen my sons? Two leprechauns, full of mischief, terrible tempers, fond of pranks?"

The party exchanged a very awkward silence.

Chance cleared his throat. "Well... funny story..."

It took a while to explain. Finn's face went through several shades of green — none of them pleasant. But after a long, tense moment, he sighed.

"What's done is done," he said quietly. "I swore to help you, and I will."

He handed Igny a small bag. "Fifty wheels. And a promise. Meet me on Leviathan Island. I have something for you."

Then, with a spin and a flash, he vanished.

Chance whistled. "Dramatic exit. I approve."

Igny looked at the empty space where Finn had stood. "We must honor his request."

Xaras nodded. "And maybe apologize again."

Chance shrugged. "Eh. He'll cool off."

Igny held up the scroll. "Then let us begin our quest."

The three heroes stepped out of the cave, unaware that their journey would take them across enchanted islands, through storms and battles, and into the heart of mysteries older than the sea itself.

But for now, they had a scroll, a mission, and each other.

And that was enough.

CHAPTER TWO - The Giant Hamster Incident

Point of View: Chance

Chance loved teleportation.

He loved the shimmer of magic, the whoosh of air, the way your stomach did a little flip like you'd just bet everything on a single roll of the dice.

Teleportation was unpredictable, chaotic, and occasionally turned your hair green for a week.

In other words: perfect.

So when the Disk of Worlds dropped the party into a sun-dappled forest on Lucky Island, Chance grinned. "See? Smooth landing. No explosions. No chickens. No—"

A scream cut through the trees.

Chance winced. "Okay, fine. *One* crisis."

Igný was already sprinting toward the sound, armor clanking like a very determined wind chime. Xaras thundered behind him, cracking his knuckles in anticipation.

Chance followed, muttering, "I swear, we can't go five minutes without something trying to eat us."

They burst into a clearing just in time to see two children — a girl kneeling beside a boy who was bleeding from his ears — and three enormous woodland creatures looming over them.

A giant hamster.

A giant chick.

And a giant squirrel.

All three were the size of small wagons.

Chance blinked. "Okay, I take it back. This is amazing."

"Not amazing," Igny barked. "Dangerous!"

Xaras cracked his neck. "I call the hamster."

The creatures turned toward the party, eyes glowing with unnatural magic. Chance felt the hairs on his arms rise.

"Summoned creatures," he said. "Someone brought them here."

"Then we unsummon them," Xaras said, charging forward.

The battle was loud, chaotic, and — in Chance's opinion — deeply entertaining.

The giant chick leapt into the air and unleashed a sonic blast that rattled Chance's teeth. He staggered back, clutching his ears.

"Okay! That's rude!"

He flicked his wrist, sending a bolt of crackling energy into the chick's feathers. It squawked indignantly.

Igny shield-bashed the giant squirrel, shouting, "In the name of Humakt, cease your aggression!"

The squirrel did not cease its aggression.

Xaras wrestled the giant hamster like it was the final round of a championship match. "Come on! Show me your moves!"

The hamster squeaked angrily and tried to sit on him.

Chance fired another blast. "Xaras, stop encouraging it!"

"I'm not encouraging it," Xaras grunted from beneath a mountain of fur. "I'm winning."

Eventually, with teamwork, magic, and one very dramatic suplex, the party defeated the creatures. They dissolved into shimmering goo — which

Ebenezer would have loved, but thankfully he wasn't here to collect samples.

Chance wiped his hands. "Well. That was weird."

Igný knelt beside the children. "Are you hurt?"

The girl shook her head. "Will was bleeding, but he's better now. Thank you."

Xaras ruffled the boy's hair gently. "You're brave."

Chance smiled. "And lucky. Very lucky. You should thank Nikel."

Igný gave him a look. "Chance. Not now."

Chance shrugged. "What? Luck is important."

The children led them to the nearby settlement — a bustling town filled with humans, reptile folk, and rhinomen working together. Chance liked it immediately. It had the energy of a place where interesting things happened.

The local healer thanked them profusely and patched up the party's wounds. "Those creatures have been appearing more often," she said. "Summoned by someone with dangerous intentions."

Chance raised an eyebrow. "Dangerous intentions are kind of our specialty."

Igný frowned. "We should remain vigilant."

Xaras nodded. "And maybe find more giant hamsters."

Chance laughed. "Please don't."

The party explored the town, discovering:

- a stadium hosting a loud, chaotic sporting event
- a consignment shop selling everything from rope to enchanted socks

- a mayor who insisted his daughter had been “kidnapped” (she had not)
- and an auction house where Chance haggled so aggressively the auctioneer looked ready to faint

But the most important discovery was this:

Ships were expensive.

Very expensive.

“Ten to twenty thousand Z?” Chance repeated, staring at the price list. “For a boat? A boat is just wood that floats!”

The shopkeeper shrugged. “Wood that floats *reliably*.”

Igný crossed his arms. “We must find another way.”

Xaras pointed to a job posting. “What about this? Someone wants help retrieving a book from the Uberhobgoblin.”

Chance made a face. “Ugh. Hobgoblins. Always so... hobgoblin-y.”

Another posting caught Igný’s eye. “This one seeks assistance with a ghost ship.”

Chance perked up. “Ghost ship? Now *that* sounds profitable.”

Xaras nodded. “And wrestle-able.”

Chance blinked. “You want to wrestle a ghost?”

Xaras shrugged. “I’ll figure it out.”

As the sun set, the party gathered in the town square.

Igný looked at the children they’d saved, now laughing and playing. “We did good today.”

Chance smirked. “We usually do.”

Xaras crossed his arms. "But someone summoned those creatures. Someone dangerous."

Chance nodded. "Which means our luck is about to get interesting."

Igný placed a hand on his sword. "Then we must be ready."

Chance grinned. "I'm always ready."

And as the stars rose over Lucky Island, the three heroes stood together — not yet a family, not yet the legends they would become, but already something important:

A team.

Even if they didn't know it yet.

CHAPTER THREE - The Witch on the Mountain

Point of View: Xaras

Xaras liked towns.

Towns had food.

Towns had people to protect.

Towns had wrestling rings (well, *stadiums*, but close enough).

Most importantly, towns had roofs tall enough that he didn't have to duck every time he walked through a doorway.

Lucky Island's settlement was lively and loud, full of cheering crowds from the stadium and the smell of roasted fish drifting through the streets. Xaras was just starting to relax when he noticed something strange.

A small, black, horned creature was staring at him.

He stared back.

The creature blinked.

He blinked.

The creature vanished.

Xaras frowned. "That's suspicious."

Chance, who was busy haggling with an auctioneer over the price of pearls the size of softballs, didn't look up. "Everything is suspicious to you."

Ignny, polishing his armor nearby, shook his head. "No. Xaras is correct. Creatures do not simply vanish without reason."

Xaras pointed. "It was right there. Small. Black. Horns. Looked like it wanted to bite someone."

Chance perked up. "Oh! That sounds like a quasit."

Ignny stiffened. "A demon."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "I can wrestle a demon."

Chance sighed. "You can't wrestle *everything*."

Xaras shrugged. "I can try."

Before they could investigate further, a flash of sickly green light burst across the street. A dozen townspeople suddenly turned into toads.

Toads.

Everywhere.

One hopped onto Xaras's boot and croaked angrily.

Chance blinked. "Okay. That's new."

Igný drew his sword. "This is dark magic."

Xaras scooped up the toad on his boot. "Don't worry, little guy. We'll fix you."

The mayor came running, waving his arms. "It's the witch! The witch on the mountain! Her demon familiar must be spying on us!"

Chance raised an eyebrow. "A witch? On a mountain? With a demon? Sounds like a whole... situation."

Igný nodded grimly. "We must investigate."

Xaras gently set the toad down. "After we fix them."

Fortunately, after about ten minutes, the toads shimmered and turned back into people — confused, damp, and very annoyed.

One of them glared at Chance. "Why was I a toad?!"

Chance shrugged. "Honestly? I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often."

While the crowd dispersed, Chance cast *Detect Magic* and spotted a faint shimmer near a barrel. He pointed. "There. Something invisible."

Igný didn't hesitate. He strode over, dove behind the barrel, and came up holding a small, squirming creature by the hair.

The creature shrieked. "Put me down! Put me down!"

It wasn't a demon.

It was a halfling.

A very angry halfling.

Chance blinked. "Okay, that's... not what I expected."

The halfling kicked wildly. "I'm not a demon! I'm a servant of the witch! She sent me to spy on you!"

Igný held him at arm's length. "You admit to serving evil?"

The halfling groaned. "She's not evil! She's just... misunderstood. And also very powerful. And also very angry that you defeated her summoned creatures."

Xaras crossed his arms. "She summoned the giant hamster?"

"Yes!" the halfling squeaked. "And she's furious you squished it!"

Xaras looked proud. "It was a good match."

Chance leaned in. "What does the witch want?"

The halfling hesitated. Then, under Garrack's intimidating glare (Garrack had wandered over at just the right moment), he spilled everything.

- The witch lived at the peak of the mountain.
- Her lair was protected by a magical barrier.
- Only those with a leaf-shaped token could enter.
- She feared the party's growing power.

- And she was watching them closely.

The halfling handed over his leaf token and a strange coin with an unfamiliar sigil.

Chance examined it. "This symbol... it's an Old One. But not the same one Markowitz worships."

Igny frowned. "Multiple Old Ones. That is troubling."

Xaras pocketed the leaf token. "Let's go talk to her."

Chance raised an eyebrow. "Talk? Really?"

Xaras shrugged. "Igny likes talking. You like talking. I like punching. We can do all three."

Igny sighed. "We will attempt diplomacy first."

Chance smirked. "And if that fails?"

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Then we wrestle."

The climb up the mountain was steep and winding. Birds watched them from branches. Squirrels chattered nervously. Even the wind seemed to whisper warnings.

Igny cast *Speak with Animals* and approached a squirrel. "Why do you watch us?"

The squirrel chattered anxiously. "Danger! Witch! Bad magic! Turned my cousin into a toad for a week!"

Igny nodded solemnly. "Thank you for the warning."

Chance whispered, "Did the squirrel really say that?"

Igny nodded. "Yes."

Chance grinned. "I love this island."

At last, they reached the witch's lair — a stone archway shimmering with magical energy. The leaf token glowed in Xaras's hand.

Chance took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's be smart. Let's be calm. Let's be —"

Xaras stepped forward and pressed the token to the barrier.

The barrier dissolved.

Chance sighed. "—or we can just do that."

Ignny raised his sword. "Stay alert."

Xaras cracked his neck. "Stay ready."

Chance grinned. "Stay lucky."

Together, they stepped into the witch's domain — unaware that this encounter would set off a chain of events leading to ghost ships, chaos creatures, and choices that would test them in ways they never expected.

But for now, they had a witch to meet.

And possibly wrestle.

CHAPTER FOUR - Bertie's Ship and the Stowaway

Point of View: Chance

Chance liked ships.

Ships were full of possibilities.

Possibilities were full of risks.

Risks were full of opportunities.

And opportunities were full of... well, treasure.

So when Bertie the rhinoman captain offered to charter his ship and seventy-five-man crew for ten days, Chance was already imagining all the ways this could go wonderfully right or hilariously wrong.

Igny, of course, was reading the contract line by line.

"Clause twelve," Igny murmured, "states that we are responsible for any magical damage caused by summoned creatures."

Chance waved a hand. "We don't summon creatures."

Xaras shrugged. "Not on purpose."

Igny sighed. "That is exactly my concern."

But in the end, the party agreed. They needed a ship. Bertie had a ship. And Chance had a feeling — a good one — that this was the start of something big.

They set sail the next morning, the salty wind whipping through Chance's hair as he leaned over the railing.

"Ahh," he said. "Smell that? Adventure."

Xaras sniffed. "Smells like fish."

Igny frowned. "Smells like responsibility."

Chance grinned. "Same thing."

The crew bustled around them — rhinomen hauling ropes, reptilefolk adjusting sails, and a few rabbitfolk darting between crates with surprising speed. Everything was going smoothly.

Suspiciously smoothly.

Which was why Chance wasn't surprised when a tiny, winged demon suddenly appeared on deck, claws raised, ready to cast a spell.

What *did* surprise him was the blur of motion that tackled the demon before anyone else even noticed.

A young man — lean, quick, and armed with a dagger — leapt from behind a crate and skewered the demon mid-spell. The creature dissolved into smoke with a pitiful squeak.

The young man stood, brushed off his shirt, and said, "Hi. I'm Flynn."

Chance blinked. "You were... hiding on the ship?"

Flynn nodded cheerfully. "Yep. Stowed away. Figured you could use the help."

Bertie stormed over, snorting. "A stowaway?! On *my* ship?!"

Flynn shrugged. "In my defense, your security is terrible."

Chance laughed. "I like him."

Igny crossed his arms. "You cannot simply appear on a vessel uninvited."

Flynn pointed at the spot where the demon had been. "Would you rather the ship be on fire?"

Igny paused. "...Fair point."

Xaras clapped Flynn on the back so hard the boy nearly fell over. "You fight well. You can stay."

Bertie groaned. "Fine. But he's *your* responsibility."

Chance winked. "Everything is my responsibility. Just ask Igny."

"I do not recall agreeing to that," Igny muttered.

The peace didn't last long.

A shout rose from below deck. A rabbitfolk man — shackled, terrified — burst onto the deck and cried, "I'd rather die than live as a slave!"

Before anyone could stop him, he leapt overboard.

The deck fell silent.

Chance's stomach twisted. "Slaves? Bertie... what exactly are you transporting?"

Bertie shifted uncomfortably. "I told you. Cargo."

Igny's eyes narrowed. "Human beings are not cargo."

Xaras stepped forward, fists clenched. "You kept people in chains?"

Bertie held up his hands. "It's legal! Mostly! And profitable! Very profitable!"

Chance felt something cold settle in his chest. This wasn't a puzzle or a prank or a gamble. This was wrong.

Igny drew his sword. "Release them. Now."

Bertie backed away. "You can't just—"

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "We can."

The crew froze. They weren't loyal to Bertie — not really. They were loyal to whoever kept them alive.

And right now, that was the party.

Bertie panicked. "Fine! Fine! I wish to be with my mum!"

There was a flash of magic — the unmistakable shimmer of a Wish spell — and Bertie vanished.

Chance blinked. "Well. That's one way to resign."

Flynn whistled. "Did he really use a Wish to run away?"

Igný sheathed his sword. "Cowardly. But effective."

Xaras nodded. "His mother must be very confused."

With Bertie gone, the crew looked at the party expectantly.

Tuppy, Bertie's first mate, cleared his throat. "So... I suppose you're the captains now?"

Chance grinned. "I always wanted to be captain."

Igný frowned. "We must free the slaves first."

And they did.

Seventy rabbitfolk and reptilefolk were unshackled, fed, and brought onto the deck. Many cried. Some hugged the party. One rabbitfolk woman insisted on giving Xaras a knitted scarf "for being so brave."

Xaras wore it proudly.

Chance distributed gems from Bertie's stash — one to each freed person. "Start fresh," he said. "Luck favors the bold."

Igný nodded approvingly. "A just choice."

Flynn leaned against the railing. "You know... you didn't have to do all that."

Chance shrugged. "Maybe not. But it was the right thing."

Xaras crossed his arms. "We protect people. That's what we do."

Flynn smiled. "Then I definitely picked the right ship."

They sailed to Spectacle Island, where the freed slaves disembarked to cheers from the townsfolk. The party was greeted with gratitude, applause, and a few suspicious glares from people who recognized Bertie's ship.

Chance waved. "We're the new management!"

Ignny added, "We do not condone slavery."

Xaras flexed. "We condone justice."

Flynn whispered, "You guys are dramatic."

Chance smirked. "You have no idea."

That night, as the party rested in the harbor, Chance looked out over the water. The moon reflected on the waves like a silver coin — a sign, perhaps, from Nikel.

He felt something shift inside him.

Responsibility.

Teamwork.

Doing the right thing even when it wasn't easy.

He wasn't sure he liked the feeling.

But he didn't hate it either.

CHAPTER FIVE - The Leviathan Awakens

Point of View: Igny

Igny of Humakt had faced many dangers in his life.

He had battled chaos creatures.

He had confronted witches.

He had even survived Chance's cooking.

But nothing — *nothing* — prepared him for the sight rising from the sea that morning.

The leviathan.

A creature so enormous that its shadow swallowed the sunlight. Its head alone was wider than their ship. Its eyes were ancient, cold, and far too interested in the three vessels sailing past Leviathan Island.

Igny gripped the railing. "By Humakt's blade..."

Chance peeked over the edge. "Okay. That's... big."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "I could take it."

Igny turned slowly. "Xaras. You cannot wrestle the ocean."

Xaras shrugged. "Not with that attitude."

The leviathan let out a low, rumbling roar that made the ship tremble. All three vessels — the party's ship, Captain Bartholomew's ship, and Captain Jasper's ship — immediately turned to flee.

"Hard to port!" Tuppy shouted.

"Harder!" Chance added.

"Harder than harder!" Xaras yelled.

Igny braced himself as the ship lurched. The sails snapped in the wind, and the crew scrambled across the deck. The leviathan surged forward, water churning around it like a storm given teeth.

Bartholomew's ship pulled ahead. Jasper's ship veered starboard.

The leviathan chose Jasper.

Igny watched helplessly as the monstrous head dipped beneath the waves... then erupted upward beneath Jasper's ship.

The vessel shattered like a toy.

Igny closed his eyes. "Humakt guide their spirits."

Chance swallowed hard. "We... we can't fight that."

Xaras stared at the waves. "Not even a little?"

"No," Igny said firmly. "Not even a little."

The leviathan turned toward the remaining ships.

"Brace yourselves!" Tuppy shouted.

Chance's eyes darted around. "We need a distraction! Something big! Something—"

Xaras snapped his fingers. "Lightning."

Before Igny could object, Xaras activated his magic ring and hurled a crackling lightning trap into the water behind them.

The leviathan plowed straight into it.

A massive jolt of electricity surged through the sea. The leviathan roared — not in pain, but in surprise.

Chance pumped a fist. "Yes! It worked!"

Igny shook his head. "It only startled it."

“That counts!”

The leviathan paused, confused, then turned back toward the remains of Jasper’s ship and began to feast.

Igný exhaled. “We are spared... for now.”

Xaras nodded. “Good. I wasn’t ready to wrestle it yet.”

Chance stared at him. “You’re never wrestling that.”

“We’ll see.”

Two days later, the party spotted their destination: **Baby Momma Island.**

Unfortunately, they also spotted three ships patrolling the coast — two flying the witch’s flag, and one flying the banner of the sorceress of the Seven Sisters Islands.

Igný frowned. “They are working together.”

Chance groaned. “Why do villains always form clubs? We never form clubs.”

Xaras nodded. “We should form a club.”

Igný ignored them. “We cannot approach in daylight. They will see us.”

As if on cue, the patrolling ships turned toward them.

“They saw us,” Chance said.

Igný sighed. “Of course they did.”

The enemy ships signaled toward the settlement on Baby Momma. The settlement signaled back.

Xaras frowned. “They’re talking.”

Chance squinted. “Probably saying, ‘Hey, look, it’s those heroes who keep ruining our plans.’”

Igny tightened his grip on his sword. "We must prepare. This will not be a simple rescue."

The party gathered on deck to plan.

"We have two ships," Igny said. "They have three."

"We have magic," Chance added.

"They have witches," Xaras countered.

"We have courage," Igny said.

"We have me," Chance said.

"We have wrestling," Xaras said.

Igny pinched the bridge of his nose. "We need a strategy."

Chance nodded. "Right. Strategy. Step one: don't die."

Xaras nodded. "Good step."

Igny sighed. "Let us begin again."

As the enemy ships closed in, the party stood together at the bow — three heroes facing impossible odds.

Chance felt his heart race.

Xaras felt his muscles tense.

Igny felt the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders.

But none of them stepped back.

None of them hesitated.

They were a team.

A strange team.

A chaotic team.

A team that occasionally made very questionable decisions.

But a team nonetheless.

And together, they would face whatever came next.

Even if it involved witches, sorceresses, or — Humakt forbid — more giant sea monsters.

CHAPTER SIX - The Beach of Secrets

Point of View: Xaras

Xaras liked beaches.

Beaches had sand for training.

Beaches had waves for cooling off.

Beaches had sunshine for drying your armor after someone (usually Chance) accidentally drenched you with a spell.

But this beach?

This beach had petrified ogres.

Two of them.

Standing in the middle of the sand like very confused statues.

Xaras tapped one gently. "Solid. Very solid."

Chance uncorked a glowing potion. "Not for long."

Ignny nodded. "Let us restore them."

The party poured the *Stone to Flesh* potions over the ogres. Slowly, cracks formed. Stone softened. Color returned.

With a loud gasp, the first ogre — Barken — blinked awake.

"Ugh," he groaned. "I hate being stone. Makes my elbows itchy."

The second ogre, Ergen, stretched so hard his joints popped like fireworks.

Xaras grinned. "Welcome back."

But before the ogres could fully regain their bearings, Ebenezer — who had wandered off, as wizards do — shouted from near the treeline.

"Everyone! Look! Runes!"

Xaras sighed. "Of course there are runes."

The runes were carved into a brick circle hidden beneath the sand. They glowed faintly, like they were waiting for something.

Ebenezer knelt beside them, eyes sparkling. “Teleportation magic! Slith symbols! Possibly dangerous! Definitely exciting!”

Igný stood guard. “Stay alert. Something feels wrong.”

Xaras scanned the treeline.

Something *was* wrong.

Dozens of shapes crouched in the shadows — goat-legged, horned, snarling. Broos.

Xaras opened his mouth to warn the others, but Barken beat him to it.

The ogre pointed his club at the trees and bellowed:

“HEY! THERE ARE BROOS HIDING IN THE TREES!”

Xaras slapped his forehead. “Subtlety is not an ogre skill.”

The Broos surged forward.

Gunther reacted instantly, slamming his staff into the sand. A swirling sandstorm erupted around the Broos, blinding them and forcing them back.

Chance whistled. “Nice!”

Igný nodded. “A wise move.”

Xaras cracked his knuckles. “I was ready to wrestle them.”

“You can wrestle later,” Chance said. “We have refugees to protect.”

Indeed — a dozen frightened villagers huddled near the water, waiting for the rowboats to return.

Merry Thom's folding ship had already carried the first group to safety, but the rest were still stranded.

Xaras planted himself between the refugees and the treeline. "No one gets past me."

Then the runes began to glow brighter.

Ebenezer gasped. "Someone is activating the teleportation circle from the other side! I need to set a ward!"

Igný stood over him protectively. "Do it. We will hold them off."

Xaras nodded. "We've got this."

He did not, in fact, "got this."

Because that was when the chaos creatures arrived.

Three monstrous shapes slithered out of the trees — eyeless, tentacled, dripping with slime.

Chance fired an Eldritch Blast.

Flynn shot a crossbow bolt.

Xaras charged with his maul raised high.

And then—

The creatures vanished.

Xaras skidded to a halt. "Hey! No fair!"

Igný closed his eyes, casting *Detect Enemies*. "They are still here. Invisible."

He pointed. "There!"

A beam of moonlight blasted down, revealing one of the creatures. The ogre swung wildly, missing by inches.

Then all three creatures reappeared at once, shrieking.

Tentacles lashed out.

One grabbed Xaras.

One grabbed Gunther.

One grabbed Barken.

Xaras struggled. "Let! Me! Go!"

He twisted, using every wrestling move he knew — the Side-Spin Suplex, the Reverse River Roll, even the rarely attempted Flying Fish Flip.

With a roar, he broke free.

Gunther and Barken were not so lucky.

The creatures lifted them into the air — higher, higher — sixty feet above the sand.

Xaras's heart dropped. "No!"

Chance fired spell after spell. Igny slashed upward. Flynn shot arrows until his quiver was empty.

Nothing worked.

Then Garrack stepped forward, clutching his divine ring.

"Humakt," he whispered, "hear me."

A pulse of invisible force rippled through the air.

All three chaos creatures collapsed instantly.

Gunther and Barken fell.

Xaras ran toward them, sand flying beneath his boots.

He reached them just as they hit the ground.

The impact shook the beach.

Xaras knelt beside Gunther, breath tight in his chest. “Please... please be okay...”

But Gunther did not move.

Neither did Barken.

Igny bowed his head. Chance looked away. Even Ebenezer fell silent.

Xaras felt something heavy settle inside him — heavier than any maul he had ever lifted.

He had lost friends before.

But never like this.

Never when he was supposed to protect them.

The rowboats returned. The refugees boarded. The party carried Gunther and Barken’s bodies with solemn care.

Before leaving, they searched the chaos creatures and found four clay trinkets shaped like playing cards.

Chance examined them. “Magic. Very magic.”

One by one, the party broke the cards:

- Garrack gained a surge of charisma
- Chance received a magic longsword
- Xaras found a bag of 8,000 Z
- Igny received a bag of 6,000 Z

But none of the gifts felt joyful.

Not today.

As the ships sailed away from the cursed beach, three enemy vessels appeared on the horizon.

The same ones that had chased them before.

Xaras stood at the bow, fists clenched.

He had failed Gunther.

He had failed Barken.

He would not fail again.

A crack of fire split the air.

A witch appeared on deck, falling to her knees.

"Xaras!" she cried. "Please — spare me! I must tell you my tale!"

Xaras exchanged a look with Igny and Chance.

This was far from over.

CHAPTER SEVEN - The Witch's Tale

Point of View: Chance

Chance had seen many surprising things in his life.

Exploding runes.

Invisible monsters.

A hamster the size of a wagon.

Xaras eating an entire roast boar by himself.

But nothing — *nothing* — prepared him for the moment a witch appeared on deck in a burst of fire, dropped to her knees, and shouted:

“Xaras! Please — spare me!”

Chance blinked. “Well. That’s new.”

Xaras blinked back. “Do I... know you?”

The witch scrambled to her feet, brushing soot off her robes. Her hair was wild, her eyes wide, and she smelled faintly of burnt cinnamon.

“I mean you no harm!” she said quickly. “I come in peace! I come in desperation! I come —”

“You come loudly,” Chance said. “Maybe take a breath.”

Igný stepped forward, sword drawn but lowered. “Explain yourself.”

The witch swallowed hard. “My name is Gladys. I was once a servant of the Old One... but I have fled. I have broken my pact. And now they hunt me.”

Chance raised an eyebrow. “They?”

Gladys nodded frantically. “The witch of First Home. The sorceress of the Seven Sisters. The Uberhobgoblin. All of them. They have joined forces.”

Xaras frowned. “Villains have clubs now.”

Chance sighed. “I *told* you they form clubs.”

Igny's eyes narrowed. "Why come to us?"

Gladys pointed at Xaras. "Because he spared me once."

Xaras blinked. "I did?"

Chance elbowed him. "Just nod. It makes you look heroic."

Xaras nodded solemnly.

Gladys continued, "I know things — secrets, plans, weaknesses. And I can help you. But only if you protect me."

Chance crossed his arms. "Protecting witches is not usually on our to-do list."

Igny added, "Nor is trusting them."

Gladys wrung her hands. "Please. I have nowhere else to go."

Xaras looked at her — really looked at her. She was scared. Alone. And running from something bigger than herself.

He knew that feeling.

"We help her," Xaras said.

Chance blinked. "We do?"

Igny hesitated. "Xaras... she may be dangerous."

Xaras nodded. "So are we."

Chance opened his mouth to argue — then closed it again. Because Xaras was right. And because Chance could feel something tugging at him, something he didn't like to admit:

Responsibility.

Ugh.

"Fine," Chance said. "But if she turns into a giant hamster, I'm out."

Gladys nodded vigorously. "No hamsters. I promise."

The witch told her tale as the ships sailed onward, enemy vessels still in pursuit.

She spoke of dark alliances.

Of rituals and runes.

Of a plan to seize control of the islands.

Of a power growing beneath the sea.

Chance listened, trying to piece it all together. "So the witch, the sorceress, and the Uberhobgoblin are working together?"

Gladys nodded. "Yes. They seek the keys. The artifacts. The power to reshape the islands."

Ignys frowned. "And they attacked Baby Momma?"

"Yes. They want something there. Something important."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Then we stop them."

Gladys looked at him with something like hope. "You truly mean to fight them?"

Xaras nodded. "We protect people. That's what we do."

Chance sighed. "We also get chased by sea monsters, attacked by chaos creatures, and nearly turned into toads. But yes. Protecting people is on the list."

Ignys placed a hand on his sword. "We will face whatever comes."

Gladys exhaled shakily. "Then I will help you. I swear it."

Chance studied her. She was scared. She was desperate. But she wasn't lying.

He could always tell when someone was lying.

(Usually because they were worse at it than he was.)

"Alright," Chance said. "Welcome to the team."

Gladys blinked. "Really?"

Xaras nodded. "Really."

Igný added, "But if you betray us—"

Gladys held up her hands. "I won't! I promise!"

Chance grinned. "Good. Because we already have enough problems."

As if on cue, a lookout shouted from the crow's nest:

"Enemy ships gaining!"

Chance groaned. "See? Problems."

Xaras cracked his neck. "Let them come."

Igný raised his shield. "We stand together."

Gladys clutched her staff. "I will do my part."

Chance took a deep breath.

This was it.

The chase.

The confrontation.

The moment everything would change.

He felt the familiar thrill of danger — the spark of chaos, the whisper of luck.

Nikel was watching.

And Chance was ready.

"Alright," he said. "Let's show them what the Party of Legend can do."

CHAPTER EIGHT - The Battle at Sea Begins

Point of View: Igny

The sea was restless.

Waves slapped against the hull.

Wind howled through the rigging.

Three enemy ships closed in behind them like wolves chasing a wounded deer.

Igny stood at the bow, shield raised, cloak snapping in the wind. He had faced danger before — many times — but something about this moment felt heavier. More important.

Perhaps it was the refugees sleeping below deck.

Perhaps it was the witch trembling beside him.

Perhaps it was the memory of Gunther and Barken, still fresh and painful.

Or perhaps it was simply that Chance was humming.

Chance only hummed when he was nervous.

Or plotting.

Or both.

“Alright,” Chance said, pacing the deck. “We need a plan. A brilliant plan. A plan so clever the gods themselves will applaud.”

Xaras nodded. “I like applause.”

Igny frowned. “We must be cautious. The enemy ships likely carry spellcasters.”

Gladys shivered. “They do. Powerful ones. The witch of First Home commands storms. The sorceress of the Seven Sisters commands illusions. And the Uberhobgoblin commands... well... hobgoblins.”

Xaras cracked his knuckles. “I can wrestle hobgoblins.”

Chance sighed. "You can't wrestle *everything*."

Xaras shrugged. "I can try."

The enemy ships drew closer.

One flew a tattered black flag marked with a twisted rune — the witch's symbol.

Another bore a shimmering blue sigil — the sorceress's mark.

The third was covered in spikes, chains, and questionable design choices — definitely the Uberhobgoblin's.

Igny raised his voice. "Crew! Prepare for evasive maneuvers!"

Tuppy saluted. "Aye, sir!"

Chance blinked. "Did he just call you 'sir'?"

Igny blinked back. "I... suppose he did."

Xaras grinned. "Captain Igny."

Igny stiffened. "No. Absolutely not."

Chance smirked. "Too late. It's canon now."

The first enemy ship fired a warning shot — a bolt of green fire that sizzled across the waves.

Gladys yelped. "That's the witch's magic! She's found us!"

Chance leaned over the railing. "Well, she's not very subtle."

Igny raised his shield. "Brace yourselves!"

The second ship unleashed a wave of shimmering illusions — phantom sea serpents rising from the water, snapping their jaws.

Xaras squinted. "Are those real?"

Chance shrugged. “Probably not.”

One illusion serpent lunged at him.

Chance screamed.

Xaras nodded. “Probably not real.”

The third ship — the hobgoblin one — began to close the distance rapidly.

Igný’s heart pounded. “We cannot outrun them. We must outsmart them.”

Chance grinned. “Finally! Something I’m good at.”

He rummaged through his bag, pulling out:

- three potions
- a deck of enchanted cards
- a half-eaten sandwich
- a small rubber duck
- and a scroll labeled *DO NOT USE UNLESS YOU REALLY MEAN IT*

Igný pointed. “What is that?”

Chance hid the scroll behind his back. “Nothing.”

Gladys gasped. “Is that—”

Chance cut her off. “Nope. Definitely not. Absolutely not The Scourge. Never heard of it.”

Igný narrowed his eyes. “Chance...”

Chance sighed. “Fine. It’s The Scourge. But we are *not* using it. It’s too dangerous.”

Igný nodded. “Agreed.”

Xaras nodded. “Agreed.”

Gladys nodded. "Agreed."

The scroll pulsed ominously.

Chance shoved it back into his bag. "Good talk."

The enemy ships drew even closer.

Tuppy shouted from the wheel. "They'll be in firing range any moment!"

Igný took a deep breath. "Then we must act now."

Chance nodded. "Right. Plan time."

Xaras cracked his neck. "Wrestling time."

Gladys clutched her staff. "Terrified time."

Igný raised his sword. "Courage, friends. We face this together."

Chance grinned. "Together. Like always."

Xaras placed a hand on Igný's shoulder. "We won't fail."

Igný felt something warm settle in his chest — something he wasn't used to.

Trust.

He nodded. "Then let us begin."

The first enemy ship fired again.

The battle at sea had begun.

And the Party of Legend — battered, grieving, but unbroken — stood ready to face it.

Whatever came next, they would face it together.

Even if Chance's plan involved rubber ducks.

Which, knowing Chance, it probably did.

CHAPTER NINE - The Plan of Questionable Brilliance

Point of View: Chance

Chance loved plans.

Not *good* plans, necessarily.

Not *safe* plans.

But plans with flair. Plans with style. Plans that made Igny sigh and Xaras grin.

And this plan?

This plan was a masterpiece.

Probably.

"Alright," Chance said, pacing the deck as enemy ships closed in. "We need to disable at least one ship, confuse the second, and outrun the third."

Igny frowned. "That is... ambitious."

Xaras nodded. "I like ambitious."

Gladys clutched her staff. "I like alive."

Chance waved a hand. "Relax. I've got this."

He reached into his bag and pulled out:

- a potion of fog
- a potion of slipperiness
- a deck of enchanted cards
- a rope
- a rubber duck
- and a small, glowing stone that hummed ominously

Igny pointed. "What is that?"

Chance hid the stone behind his back. "Nothing."

Gladys gasped. "Is that a Chaos Disruptor?!"

Chance winced. "Okay, fine, it's a Chaos Disruptor. But only a *small* one."

Igny's eyes widened. "Chance. That device is unstable."

"Only if you shake it."

Xaras reached for it. "Can I shake it?"

"NO!" Chance and Igny shouted together.

Xaras lowered his hand. "Okay. But I still want to."

The enemy ships drew closer.

The witch's ship on the left crackled with green lightning.

The sorceress's ship on the right shimmered with illusions.

The hobgoblin ship in the center was... well... ugly.

Chance pointed dramatically. "Step one: fog potion."

He hurled the potion overboard. A thick cloud of mist erupted around their ship, swallowing them in swirling gray.

Tuppy shouted from the wheel, "I can't see anything!"

Chance grinned. "Perfect."

Igny groaned. "This is not perfect."

Xaras squinted into the fog. "I can see fine."

Chance blinked. "Really?"

"No."

"Step two!" Chance said. "Slipperiness potion!"

He hurled the second potion at the hobgoblin ship. It shattered against the hull, coating the deck in a shimmering, oily sheen.

Moments later, hobgoblins began slipping, sliding, and crashing into each other like bowling pins.

Xaras laughed. "I love this plan."

Igný rubbed his temples. "This is chaos."

Chance winked. "Nikel would be proud."

"Step three!" Chance said. "Illusion disruption!"

He tossed a card from his enchanted deck toward the sorceress's ship. It burst into a swarm of glowing butterflies that fluttered into the illusionary sea serpents.

The illusions flickered, sputtered, and collapsed into sparkles.

Gladys gasped. "You dispelled her magic!"

Chance shrugged. "Butterflies. Very underrated."

"Step four!" Chance said. "Rubber duck."

Igný stared. "Chance. What does the duck do?"

Chance tossed it into the water. It bobbed cheerfully.

"Absolutely nothing," Chance said. "But it confuses people."

Xaras nodded thoughtfully. "It confuses me."

"See? Effective."

The enemy ships faltered.

The witch's ship slowed, blinded by fog.
The sorceress's illusions collapsed.
The hobgoblin ship spun in circles as its crew slid helplessly across the deck.
Tuppy shouted, "We're pulling ahead!"
Igny blinked. "It's... working."
Gladys clapped her hands. "We're escaping!"
Chance grinned. "Of course we are. My plans always work."
Xaras raised an eyebrow. "Always?"
Chance hesitated. "Usually."
Igny crossed his arms. "Occasionally."
Gladys whispered, "Miraculously."
Chance sighed. "Fine. But this one worked."

Then the Chaos Disruptor hummed louder.
Chance froze. "Uh-oh."
Igny's eyes widened. "Chance. What did you do?"
"I didn't do anything! It's doing it on its own!"
The stone glowed brighter, vibrating in Chance's hand.
Gladys shrieked. "Throw it! Throw it now!"
Chance hurled the Disruptor overboard.
It hit the water.
There was a flash of purple light.
A shockwave rippled across the sea.

The enemy ships rocked violently.
Illusions shattered.
Magic sputtered.
The witch's lightning fizzled out.
The sorceress's sails went limp.
The hobgoblin ship spun like a top.

And then...

Silence.

The sea calmed.
The fog thinned.
The enemy ships drifted, powerless.

Chance exhaled. "See? Perfect plan."

Igný stared at him. "Chance. That was reckless. Dangerous. Irresponsible."

Xaras clapped Chance on the back. "And awesome."

Chance grinned. "Thank you."

Igný sighed. "We must discuss your decision-making."

Chance shrugged. "We can discuss it later. Preferably never."

Gladys leaned over the railing. "They're not following us anymore."

Tuppy shouted, "We're in the clear!"

Chance smiled.

For now, at least, they were safe.

But deep down, he knew this wasn't over.

The witch.
The sorceress.
The Uberhobgoblin.
The leviathan.
The chaos creatures.

The runes.

The keys.

The artifacts.

Everything was connected.

And the Party of Legend was right in the middle of it.

Chance took a deep breath.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s see what comes next.”

CHAPTER TEN - The Calm Before the Storm

Point of View: Xaras

The sea was calm.

Too calm.

Xaras sat on the deck with his legs crossed, staring out at the horizon. The waves rolled gently beneath the ship, the sky glowed orange with sunset, and for the first time in days, nothing was trying to eat them, chase them, or turn them into amphibians.

It was unsettling.

Chance flopped down beside him. "You look like you're thinking."

"I am," Xaras said.

Chance blinked. "Oh. Should I... leave?"

Xaras shook his head. "No. You can stay."

Chance leaned back on his elbows. "Good. Thinking is exhausting. I prefer to do it in groups."

Xaras didn't smile, but he felt the corner of his mouth twitch. Just a little.

Below deck, the refugees slept soundly. Igny was helping Tuppy repair a damaged railing. Gladys was nervously pacing, muttering spells under her breath. Flynn was teaching a rabbitfolk child how to throw a dagger (Igny would disapprove, but Flynn insisted it was "educational").

And Xaras... Xaras was thinking.

About Gunther.

About Barken.

About the chaos creatures.

About the way Chance had looked when the Disruptor nearly exploded.

About the way Igny had stood between the refugees and danger without hesitation.

About the way Gladys had begged for protection.

He wasn't used to thinking this much.

He wasn't used to feeling this much.

He wasn't used to... caring this much.

Chance nudged him. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Thinking."

Xaras sighed. "I failed."

Chance blinked. "What? When?"

"On the beach," Xaras said quietly. "Gunther. Barken. I couldn't save them."

Chance's expression softened. "Xaras... that wasn't your fault."

"I was supposed to protect them."

"You did everything you could."

Xaras shook his head. "Not enough."

Chance was silent for a moment — a rare moment — before he said, "You know... Igny thinks he fails every time someone breaks a rule. I think I fail every time a plan goes wrong. But you? You think you fail every time someone gets hurt."

Xaras stared at him.

Chance shrugged. "We all fail. That's part of being heroes. But we also get back up. That's the other part."

Xaras looked back at the horizon. "I don't want to lose anyone else."

Chance nodded. "Then we won't. Not if we stick together."

Xaras frowned. "Together?"

Chance smirked. "Yeah. You know. As a team. A group. A... what's the word...?"

Xaras blinked. "Family?"

Chance froze. "Whoa. Easy. Let's not get emotional."

Xaras shrugged. "It fits."

Chance looked away. "Maybe. A little."

Igný approached, wiping sweat from his brow. "The repairs are complete. The ship is seaworthy again."

Chance grinned. "Good. Because we're going to need it."

Igný nodded. "Indeed. The witch's tale troubles me. The alliances forming... the rituals... the keys... the artifacts... something dark is coming."

Xaras stood. "Then we face it."

Igný placed a hand on his shoulder. "Together."

Chance groaned. "Oh great. Now *you're* saying it."

Igný raised an eyebrow. "Saying what?"

"Nothing," Chance muttered.

Xaras smiled — a real smile this time.

Gladys hurried over, clutching a scroll. "I've been thinking," she said breathlessly.

Chance whispered to Xaras, "Uh-oh. She's thinking too."

Gladys continued, “The witch and the sorceress... they’re not just working together. They’re preparing something. Something big. Something involving the islands.”

Igny frowned. “Explain.”

Gladys unrolled the scroll. “There are places — ancient places — where the barriers between worlds are thin. The runes on the beach were one. The witch is searching for more.”

Chance leaned in. “Why?”

Gladys swallowed. “To open a door.”

Xaras crossed his arms. “A door to what?”

Gladys whispered, “To the Old Ones.”

The wind seemed to pause.

Chance’s smile faded.

Igny’s jaw tightened.

Xaras felt a chill run down his spine.

Igny spoke first. “Then we must stop them.”

Gladys nodded. “Yes. But you’ll need help. Allies. Artifacts. Knowledge.”

Chance smirked. “Good thing we’re collecting all three.”

Xaras cracked his knuckles. “Where do we go next?”

Gladys pointed to the map. “Baby Momma Island. The witch and the sorceress want something there. Something important.”

Igny nodded. “Then that is our destination.”

Chance stood. “And we’ll get there before they do.”

Xaras looked at his friends — Igny, steady and strong; Chance, clever and unpredictable; Gladys, frightened but brave; Flynn, eager and loyal.

His team.

His people.

His family.

He nodded. "Let's go."

CHAPTER ELEVEN - Baby Momma Island

Point of View: Igny

Igny had seen many strange things in his life.

He had seen a leprechaun trapped in a magical cage.

He had seen a hamster the size of a wagon.

He had seen Chance's laundry pile, which was arguably the most terrifying of all.

But nothing prepared him for Baby Momma Island.

The island looked peaceful from a distance — palm trees swaying, waves glittering, birds chirping. But as the ship approached the shore, Igny felt a chill crawl up his spine.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

"Do you feel that?" Igny asked quietly.

Chance nodded. "Yep. That's the feeling of 'we're about to get into trouble.' I know it well."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Good. I was getting bored."

Gladys shivered. "The witch and the sorceress were here. I can feel the residue of their magic."

Igny frowned. "Then we must proceed with caution."

Chance grinned. "Or we can proceed with style."

Igny sighed. "Chance. Please."

The party disembarked with a small landing crew — Flynn, Gladys, and a few brave volunteers. The beach was quiet. Too quiet.

Xaras sniffed the air. "Smells like... smoke."

Chance sniffed too. "Smells like... burnt magic."

Igny sniffed. "Smells like... danger."

Flynn sniffed. "Smells like fish."

Everyone stared at him.

"What?" Flynn said. "It does."

They followed a narrow path inland. The trees grew thicker, the shadows deeper. Strange symbols were carved into the trunks — spirals, runes, and shapes that made Igny's skin crawl.

Gladys pointed. "Those are Old One markings. Very old. Very powerful."

Chance poked one with a stick. "Should I not touch these?"

"NO!" Gladys shrieked.

Chance dropped the stick. "Okay, okay! Sheesh."

They reached a clearing — and froze.

The settlement was in ruins.

Huts burned.

Boats smashed.

Supplies scattered.

The ground scorched with magical residue.

Igny's heart tightened. "We are too late."

Xaras clenched his fists. "Who did this?"

Gladys swallowed. "The witch. The sorceress. Their forces. They were searching for something."

Chance kicked a broken crate. "Searching for what? A souvenir? A magical coconut?"

Gladys shook her head. "Something important. Something hidden."

Igný knelt beside a charred symbol burned into the sand. "This is a summoning rune."

Chance groaned. "Oh great. More summoning."

Xaras cracked his neck. "Good. I can wrestle summoned things."

Igný stood. "We must find survivors."

They searched the ruins.

They found footprints.

They found signs of struggle.

They found a half-burned journal.

They found a broken staff.

They found a trail leading deeper into the jungle.

But they found no people.

Until—

"Help!" a voice cried.

The party sprinted toward the sound.

A small group of villagers huddled beneath a fallen tree, trapped by debris.

Igný and Xaras lifted the trunk easily, freeing them.

"Thank you!" a woman gasped. "They came out of nowhere — witches, monsters, chaos beasts — they took our people!"

Igný knelt. "Where?"

She pointed toward the mountains. "They said something about a ritual. Something about 'the heart of the island.'"

Gladys paled. "No. No, no, no. They're going to open a conduit."

Chance blinked. "A what now?"

"A doorway," Gladys whispered. "A doorway to the Old Ones."

Xaras frowned. "That sounds bad."

"It is," Gladys said. "Very."

Ignys stood tall. "Then we must stop them."

Chance nodded. "Agreed. But first—"

He pointed toward the treeline.

A figure stood there.

Watching them.

A tall figure.

Cloaked.

Hooded.

Holding a staff crackling with green fire.

The witch of First Home.

She smiled.

"Hello, heroes."

CHAPTER TWELVE - The Witch's Challenge

Point of View: Chance

Chance had seen villains before.

Some were loud.

Some were sneaky.

Some were so dramatic they practically traveled with their own theme music.

But the witch of First Home?

She was all three.

She stepped out of the treeline like she owned the island, her cloak billowing even though there was no wind. Her staff crackled with green fire. Her smile was the kind that said, *I know something you don't, and you're not going to like it.*

"Hello, heroes," she purred.

Chance whispered to Igny, "Okay, she's definitely got theme-music energy."

Igny didn't respond. His jaw was set, his hand on his sword.

Xaras stepped forward. "You hurt these people."

The witch tilted her head. "Yes. And?"

Xaras blinked. "And that's bad."

The witch sighed. "Morality. How quaint."

Chance stepped between them. "Alright, let's skip the monologue. What do you want?"

Her smile widened. "A deal."

Chance groaned. "Of course you do."

The witch raised her staff, and green fire swirled into the shape of a map — the islands, glowing with runes and symbols.

"You seek the keys," she said. "The artifacts. The power to restore the islands."

Igný nodded cautiously. "Yes."

"And I," she said, "seek to open the conduit."

Gladys gasped. "You can't! The Old Ones—"

"—will return," the witch finished. "And I will be the one who brings them forth."

Chance crossed his arms. "Okay, so your plan is 'destroy the world.' Got it."

The witch rolled her eyes. "Not destroy. Transform. Improve. Rebuild."

Xaras frowned. "With monsters?"

"With power," she corrected.

Igný stepped forward. "We will not allow it."

The witch smirked. "You misunderstand. I'm not asking for permission. I'm offering a choice."

Chance raised an eyebrow. "A choice?"

She pointed her staff at the villagers huddled behind the party.

"Leave this island," she said. "Walk away. Do not interfere. And I will let them live."

The villagers gasped.

Igný's eyes narrowed. "And if we refuse?"

The witch shrugged. "Then I will finish what I started."

Xaras growled. "You won't touch them."

The witch's smile sharpened. "Then choose."

Chance felt the weight of the moment settle on his shoulders.

This was a moral choice — a real one.
The kind Igny agonized over.
The kind Xaras felt in his bones.
The kind Chance usually avoided by making a joke.

But not this time.

He looked at Igny.

Igny looked at him.

Then they both looked at Xaras.

Xaras nodded. "We protect people."

Chance exhaled. "Yeah. We do."

Igny stepped forward, voice steady. "We refuse."

The witch sighed dramatically. "Heroes. Always so predictable."

She raised her staff.

Green fire erupted.

Xaras charged first, roaring.

Igny followed, shield raised.

Chance hurled a blast of crackling energy.

Gladys shouted a counterspell.

Flynn fired an arrow that whistled past Chance's ear.

The witch flicked her wrist.

A wave of green force slammed into them, sending the party skidding backward across the sand.

Chance groaned. "Ow. Okay. She hits hard."

Igny stood, bracing himself. "Again!"

They charged.

The witch unleashed a storm of magical bolts.
Igny deflected them with his shield.
Xaras dodged and rolled like a surprisingly graceful boulder.
Chance countered with a burst of wild magic that turned one of her spells into a shower of glitter.

The witch blinked. "Did you just—"
Chance shrugged. "Magic is weird."

The battle raged.
But the witch wasn't trying to win.
She was stalling.
Chance realized it too late.
She slammed her staff into the ground.
A shockwave rippled outward.
The earth split.
A glowing rune circle ignited beneath her feet.
Gladys screamed, "She's opening a conduit!"
The witch smiled sweetly. "Good luck, heroes."
And then—
She vanished.
The rune circle collapsed.
The jungle fell silent.

Igny lowered his sword. "She escaped."
Xaras punched the ground. "Coward."

Chance stared at the fading runes. "She wasn't trying to beat us. She was testing us."

Gladys nodded shakily. "And she knows you'll follow her."

Chance sighed. "Of course she does. We're predictable."

Ignny placed a hand on his shoulder. "Predictable is not always bad."

Xaras nodded. "Especially when predictable means 'we protect people.'"

Chance looked at the villagers — scared, exhausted, but alive.

He smiled.

"Alright," he said. "Let's clean up this mess."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - The Heart of the Island

Point of View: Igny

The witch's laughter still echoed in Igny's mind long after she vanished.

It wasn't loud.

It wasn't mocking.

It was worse.

It was confident.

Igny hated that.

He stood in the ruined clearing, sword lowered but still in hand, scanning the jungle for any sign of danger. Chance paced in circles. Xaras cracked his knuckles. Gladys muttered spells under her breath. Flynn checked the villagers for injuries.

The air felt heavy — like the island itself was holding its breath.

"We need to find what she was looking for," Igny said.

Chance nodded. "Right. Clues. Secrets. Hidden treasure. Preferably not cursed."

Gladys pointed toward the mountains. "The heart of the island is that way. The witch mentioned it during the attack."

Xaras frowned. "What is the heart of an island?"

Gladys swallowed. "The place where its magic is strongest."

Chance blinked. "Oh. So the dangerous part."

"Yes," Gladys said. "Very."

Igny sheathed his sword. "Then we go."

The path into the jungle was narrow and winding. Vines hung low. Strange birds called from the treetops. The air shimmered with faint magical residue — the kind that made Igny's armor hum.

Chance poked a glowing mushroom with a stick. "Do you think this is poisonous?"

Gladys shrieked. "Don't touch that!"

Chance dropped the stick. "Okay, okay! I'm just curious."

Xaras stepped over the mushroom. "Curiosity is how you get turned into a toad."

Chance pointed. "That happened once."

"Twice," Igny corrected.

Chance scowled. "It was a *small* toad."

They reached a stone archway half-buried in vines. Ancient runes glowed faintly along its surface.

Igny brushed away the leaves. "These symbols... they match the ones on the beach."

Gladys nodded. "Yes. This is another conduit site."

Chance peered inside. "Looks dark. And spooky. And probably full of traps."

Xaras grinned. "Good."

Igny sighed. "Xaras, not everything is a wrestling opportunity."

Xaras shrugged. "Most things are."

Inside the archway, the air grew cooler. The walls were carved with spirals, runes, and images of creatures Igny didn't recognize — serpents with wings, giants with too many arms, shadows with eyes.

Gladys shivered. "These carvings are warnings."

Chance squinted. "They look like doodles."

"They are not doodles," Gladys hissed. "They are depictions of the Old Ones."

Xaras frowned. "They look wrestle-able."

Gladys stared at him. "They are not wrestle-able."

Xaras shrugged. "We'll see."

At the end of the tunnel, they found a chamber.

A circular room.

A stone pedestal in the center.

And on the pedestal...

A glowing crystal sphere.

Chance whistled. "Ooh. Shiny."

Igny stepped forward cautiously. "Do not touch it."

Chance stepped back. "I wasn't going to touch it."

Xaras raised an eyebrow. "You were absolutely going to touch it."

Chance crossed his arms. "I was *thinking* about touching it. That's different."

Gladys approached the pedestal slowly. "This is a Heartstone. It amplifies magical energy. The witch must have been trying to activate it."

Igny frowned. "For what purpose?"

Gladys hesitated. "To open a conduit. To weaken the barrier between worlds."

Chance groaned. "Why do villains always want to open things? Doors. Portals. Boxes. Just leave things closed!"

Xaras nodded. "Closed things are safer."

Ignny studied the Heartstone. "Can it be destroyed?"

Gladys shook her head. "No. But it can be moved."

Chance blinked. "Moved? Like... picked up?"

Gladys nodded. "Yes. But only by someone with strong willpower."

Xaras stepped forward. "I'll do it."

Gladys shook her head. "No. Not strong muscles. Strong *mind*."

Xaras paused. "Oh."

Chance smirked. "I'll do it."

Ignny raised a hand. "No. I will."

Chance blinked. "You? Ignny, you're great at rules and honor and polishing armor, but this thing needs someone who can handle magical weirdness."

Ignny met his gaze. "And you believe that is you?"

Chance opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Thought about it.

"...Okay, fair point."

Gladys nodded. "Ignny is the best choice. His mind is disciplined. Focused. Unyielding."

Xaras nodded. "Like a rock."

Chance added, "Like a very shiny, very serious rock."

Ignny sighed. "Thank you. I think."

Ignny placed his hands on the Heartstone.

It pulsed.

A wave of energy surged through him — not painful, but powerful. Like standing in the center of a storm. He felt the island's magic. The witch's magic. The chaos magic. All swirling around him.

He held firm.

He would not bend.

He would not break.

He lifted the Heartstone.

The chamber shook.

The runes dimmed.

The air cleared.

Gladys gasped. "You did it!"

Chance grinned. "See? Shiny rock."

Xaras clapped Igny on the back so hard he nearly dropped the Heartstone. "Good job."

Igny steadied himself. "We must take this somewhere safe."

Gladys nodded. "Yes. Before the witch returns."

Chance looked toward the tunnel. "Speaking of which..."

Footsteps echoed in the distance.

Many footsteps.

Igny tightened his grip on the Heartstone.

Xaras cracked his knuckles.

Chance drew his sword.

Gladys whispered a spell.

Flynn readied his bow.

The witch hadn't given up.

And neither would they.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - The Ambush in the Jungle

Point of View: Xaras

Xaras didn't mind being chased.

He'd been chased by wolves.

He'd been chased by angry merchants.

He'd been chased by a giant hamster (twice).

But being chased by witches, chaos creatures, and an entire villain alliance?

That was new.

And he didn't like it.

"Move!" Igny shouted, Heartstone glowing in his hands as the party sprinted down the tunnel.

Chance ran beside him, panting. "I just want to say — this is not my fault!"

Gladys shrieked, "They're coming from both sides!"

Flynn yelled, "I told you we should've taken the left path!"

Xaras thundered behind them, ready to fight anything that got too close.

"Left path had spiders."

Flynn squeaked. "Oh. Right. Never mind."

They burst out of the tunnel and into the jungle clearing.

And froze.

Because the clearing was full.

Dozens of cloaked figures stood between them and the beach. Some held staffs crackling with magic. Others carried blades. A few had glowing eyes that Xaras did not like at all.

Chance whispered, "Okay. That's... a lot."

Igný raised his shield. "Stand firm."

Gladys whimpered. "I am absolutely not standing firm."

Xaras stepped forward. "I'll hold them off."

Igný grabbed his arm. "No. We stay together."

Xaras blinked. "But—"

"Together," Igný repeated.

Xaras hesitated.

Then nodded.

The cloaked figures stepped aside.

And the witch of First Home walked into view.

She looked annoyed.

Not furious.

Not triumphant.

Just... annoyed.

"I told you to leave," she said.

Chance shrugged. "We're bad at instructions."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "And we don't run."

The witch sighed. "You really are predictable."

Igný lifted the Heartstone. "You will not have this."

Her eyes narrowed. "Oh, I will. But I don't need to take it from you."

She raised her staff.

The ground trembled.

The trees shook.

And from the shadows emerged —

Chaos creatures.

Three of them.

The same kind that had killed Gunther and Barken.

Xaras's heart clenched.

Not again.

The creatures lunged.

Xaras roared and charged, swinging his maul with everything he had. Igny slashed with divine light. Chance hurled blasts of crackling energy. Gladys cast a shimmering barrier. Flynn fired arrows as fast as he could.

But the creatures were fast.

Too fast.

One grabbed Xaras by the leg and yanked him off his feet.

Another wrapped a tentacle around Igny's shield.

The third lunged straight for Gladys.

Chance shouted, "NO!"

He fired a wild surge of magic.

It exploded in a burst of rainbow light.

The chaos creature froze mid-lunge... then turned into a chicken.

A very confused chicken.

Xaras blinked. "Chance. Do that again."

Chance panted. "I can't! It was an accident!"

Igny grunted, wrestling with the tentacle. "Then make another accident!"

The witch snarled. “Enough!”

She slammed her staff into the ground.

A shockwave blasted outward.

The party was thrown backward.

The Heartstone flew from Igny’s hands —

—and Xaras dove for it.

He caught it mid-air, rolled, and sprang to his feet.

The witch’s eyes widened. “You —”

Xaras didn’t let her finish.

He charged.

Straight through the chaos creatures.

Straight past the cloaked figures.

Straight toward the beach.

“GO!” he roared.

Igny scrambled up. “After him!”

Chance grabbed Gladys and Flynn. “Move, move, move!”

The party sprinted after Xaras as spells exploded behind them.

They burst out of the jungle and onto the sand.

Their ship waited offshore, Tuppy waving frantically. “Hurry!”

Xaras didn’t slow down.

He splashed into the water, holding the Heartstone high above his head.

Igny followed.

Chance followed.

Gladys followed.

Flynn followed.

Behind them, the witch screamed in fury.

“STOP THEM!”

Chaos creatures charged onto the beach.

Cloaked figures hurled spells.

The water churned.

The air crackled.

Xaras reached the rowboat.

He shoved the Heartstone into Igny’s hands. “Take it!”

Igny grabbed it. “Get in!”

Xaras turned back toward the beach.

Chance grabbed his arm. “Xaras! No!”

Xaras shook his head. “I’m not leaving anyone behind.”

Flynn shouted, “Everyone’s here!”

Xaras blinked.

“Oh.”

Chance shoved him into the boat. “Then SIT!”

The rowboat shot toward the ship as spells exploded around them.

Tuppy hauled them aboard. “We’re leaving!”

The ship’s sails unfurled.

The wind caught.

The vessel surged forward.

On the beach, the witch shrieked in rage as the ship pulled away.

“You cannot run forever!”

Chance cupped his hands around his mouth. “We can run for a pretty long time!”

Ignny collapsed against the railing, clutching the Heartstone.

Gladys slumped beside him. “We made it.”

Flynn flopped onto the deck. “Barely.”

Xaras sat heavily, chest heaving.

Chance looked at him.

“You okay?”

Xaras nodded slowly.

“We stayed together.”

Chance smiled. “Yeah. We did.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - The Storm on the Horizon

Point of View: Chance

Chance liked storms.

Not the dangerous kind — the kind with lightning that tried to smite you personally (he'd had enough of that for one lifetime). But the dramatic kind? The kind that made the sky look like it was brooding over a tragic backstory?

Those were great.

Unfortunately, the storm forming over the ocean right now was definitely the dangerous kind.

Dark clouds churned like boiling ink. Lightning flickered inside them like angry fireflies. The wind howled across the deck, snapping the sails and making the ship groan.

Chance squinted at the sky. "Okay. That's not normal."

Gladys clutched the railing. "It's magical. I can feel it."

Igny nodded grimly. "The witch is summoning a storm."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Good. I like storms."

Chance stared at him. "You like *everything* that can kill us."

Xaras shrugged. "It keeps life interesting."

The Heartstone pulsed in Igny's hands, glowing brighter with every gust of wind. It hummed like it was trying to speak — or warn them.

Gladys approached cautiously. "It's reacting to the storm. The witch must be trying to activate another conduit."

Chance groaned. "Why does she keep opening things? Has she ever heard of a nice, safe *lock*?"

Igný ignored him. "Gladys. What does the Heartstone do?"

Gladys hesitated. "It... amplifies magic. All magic. If the witch gets her hands on it, she could open a conduit large enough to bring an Old One through."

Chance blinked. "Through what?"

Gladys pointed at the storm. "Through *that*."

Xaras frowned. "That seems bad."

Gladys nodded. "Very."

The ship rocked violently as a wave crashed over the bow. Tuppy shouted from the wheel, "We can't outrun this! The storm's pulling us in!"

Chance grabbed the railing. "Pulling us in? Storms don't pull!"

Gladys shouted over the wind, "Magical storms do!"

Xaras grinned. "I knew I liked this storm."

Igný braced himself. "We must stabilize the ship!"

Chance blinked. "How? With what? We don't have a 'stop magical storm' button!"

Gladys's eyes widened. "Actually... we might."

Chance stared. "We do?! Why do we never use the good buttons first?!"

Gladys pointed at the Heartstone. "If we channel its energy into the storm, we might disrupt the witch's spell."

Igný nodded. "Then we must try."

Xaras frowned. "What if it explodes?"

Gladys hesitated. "Then... we explode with it."

Chance threw up his hands. "Great! Perfect! Love that for us!"

Igný stepped to the center of the deck, holding the Heartstone high. Lightning flashed overhead, illuminating him like a very dramatic statue.

“Gladys,” he said, “tell me what to do.”

Gladys raised her staff. “Focus your will. Push the Heartstone’s energy outward. Let it counter the storm’s pull.”

Chance muttered, “This feels like a terrible idea.”

Xaras nodded. “Most good ideas do.”

Igný closed his eyes.

The Heartstone glowed brighter.

The wind howled louder.

The storm roared.

And then—

A beam of pure white light shot from the Heartstone into the sky.

The storm shuddered.

Lightning froze mid-flash.

The clouds twisted, recoiled, and—

Exploded outward in a shockwave of wind and light.

The ship rocked violently. Chance grabbed Xaras. Xaras grabbed the mast.

The mast grabbed nothing because it was a mast.

And then—

Silence.

The storm was gone.

Just... gone.

The sky cleared. The sea calmed. The wind softened.

Igný lowered the Heartstone, panting.

Gladys stared in awe. "You did it."

Chance blinked. "He did it."

Xaras nodded. "We did it."

Igný shook his head. "No. The Heartstone did it. I merely guided it."

Chance grinned. "Well, guide it again next time."

Gladys's smile faded. "There will be a next time."

Chance groaned. "Of course there will."

Gladys pointed toward the horizon.

A faint glow pulsed on a distant island — red, ominous, rhythmic.

"The witch is moving to the next conduit," she said. "And she won't stop until she opens one."

Igný tightened his grip on the Heartstone. "Then we must stop her."

Xaras nodded. "Together."

Chance sighed. "Okay, fine. Together."

Flynn leaned over the railing. "Uh... guys?"

They turned.

Flynn pointed at the water.

Something enormous moved beneath the waves.

Something with scales.

Something with glowing eyes.

Something that made the leviathan look small.

Chance whispered, "Oh no."

Xaras whispered, "Oh yes."

Igný whispered, "Humakt preserve us."

Gladys whispered, "That's not the leviathan."

The creature rose.

The sea boiled.

The ship shook.

And the next chapter of their adventure began.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - The Creature Beneath the Waves

Point of View: Igny

The sea bulged.

Not in the normal way waves rise and fall, but in the *something enormous is about to surface and we should all reconsider our life choices* kind of way.

Igny gripped the railing. "Brace yourselves."

Chance gripped Xaras. "I *am* bracing myself!"

Xaras grinned. "I'm excited."

Gladys hid behind Igny. "I'm terrified."

Flynn hid behind Gladys. "I'm behind whoever looks the least likely to die."

The water swelled higher.

Higher.

Higher.

And then —

With a roar that shook the ship, the creature rose from the depths.

It was massive.

It was ancient.

It was covered in scales that shimmered like molten gold.

Its eyes glowed with a deep, swirling blue — not hostile, but not friendly either.

Chance whispered, "That's not the leviathan."

Gladys nodded shakily. "No. This is older."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "I can wrestle it."

Igny didn't even look at him. "No. You cannot."

The creature towered over the ship, water cascading off its body like waterfalls. Its head alone was the size of a house. Its fins spread wide, casting shadows across the deck.

And then it spoke.

Not with words.

With a sound — a deep, resonant hum that vibrated through the ship, through the air, through Igny's bones.

Gladys gasped. "It's communicating!"

Chance blinked. "With humming?"

"Yes!" Gladys said. "Some ancient sea creatures speak through resonance!"

Xaras hummed back.

The creature paused.

Chance slapped Xaras's arm. "Don't hum at the giant sea god!"

Igny stepped forward, Heartstone in hand. The stone pulsed in response to the creature's hum.

Gladys's eyes widened. "It's reacting to the Heartstone!"

The creature lowered its head, staring directly at Igny.

The Heartstone glowed brighter.

The creature hummed again — softer this time, almost... curious.

Igny swallowed. "It's not attacking."

Chance exhaled. "Good. Because we'd lose."

Xaras shrugged. "We'd lose *gloriously*."

The creature dipped its head lower, until its glowing eyes were level with Igny.

The Heartstone pulsed.

The creature pulsed back.

Gladys whispered, "It's... testing him."

Igny steadied his breath. "I am Igny of Humakt," he said, voice steady. "We mean no harm."

The creature hummed — a long, low note that made the sails flutter.

Chance whispered, "Is that good?"

Gladys nodded. "I think so."

The creature raised its head, then slowly — very slowly — sank back beneath the waves.

The water calmed.

The sea stilled.

The creature vanished.

Xaras blinked. "Did we win?"

Chance shook his head. "No. We survived."

Igny lowered the Heartstone. "It was not an enemy."

Gladys nodded. "No. It was a guardian."

Flynn frowned. "Guardian of what?"

Gladys looked at the Heartstone.

Then at the horizon.

Then at the faint red glow pulsing from the distant island.

"The conduits," she whispered. "The Old Ones. The balance of the islands."

Chance groaned. “Why is everything always about balance? Can’t anything ever be about snacks?”

Xaras nodded. “Snacks are good.”

Ignny sheathed his sword. “We must continue. The witch will not stop.”

Gladys pointed toward the glowing island. “Then that is where we go next.”

Chance sighed dramatically. “Fine. But if another giant sea creature shows up, I’m quitting.”

Xaras grinned. “No you’re not.”

Chance sighed again. “No. I’m not.”

The ship turned toward the horizon.

Toward danger.

Toward mystery.

Toward the next chapter of their story.

And the sea — calm now, but watching — hummed softly beneath them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - The Island of Red Light

Point of View: Chance

Chance didn't like red glows.

Green glows? Fine.

Blue glows? Usually safe.

Purple glows? Suspicious, but manageable.

But red glows?

Red glows meant trouble.

And the island ahead of them was glowing red like a giant magical warning sign.

"Okay," Chance said, leaning over the railing. "That looks... ominous."

Igny nodded. "It is."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "I like it."

Gladys whimpered. "I don't."

Flynn squinted. "Is the island... pulsing?"

It was.

The entire island throbbed with a slow, rhythmic glow — like a heartbeat.

Chance shivered. "That's not normal."

Gladys shook her head. "No. That's conduit magic. Very old. Very dangerous."

Xaras grinned. "Very wrestle-able."

Chance stared at him. "Xaras, you cannot wrestle a *heartbeat island*."

Xaras shrugged. "Not with that attitude."

As the ship approached the shore, the glow intensified. The water shimmered red. The sand shimmered red. Even the palm trees shimmered red.

Flynn whispered, "This place feels cursed."

Gladys corrected him. "It *is* cursed."

Chance groaned. "Great. Perfect. Love that for us."

Igný stepped off the ship first, Heartstone in hand. The stone pulsed in response to the island's glow.

Gladys gasped. "It's resonating. The witch is close."

Chance looked around. "So where's the welcoming committee? Usually by now we're being chased by something with too many teeth."

Xaras pointed. "There."

Chance turned.

"Oh. Yep. There it is."

A group of cloaked figures emerged from the treeline — not witches, not sorceresses, not hobgoblins.

These were different.

Their cloaks were stitched with glowing red runes. Their eyes glowed faintly. Their movements were slow, synchronized, unnatural.

Gladys gasped. "Conduit guardians."

Chance blinked. "Guardians? Like... good guys?"

"No!" Gladys squeaked. "They're animated by conduit energy! They protect the ritual site!"

Xaras cracked his neck. "Good. I was getting bored."

Igný raised his shield. "Prepare yourselves."

The guardians stepped forward.

And then—

They stopped.

All at once.

Chance blinked. “Uh... did we break them?”

Gladys shook her head. “No. They’re waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Flynn asked.

A voice answered.

“Waiting for *me*.”

The witch of First Home stepped out from behind the guardians, her staff glowing with red fire.

Chance groaned. “Of course.”

Igny stepped forward. “We will not let you open the conduit.”

The witch smiled. “You’re too late.”

She pointed her staff toward the center of the island.

A pillar of red light shot into the sky.

The ground trembled.

The air crackled.

The island pulsed faster.

Gladys screamed, “She’s activating the conduit!”

Xaras roared. “Then we stop her!”

Chance drew his sword. “Right behind you!”

Flynn nocked an arrow. “I’m behind *him*!”

Gladys hid behind Flynn. “I’m behind whoever survives!”

Igný raised the Heartstone.

It glowed brighter than ever.

The witch's smile faded.

"Oh," she whispered. "You brought *that*."

Chance grinned. "Yep. And we're not afraid to use it."

Igný stepped forward, Heartstone blazing.

The witch stepped back, eyes narrowing.

The guardians surged forward.

The ground split.

The conduit roared.

And the battle for the Island of Red Light began.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - The Conduit Awakens

Point of View: Igny

The guardians charged.

Dozens of them, moving in eerie unison, their runes glowing brighter with every step. The ground pulsed beneath Igny's boots, matching the rhythm of the island's heartbeat.

The conduit was waking up.

And the witch was smiling.

"Stop them," she commanded.

The guardians obeyed.

Xaras met the first wave head-on, swinging his maul in a wide arc that sent three guardians flying.

"They're light!" he shouted. "Like punching scarecrows!"

Chance fired a blast of crackling energy. "Scary scarecrows!"

Flynn shot an arrow that pinned a guardian's cloak to a tree. "They're not even bleeding!"

Gladys squeaked, "They don't *have* blood! They're animated constructs!"

Xaras grinned. "Good. Less mess."

Igny stepped forward, raising the Heartstone. "We must reach the conduit!"

The witch laughed. "You won't."

The ground split open.

A pillar of red light erupted from the center of the island, swirling upward like a tornado made of fire and magic. The air vibrated with power. The trees bent away from it. The guardians' runes flared brighter.

Gladys gasped. "It's opening! The conduit is opening!"

Chance groaned. "Why does everything always open? Can't anything ever stay closed?!"

Xaras nodded. "Closed things are safer."

Igný tightened his grip on the Heartstone. "We must disrupt the ritual."

Gladys pointed at the pillar. "You need to get the Heartstone into the conduit's core!"

Chance blinked. "Into the giant magical death-beam?!"

"Yes!"

Xaras grinned. "I'll throw him."

Igný shook his head. "No throwing."

Chance sighed. "Thank you."

Igný added, "Unless absolutely necessary."

Chance groaned. "Never mind."

The guardians surged again.

Xaras slammed two together like cymbals.

Chance unleashed a burst of wild magic that turned one guardian's cloak into a swarm of butterflies.

Flynn darted between them, cutting runes with quick dagger strikes.

Gladys cast shimmering shields that deflected blasts of red energy.

Igný pushed forward, step by step, toward the pillar of light.

The witch's eyes narrowed. "You're stronger than I expected."

Igny didn't respond.

He didn't need to.

He had a mission.

The witch raised her staff.

A bolt of red lightning shot toward Igni.

Xaras leapt in front of him, taking the hit full-force.

He staggered, smoke curling from his armor.

"Xaras!" Chance shouted.

Xaras shook himself like a wet dog. "I'm fine."

He was not fine.

But he stood anyway.

Igni placed a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you."

Xaras nodded. "Go."

Igni ran.

The ground trembled.

The air crackled.

The pillar roared.

The witch screamed, "STOP HIM!"

Guardians lunged.

Chance blasted them aside.

Flynn tripped them.

Gladys froze them with a burst of ice.

Xaras tackled the last one like a charging bull.

Igny reached the base of the conduit.

The Heartstone pulsed.

The pillar pulsed back.

Gladys shouted, "NOW!"

Igny thrust the Heartstone into the light.

The world exploded.

Not literally — but it felt like it.

A shockwave of white energy blasted outward, knocking everyone off their feet. The red pillar flickered, sputtered, and collapsed inward like a dying star.

The guardians froze.

Their runes dimmed.

Their cloaks fell empty to the ground.

The witch screamed in fury. "NO!"

Chance groaned from the dirt. "Ow."

Flynn groaned. "Ow."

Gladys groaned. "Ow."

Xaras stood up immediately. "Again!"

Igny staggered to his feet, Heartstone still glowing faintly.

The conduit was closed.

For now.

The witch glared at them, eyes blazing with hatred.

"This is not over," she hissed. "You cannot stop what is coming."

Chance wiped dirt off his face. "We literally just did."

The witch snarled. "The Old Ones are stirring. The conduits are awakening. And you—"

She pointed at Igny.

"—are the only one who can stop them. Or doom us all."

Igny stiffened. "What do you mean?"

But the witch didn't answer.

She vanished in a burst of red fire.

Silence fell.

The island stopped pulsing.

The air cooled.

The ground steadied.

Xaras walked over and clapped Igny on the back. "We did it."

Chance nodded. "Yeah. We actually did."

Gladys looked at the Heartstone. "But the witch is right. This isn't over."

Flynn pointed at the horizon. "Uh... guys?"

They turned.

Far away, on another island, a new glow was rising.

Blue this time.

Pulsing.

Waiting.

Chance groaned. "Oh come on."

Igny lifted the Heartstone.

“We go,” he said.

Xaras nodded. “Together.”

Chance sighed. “Fine. Together.”

Gladys smiled weakly. “I’m glad I joined you.”

Flynn added, “Me too.”

The ship turned toward the next island.

Toward the next conduit.

Toward the next danger.

And the Party of Legend sailed on.

CHAPTER NINETEEN - The Sorceress of the Seven Sisters

Point of View: Chance

Chance didn't trust blue glows either.

Red glows meant danger.

Green glows meant curses.

Purple glows meant "Chance, don't touch that."

But blue glows?

Blue glows meant illusions.

And illusions meant headaches.

The island ahead shimmered like a mirage — trees bending in impossible directions, rocks floating a few inches above the ground, and the shoreline flickering like a broken lantern.

Flynn squinted. "Is the island... melting?"

Gladys shook her head. "No. It's illusion magic."

Chance groaned. "Great. My favorite."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "I like illusions."

Chance stared. "You like *everything*."

Xaras shrugged. "Illusions make fights interesting."

Igný stepped off the ship first, Heartstone glowing faintly. "Stay close. Nothing here is what it seems."

Chance muttered, "Including our life choices."

The moment they stepped onto the sand, the world shifted.

The beach vanished.

The trees vanished.

The sky vanished.

Suddenly, they were standing in a long hallway made of mirrors — endless reflections stretching in every direction.

Flynn yelped. “Where are we?!”

Gladys whispered, “Inside an illusion.”

Chance tapped a mirror. His reflection tapped back — but a half-second too late.

He jumped. “Nope. Hate this. Absolutely hate this.”

Igný raised the Heartstone. Its glow cut through the illusion like a lantern in fog.

The mirrors rippled.

A voice echoed through the hall.

Smooth.

Cold.

Amused.

“Welcome, heroes.”

Chance groaned. “Oh great. Another dramatic villain.”

Gladys paled. “That’s her. The Sorceress of the Seven Sisters.”

Xaras grinned. “Finally.”

The mirrors shifted again.

A figure appeared at the far end of the hall — tall, elegant, wrapped in shimmering blue robes. Her hair floated as if underwater. Her eyes glowed like twin moons.

The Sorceress smiled.

"You've caused quite a stir," she said. "Closing conduits. Interfering with rituals. Annoying the witch."

Chance crossed his arms. "Annoying villains is kind of our thing."

The Sorceress tilted her head. "And yet you still walk willingly into danger."

Ignys stepped forward. "We will not allow you to open this conduit."

She laughed — a soft, musical sound that somehow made Chance's skin crawl.

"Oh, I'm not opening it," she said. "I'm *testing* it."

Gladys gasped. "Testing?! Why?!"

The Sorceress raised a hand.

The mirrors rippled.

The hallway dissolved.

And suddenly —

They were standing on a cliff overlooking a swirling vortex of blue energy.

The Blue Conduit.

It pulsed like a heartbeat.

It hummed like a storm.

It twisted the air around it like a whirlpool of magic.

Chance whispered, "Okay. That's... big."

Xaras nodded. "Very wrestle-able."

Gladys squeaked. "No it is NOT!"

The Sorceress appeared beside the vortex, floating effortlessly.

"This conduit is unstable," she said. "It needs a catalyst. A focus. A mind strong enough to shape its power."

Her eyes drifted to Igny.

Chance groaned. "Oh come on. Why is it always him?"

Igny tightened his grip on the Heartstone. "I will not help you."

The Sorceress smiled. "You already are."

She snapped her fingers.

The ground beneath them cracked.

Illusions exploded outward — dozens of them.

A hundred Igny clones.

A hundred Xaras clones.

A hundred Chance clones (all of whom looked slightly more smug than the real one).

A hundred Gladys clones (all panicking).

A hundred Flynn clones (all aiming crossbows at each other).

Chance screamed, "THIS IS MY NIGHTMARE!"

Xaras punched a clone. "This is AMAZING!"

Gladys hid behind Igny. "Make it stop!"

Igny raised the Heartstone.

Its light cut through the illusions like a blade.

The clones flickered.

The Sorceress frowned. "Impressive."

Igny stepped forward. "End this."

She shook her head. "No. You must."

She gestured toward the conduit.

"Enter it," she said. "Or watch it tear this island apart."

Chance blinked. "Enter the giant magical death-vortex?!"

Gladys shrieked, "HE CAN'T DO THAT!"

Flynn whispered, "Can he do that?"

Xaras shrugged. "He can try."

Igný stared at the swirling blue energy.

The Heartstone pulsed in his hand.

Chance grabbed his arm. "Igný. Don't."

Igný looked at him.

At Xaras.

At Gladys.

At Flynn.

At the conduit.

Then he said, quietly:

"I must."

And he stepped toward the vortex.

CHAPTER TWENTY - Into the Conduit

Point of View: Igny

The world around Igny dissolved the moment he stepped into the swirling blue vortex.

There was no wind.

No sound.

No ground beneath his feet.

Just light.

Blue light.

Endless.

Shifting.

Alive.

It wrapped around him like water and fire at the same time, humming with ancient power. The Heartstone pulsed in his hand, resonating with the conduit's rhythm.

Igny had faced monsters.

He had faced witches.

He had faced Chance's cooking.

But he had never faced *this*.

He took a breath — or something like a breath — and stepped deeper.

Meanwhile, Outside the Conduit

Point of View: Chance

Chance stared at the swirling vortex.

"Igny just walked into a magical blender," he said. "A *magical blender*, Xaras."

Xaras nodded. "He'll be fine."

Flynn squeaked, "How do you know?!"

Xaras shrugged. "He's Igny."

Gladys wrung her hands. "We have to help him! We have to—"

The Sorceress appeared again, floating above the cliff like she was posing for a dramatic painting.

"You cannot follow him," she said. "The conduit accepts only one mind at a time."

Chance glared. "Then bring him back!"

The Sorceress smiled. "If he succeeds, he will return."

"And if he fails?" Flynn whispered.

The Sorceress's smile widened.

"Then the conduit will keep him."

Chance's stomach dropped.

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Then he won't fail."

Inside the Conduit

Point of View: Igny

The blue light shifted.

Shapes formed.

Mountains.

Oceans.

Stars.

Faces he didn't recognize.

Faces he did.

Gunther.

Barken.

His old companions.

His fallen brothers of Humakt.

They flickered like memories made of smoke.

"I am not afraid," Igny said.

The conduit hummed.

The shapes dissolved.

New ones formed.

A massive shadow with too many eyes.

A serpent coiled around a sun.

A hand reaching through a crack in the sky.

The Old Ones.

Igny tightened his grip on the Heartstone. "You will not enter this world."

The conduit pulsed — a deep, resonant thrum that shook the space around him.

A voice echoed.

Not loud.

Not soft.

Everywhere.

WHY DO YOU RESIST?

Igny stood tall. "Because I must."

YOU ARE SMALL. FRAGILE. MORTAL.

"I am enough."

YOU CANNOT STOP WHAT IS COMING.

Igny raised the Heartstone.

"I can try."

The light surged.

The conduit roared.

And Igny pushed.

Outside the Conduit

Point of View: Chance

The vortex pulsed violently.

Blue lightning arced across the cliff.

The ground trembled.

The air crackled.

Gladys screamed, "It's destabilizing!"

Flynn shouted, "Is that good?!"

Chance yelled, "WHEN IS DESTABILIZING EVER GOOD?!"

Xaras planted his feet. "Hold the line!"

The Sorceress watched calmly, as if observing a very interesting science experiment.

"He is fighting it," she said. "Impressive."

Chance glared. "You could HELP, you know!"

She shook her head. "This is his trial, not mine."

Chance groaned. "I hate magic people."

Gladys gasped. "I'm a magic person!"

Chance waved a hand. "Not you. You're fine."

Inside the Conduit

Point of View: Igny

The Heartstone blazed with white light.

The conduit pushed back — a tidal wave of ancient power trying to crush him, swallow him, erase him.

Igny held firm.

He thought of his friends.

Chance, reckless but loyal.

Xaras, strong and steady.

Gladys, frightened but brave.

Flynn, small but fierce.

He thought of the villagers.

The islands.

The people who needed him.

He thought of Gunther and Barken.

“I will not fail,” he whispered.

The conduit screamed.

The light shattered.

And everything went white.

Outside the Conduit

Point of View: Chance

The vortex exploded.

Not outward — inward.

It collapsed like a dying star, shrinking, twisting, folding into itself until —

It vanished.

The cliff fell silent.

The air stilled.

The ground stopped shaking.

And Igny —

Igny lay on the ground, unconscious, the Heartstone dim but intact beside him.

Chance sprinted to him. "Igny! Hey! Hey! Wake up!"

Xaras knelt. "Is he breathing?"

Flynn checked. "Yes!"

Gladys cast a small healing spell. "He's alive!"

Igny's eyes fluttered open.

Chance exhaled so hard he nearly fell over. "Don't do that again!"

Igny blinked. "Did... did I succeed?"

Gladys nodded. "The conduit is closed."

Xaras grinned. "You did it."

Flynn smiled. "We knew you would."

Chance wiped his eyes. "We *mostly* knew."

Igny sat up slowly. "Where is the Sorceress?"

They turned.

She was gone.

Only a faint shimmer of blue light remained.

Chance groaned. "Villains and their dramatic exits."

But the victory was short-lived.

Because on the horizon—

A new glow appeared.

Green.

Sickly.

Twisting.

Chaotic.

Gladys gasped. “The Uberhobgoblin.”

Chance sighed. “Of course.”

Igný stood, steadying himself. “Then we go.”

Xaras nodded. “Together.”

Flynn added, “Always.”

Chance groaned. “Fine. Together.”

And the Party of Legend set sail toward the next island.

Toward the next conduit.

Toward the next danger.

Their story far from over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE - The Green Conduit and the Uberhobgoblin

Point of View: Xaras

Xaras liked goblins.

They were small.

They were loud.

They were terrible at fighting but *excellent* at running away, which made them fun to chase.

But the Uberhobgoblin?

He was not fun.

He was not small.

He was not loud.

He was not terrible at fighting.

He was... big.

Very big.

And he was standing on the beach of the Green Conduit island, holding a club the size of a tree trunk, grinning like someone who had just discovered a new hobby called “smashing heroes.”

Chance whispered, “Okay. I take it back. I don’t like green glows either.”

Gladys whimpered. “That’s chaos magic. Very unstable. Very dangerous.”

Flynn added, “Very glowy.”

Ignny stepped forward, Heartstone in hand. “Stay alert.”

Xaras cracked his knuckles. “I’m ready.”

Chance stared at him. “You always say that.”

Xaras nodded. “Because I am always ready.”

The island pulsed with sickly green light.

The trees twisted into unnatural shapes.

The sand bubbled like boiling soup.

The air smelled faintly of pickles.

Chance gagged. "Why does it smell like pickles?!"

Gladys whispered, "Chaos magic often manifests as unpleasant odors."

Flynn sniffed. "I like pickles."

Xaras nodded. "Pickles are good."

Igny sighed. "Focus."

The Uberhobgoblin stepped forward.

He was enormous — taller than Xaras, wider than two Xarases, and wearing armor made of mismatched metal plates held together with rope, hope, and questionable engineering.

He pointed his giant club at the party.

"YOU!" he roared. "YOU ARE THE LEGEND PARTY!"

Chance whispered, "Close enough."

The Uberhobgoblin stomped his foot. The ground shook.

"I AM THE UBERHOBGOBLIN!" he bellowed. "MASTER OF CHAOS! KING OF GOBLINS! DESTROYER OF —"

He paused.

"—WHAT WAS I SAYING?"

Gladys whispered, "Chaos magic affects memory."

Chance nodded. "And apparently grammar."

The Uberhobgoblin roared again. "YOU WILL NOT STOP MY CONDUIT!"

He pointed behind him.

The Green Conduit pulsed like a giant, glowing swamp bubble.

It hummed.

It gurgled.

It burped.

Chance gagged again. "Oh that is *definitely* chaos magic."

The Uberhobgoblin charged.

Xaras charged too.

They collided with a BOOM that shook the entire beach.

Xaras grinned. "Finally! Someone who can wrestle!"

The Uberhobgoblin laughed. "YES! WRESTLE!"

They immediately began wrestling.

Chance shouted, "Xaras! We have a plan!"

Xaras shouted back, "THIS IS THE PLAN!"

Ignys sighed. "Of course it is."

Meanwhile, the goblins arrived.

Dozens of them.

Maybe hundreds.

All wearing mismatched armor, carrying sticks, spoons, frying pans, and one goblin who proudly wielded a baguette.

Flynn blinked. "Is that goblin holding bread?"

Gladys nodded. "Chaos magic."

Chance groaned. "I hate this island."

The goblins charged.

Flynn fired arrows.

Gladys cast shimmering shields.

Chance unleashed blasts of wild magic that turned one goblin's spoon into a rubber chicken.

The goblin screamed in terror and ran away.

Chance blinked. "Okay. That one was actually useful."

Igny pushed toward the conduit.

The Heartstone pulsed violently — reacting to the chaos magic like a magnet to lightning.

Gladys shouted, "You need to stabilize it before it ruptures!"

Chance yelled, "What happens if it ruptures?!"

Gladys shrieked, "EVERYTHING EXPLODES!"

Flynn squeaked, "Everything?!"

Gladys nodded. "Everything!"

Chance groaned. "Why is everything always exploding?!"

The Uberhobgoblin slammed Xaras into the sand.

Xaras stood up immediately. "Good hit!"

The Uberhobgoblin laughed. "YOU ARE FUN!"

Xaras grinned. "YOU TOO!"

Chance shouted, "STOP HAVING FUN AND HELP US!"

Xaras sighed. "Fine."

He grabbed the Uberhobgoblin by the leg and swung him like a giant, angry flail, knocking goblins in every direction.

Flynn blinked. "That... works."

Gladys whispered, "Chaos fighting chaos."

Igny reached the conduit.

The Heartstone glowed white.

The conduit glowed green.

The two lights clashed like lightning meeting a storm.

Igny shouted, "NOW!"

Gladys cast a stabilizing spell.

Chance fired a blast of energy.

Flynn shot a glowing arrow.

Xaras threw the Uberhobgoblin directly at the conduit.

The Uberhobgoblin screamed, "WHEEEEEEEEE!"

He hit the conduit.

The conduit burped.

Then—

It collapsed.

A shockwave blasted across the island.

The goblins fainted.

The trees un-twisted.

The sand stopped bubbling.

The pickle smell vanished.

Xaras landed on his back. "Ow."

Chance collapsed beside him. "Ow."

Flynn flopped onto the sand. "Ow."

Gladys sat down. "Ow."

Igný stood, holding the Heartstone.

"It is done."

But the victory didn't last long.

Because on the horizon—

A new glow appeared.

Purple.

Dark.

Cold.

Ancient.

Gladys gasped. "The final conduit."

Chance groaned. "Of course."

Xaras stood. "We go."

Igný nodded. "Together."

Flynn added, "Always."

Gladys whispered, "The final battle is coming."

And the Party of Legend set sail once more.

Toward the last conduit.

Toward the greatest danger.

Toward the end of everything.

Or the beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO - The Island of Shadows

Point of View: Igny

The Island of Shadows did not glow.

It *absorbed* light.

The closer the ship sailed, the darker the world became — as if the island were drinking the sunlight straight from the sky. The waves dimmed. The clouds dimmed. Even the air felt heavy, like it was holding its breath.

Flynn whispered, “I don’t like this.”

Gladys whispered, “No one likes this.”

Chance whispered, “I REALLY don’t like this.”

Xaras whispered, “I like this.”

Igny didn’t whisper. “Stay alert.”

The Heartstone pulsed faintly in his hand — not bright, not warm, but tense. Like it was afraid.

Igny had never felt a magical object feel afraid before.

He didn’t like it.

The ship anchored in shallow water. The party stepped onto the black sand beach, which felt cold even through their boots.

Chance shivered. “Okay. This is officially the creepiest place we’ve ever been.”

Gladys nodded. “This island is older than the others. Much older. The final conduit must be here.”

Flynn pointed at the treeline. “Do you hear that?”

They listened.

Nothing.

No birds.

No insects.

No wind.

Just silence.

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Good. Easier to hear enemies."

Chance muttered, "Or harder to hear them sneaking up on us."

Ignys raised the Heartstone. "We move."

The jungle was wrong.

The trees were tall and twisted, their branches reaching like claws. The shadows moved even when nothing else did. The air felt thick, like walking through a dream.

Or a nightmare.

Gladys whispered, "This place is saturated with Old One magic."

Chance whispered, "Can we unsaturate it?"

Gladys whispered, "No."

Chance whispered, "Then I hate it."

Xaras whispered, "I like it."

Flynn whispered, "Stop liking things!"

They reached a clearing.

At the center stood a stone altar carved with spirals and runes older than any language Ignys knew. Above it, suspended in midair, was a swirling mass of purple light — the final conduit.

It pulsed slowly.

Hungrily.

Chance whispered, "That looks... bad."

Gladys whispered, "That looks... very bad."

Xaras whispered, "That looks wrestle-able."

Igný whispered, "No."

A voice echoed through the clearing.

"Welcome, heroes."

The witch of First Home stepped from the shadows.

The Sorceress of the Seven Sisters stepped from the opposite side.

And the Uberhobgoblin dropped from a tree, landing with a thud.

Chance blinked. "You can climb trees?!"

The Uberhobgoblin shrugged. "I AM VERY AGILE."

The witch smiled. "You have been quite troublesome."

The sorceress added, "But useful."

The Uberhobgoblin added, "AND FUN."

Igný stepped forward. "We will stop you."

The witch laughed. "Stop us? Oh, Igný. You still don't understand."

The sorceress raised a hand. "We are not opening the conduit."

The Uberhobgoblin nodded. "NOPE."

Chance blinked. "You're... not?"

Gladys frowned. "Then what are you doing?"

The witch pointed at Igny.

“We are opening *you*.”

Igny froze.

“What?”

The sorceress smiled. “You are the key.”

The Uberhobgoblin added, “THE SHINY KEY.”

Chance shouted, “STOP CALLING HIM SHINY!”

Gladys gasped. “The conduits... the Heartstone... the resonance... Igny, they’ve been manipulating you!”

The witch nodded. “Every conduit you closed. Every surge of power. Every test. You have been preparing yourself.”

The sorceress added, “Strengthening your mind.”

The Uberhobgoblin added, “AND YOUR MUSCLES.”

Xaras nodded. “He does have good muscles.”

Chance slapped his forehead. “Not helping!”

Igny stepped back. “I will not be your key.”

The witch smiled. “You already are.”

The conduit pulsed.

The Heartstone pulsed.

Igny felt a pull — deep, ancient, irresistible.

The sorceress whispered, “The Old Ones are calling you.”

The witch whispered, “Answer.”

The Uberhobgoblin whispered, “HELLO?”

The conduit flared.

Igny staggered.

Chance grabbed him. "Igny! Stay with us!"

Xaras grabbed his other arm. "Fight it!"

Gladys cast a stabilizing spell. "Hold on!"

Flynn aimed an arrow at the villains. "Back off!"

The witch raised her staff.

The sorceress raised her hands.

The Uberhobgoblin raised his club.

And the conduit—

Opened.

A blast of purple light erupted outward.

The world shook.

The shadows screamed.

And Igny—

Igny vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - The World Between

Point of View: Igny

Igny expected darkness.

Instead, he found... nothing.

Not empty nothing — *full* nothing.

A vast, endless space of swirling purple mist, shifting shapes, and distant echoes that sounded like memories trying to speak.

He stood on something that wasn't ground.

He breathed something that wasn't air.

He existed in a place that wasn't a place.

The World Between.

He knew it instinctively.

The Heartstone floated beside him, glowing faintly.

Igny reached for it — and his hand passed through it like smoke.

He frowned. "This is... not ideal."

A voice echoed.

Not the witch.

Not the sorceress.

Not the Uberhobgoblin.

Something older.

YOU HAVE COME.

Igny turned.

A shape formed in the mist — tall, shifting, impossible to fully see. A silhouette with too many arms. Too many eyes. Too many... everything.

An Old One.

Igný steadied himself. "I will not let you enter our world."

The shape pulsed.

YOU CANNOT STOP WHAT YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

"I understand enough."

DO YOU?

The mist shifted.

Images appeared.

The conduits.

The islands.

The witch.

The sorceress.

The Uberhobgoblin.

The giant sea guardian.

The chaos creatures.

The runes on the beach.

The Heartstone.

All connected.

All part of something larger.

Something ancient.

Something dangerous.

Igný clenched his fists. "Why me?"

The Old One's voice rumbled.

BECAUSE YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN OPEN THE DOOR.

Igný froze.

"I will not."

YOU ALREADY HAVE.

The mist swirled violently.

The world shook.

And Igny felt himself being pulled deeper.

Meanwhile, Back on the Island of Shadows

Point of View: Chance

Chance stared at the spot where Igny had vanished.

“Okay,” he said. “This is bad.”

Flynn nodded. “Very bad.”

Gladys wrung her hands. “Extremely bad.”

Xaras cracked his knuckles. “We get him back.”

Chance blinked. “How?! He’s in the... the... the purple place!”

Gladys corrected him. “The World Between.”

Chance waved his arms. “That’s not better!”

The witch, the sorceress, and the Uberhobgoblin watched calmly from the edge of the clearing.

The witch smirked. “He is beyond your reach.”

The sorceress added, “Only one who shares his resonance may follow.”

The Uberhobgoblin added, “RESONANCE IS LIKE VIBRATIONS BUT MAGIC.”

Gladys gasped. “Resonance... the Heartstone... the conduits... Chance!”

Chance blinked. “What? Why me?!”

Gladys grabbed his shoulders. “Because your magic is chaotic. Unstable. Unpredictable.”

Chance frowned. "Those are all insults."

Gladys shook him. "No! They're *compatible*! You can follow Igny into the World Between!"

Flynn squeaked. "Is that safe?!"

Gladys shook her head. "Absolutely not!"

Xaras grinned. "Perfect."

Chance swallowed hard. "Okay. So... how do I do it?"

Gladys pointed at the fading conduit.

"You jump."

Chance stared. "Jump. Into the magical shadow vortex."

"Yes."

"Without a plan."

"Yes."

"Without knowing what's inside."

"Yes."

Chance sighed. "Fine. But if I die, I'm haunting all of you."

Xaras nodded. "I would like that."

Flynn whispered, "I would not."

Gladys shoved Chance toward the conduit. "GO!"

Chance took a deep breath.

"Okay, Igny," he muttered. "I'm coming."

And he jumped.

Inside the World Between

Point of View: Igny

The Old One loomed over him.

YOU CANNOT ESCAPE.

Igny raised his chin. "I will not yield."

YOU WILL.

The mist surged.

The world shook.

And then —

A voice echoed through the void.

"IGNYYYYYYYY!"

Igny blinked. "Chance?"

A shape crashed into him from above.

Chance landed face-first in the mist.

He stood up, wobbling. "Ow. Okay. That was... unpleasant."

Igny stared. "How did you —"

Chance pointed at himself. "Magic. Chaos. Bad decisions. You know. My whole thing."

The Old One pulsed.

ANOTHER KEY.

Chance blinked. "Nope! Not a key! Very much a lock! A broken lock!"

Igny stepped in front of him. "Leave him out of this."

The Old One's voice rumbled.

YOU CANNOT PROTECT HIM.

Chance stepped beside Igny.

“Actually,” he said, “he can.”

Igný looked at him.

Chance grinned. “Together, right?”

Igný nodded. “Together.”

The Old One roared.

The mist surged.

The world cracked.

And the two of them braced for whatever came next.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR - Two Against the Void

Point of View: Chance

Chance had been in some weird places.

Inside a giant hamster's burrow.

Inside a collapsing illusion maze.

Inside a barrel that one time he tried to "surprise" Igny.

But this?

This was the weirdest.

The World Between felt like standing inside a dream someone forgot to finish. Purple mist swirled around them, forming shapes that dissolved before Chance could understand them. The ground wasn't ground. The air wasn't air. And the Old One looming above them definitely wasn't something he wanted to get to know better.

It pulsed like a heartbeat made of shadows.

Igny stood firm beside him.

Chance whispered, "Okay. So. What's the plan?"

Igny whispered back, "I do not know."

Chance groaned. "Great. Perfect. Love that for us."

The Old One's voice echoed through the void.

YOU DO NOT BELONG HERE.

Chance pointed at Igny. "He doesn't. I definitely don't. I'm allergic to cosmic horror."

Igny stepped forward. "We will not let you enter our world."

The Old One pulsed.

YOU CANNOT STOP WHAT IS ALREADY BEGUN.

Chance muttered, “We’ve stopped like three things already today.”

YOU ARE SMALL.

Chance nodded. “Yes. Thank you for noticing.”

YOU ARE WEAK.

Chance nodded again. “Also true.”

YOU ARE—

Chance cut it off. “Okay, rude. We get it.”

Igný raised his chin. “We stand together.”

The Old One’s shape shifted — growing taller, wider, more impossible.

THEN YOU WILL FALL TOGETHER.

Meanwhile, on the Island of Shadows

Point of View: Gladys

Gladys was panicking.

Not a little panic.

Not a medium panic.

A full-scale, maximum-capacity, “the world is ending and I forgot my spellbook” panic.

The conduit had closed behind Chance and Igný, sealing them inside the World Between. The witch, the sorceress, and the Uberhobgoblin watched with infuriating calm.

Gladys spun toward Xaras. “We have to reopen it!”

Xaras nodded. “Yes.”

Flynn squeaked, “How?!”

Xaras shrugged. “I hit it.”

Gladys grabbed his arm. "NO! You cannot punch a conduit!"

Xaras frowned. "I punched the last one."

"That was different!"

Flynn pointed at the villains. "They're doing something!"

The witch raised her staff.

The sorceress lifted her hands.

The Uberhobgoblin lifted a rock for no reason.

Gladys gasped. "They're stabilizing the conduit from the outside! They're trying to keep Igny trapped!"

Xaras growled. "Not happening."

Gladys took a deep breath.

"Okay. I can do this. I can do this. I can—"

She fainted.

Flynn caught her. "Gladys!"

She sat up immediately. "I'm fine! I'm fine! I'm just... overwhelmed!"

Xaras pointed at the conduit. "Do magic."

Gladys gulped. "Right. Magic."

She raised her staff.

"Please work," she whispered.

And she cast the spell.

Back in the World Between

Point of View: Igny

The Old One attacked.

Not with claws.

Not with fire.

Not with anything Igny could see.

It attacked with *thought*.

A wave of pressure slammed into him, trying to crush his mind, bend his will, break his resolve.

Igny staggered.

Chance grabbed his arm. "Hey! No falling! Falling is banned!"

Igny gritted his teeth. "I am... trying."

The Old One pulsed again.

YOU ARE NOT ENOUGH.

Igny raised the Heartstone.

It flickered weakly.

Chance stepped in front of him.

"Hey! Big spooky shadow thing! Leave him alone!"

The Old One paused.

YOU ARE NOTHING.

Chance grinned. "Exactly! Which means I'm unpredictable!"

He fired a blast of wild magic.

It turned into a shower of confetti.

Chance blinked. "Okay. Not ideal."

The Old One pulsed again.

The confetti turned into screaming shadow-birds.

Chance screamed. "NOPE NOPE NOPE!"

Igny swung the Heartstone through the birds. They dissolved.

Chance panted. "Okay. New plan. Igny, you do the smart stuff. I'll... distract it."

Igny nodded. "Very well."

Chance blinked. "Wait. That was a joke. Igny. IGNY?!"

But Igny was already stepping forward.

Meanwhile, on the Island of Shadows

Point of View: Gladys

Gladys's spell hit the conduit.

It flickered.

It pulsed.

It cracked.

Flynn shouted, "It's working!"

Xaras shouted, "Hit it again!"

Gladys shouted, "I AM!"

The witch snarled. "Stop her!"

The sorceress raised her hands.

The Uberhobgoblin threw the rock.

It missed everyone and hit a tree.

The tree fell on him.

He shouted, "I AM FINE!"

Gladys cast again.

The conduit split open.

A crack of purple light appeared.

Flynn gasped. "We did it!"

Xaras nodded. "Now we go in."

Gladys squeaked. "WHAT?!"

Xaras grabbed her and Flynn by the collars.

"We go."

And he jumped.

Back in the World Between

Point of View: Chance

Chance saw the crack first.

A sliver of light tearing through the mist.

He pointed. "Igny! Look!"

Igny turned.

The crack widened.

Xaras burst through it like a cannonball.

He landed on the mist-ground with a thud.

"I AM HERE."

Chance cheered. "Xaras!"

Flynn tumbled out next. "Ow!"

Gladys floated through last, screaming the entire time.

She landed on Chance.

"Ow," Chance said.

Gladys sat up. "We made it!"

The Old One pulsed.

FOOLS.

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Good. A fight."

Chance pointed at the Old One. "Xaras, you cannot wrestle that!"

Xaras shrugged. "I can try."

Ignny raised the Heartstone.

It glowed brighter than ever.

Chance stepped beside him.

Xaras stepped beside Chance.

Gladys and Flynn stepped behind them.

Together.

The Old One roared.

The World Between shook.

And the final battle began.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE - The Heartstone's Choice

Point of View: Igny

The Old One towered above them, a shifting silhouette of eyes, arms, and impossible geometry. The World Between trembled with every pulse of its presence.

Chance whispered, "Okay. So. New plan."

Igny kept his eyes on the Old One. "What is the plan?"

Chance pointed at the monster. "Don't die."

Xaras nodded. "Good plan."

Gladys squeaked, "Not a *complete* plan!"

Flynn added, "But a good start!"

The Old One's voice echoed through the void.

YOU CANNOT WIN.

Igny raised the Heartstone.

"We can try."

The Old One pulsed.

YOU ARE FRAGILE.

Chance stepped forward. "We're also stubborn."

YOU ARE SMALL.

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "But strong."

YOU ARE MANY.

Gladys whispered, "That's... actually true."

AND YOU WILL BREAK.

The Old One surged forward.

The Battle Begins

The void exploded into motion.

Shadow-tendrils lashed out.

The ground rippled like water.

The air vibrated with ancient power.

Xaras charged first, swinging his maul with a roar. It passed through the Old One's form like smoke.

Xaras blinked. "Oh."

Chance shouted, "Xaras! You can't punch cosmic nightmares!"

Xaras frowned. "Then how do we fight it?"

Gladys shouted, "With magic! With willpower! With—"

A tendril whipped toward her.

Flynn tackled her out of the way. "With teamwork!"

Igny stepped forward, Heartstone blazing.

The Old One recoiled.

Chance gasped. "Igny! It's afraid of the Heartstone!"

The Old One pulsed violently.

I FEAR NOTHING.

Chance pointed. "You literally just flinched!"

SILENCE.

A wave of force slammed into them.

Xaras skidded backward.

Flynn tumbled.

Gladys spun like a pinwheel.
Chance hit the ground face-first.
“Ow,” he said into the floor-that-wasn’t-a-floor.
Igny alone remained standing.
The Heartstone glowed brighter.

The Heartstone Speaks

A new voice echoed through the void.

Soft.

Warm.

Ancient.

IGNY.

Igny froze. “Who...?”

YOU HOLD MY HEART.

The Heartstone pulsed in his hand.

Chance whispered, “Okay. That’s new.”

Gladys gasped. “The Heartstone is sentient!”

Flynn blinked. “Is that good?”

Gladys shrugged. “Maybe?”

The Heartstone’s voice filled the space.

I WAS MADE TO PROTECT.

TO BALANCE.

TO CHOOSE.

Igny steadied himself. “Choose what?”

A CHAMPION.

The Old One roared.

YOU CANNOT CHOOSE HIM.

I ALREADY HAVE.

The Heartstone flared with blinding white light.

The Old One recoiled, its form flickering.

Chance shielded his eyes. "Igny! You're glowing!"

Xaras nodded. "Good glow."

Gladys squeaked, "Very good glow!"

Flynn whispered, "Please don't explode."

The Final Stand

The Old One surged forward, its form twisting into a storm of shadows.

YOU ARE MINE.

Igny stepped forward.

"No."

The Heartstone floated above his hand, spinning faster and faster.

Chance shouted, "Igny! What are you doing?!"

Igny didn't look back.

"I am choosing."

The Heartstone's voice echoed.

TOGETHER.

A beam of white light shot from the Heartstone, striking the Old One.

The void shook.

The shadows screamed.

The Old One writhed.

YOU CANNOT BANISH ME.

Ignny shouted, "I can try!"

Chance grabbed his arm. "We can try!"

Xaras grabbed Chance. "Together!"

Gladys grabbed Xaras. "Together!"

Flynn grabbed Gladys. "Together!"

The Heartstone pulsed.

Their lights merged.

White.

Blue.

Green.

Red.

Gold.

A rainbow of magic surged into the Old One.

The creature shrieked.

NO—

And then—

It shattered.

The shadows dissolved.

The mist cleared.

The void brightened.

The Old One was gone.

The Heartstone's Choice

The Heartstone floated back into Igny's hands.

Its voice was faint now.

WELL DONE.

Igny bowed his head. "Thank you."

THE DOOR IS CLOSED.

THE OLD ONES SLEEP.

BUT BALANCE MUST BE KEPT.

Igny frowned. "What do you mean?"

The Heartstone dimmed.

YOU ARE THE KEEPER NOW.

Chance blinked. "Keeper? Keeper of what?"

The Heartstone flickered.

EVERYTHING.

And then it went silent.

The World Between Collapses

The void trembled.

Gladys gasped. "The realm is collapsing!"

Flynn shouted, "We need to go!"

Xaras nodded. "Jump!"

Chance grabbed Igny's arm. "Come on!"

Igny hesitated.

Then nodded.

Together, they leapt through the crack in the void —
—and fell back onto the Island of Shadows.

The conduit sealed behind them.

The witch, the sorceress, and the Uberhobgoblin were gone.

The island was quiet.

The world was safe.

For now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX - After the Storm

Point of View: Chance

Chance had never been so happy to fall on his face.

He hit the black sand of the Island of Shadows with a thud, groaned, and then immediately rolled over to check on Igny.

Igny lay beside him, breathing hard, the Heartstone dim in his hand.

Chance exhaled. "Okay. Good. You're alive. That's important. That's very important."

Xaras landed next, creating a crater.

Flynn landed on Xaras.

Gladys landed on Flynn.

Gladys groaned. "I hate magic."

Flynn groaned. "I hate falling."

Xaras sat up. "I like both."

Chance pointed at him. "You like *everything*."

Xaras nodded. "Yes."

The island was quiet.

The shadows no longer moved.

The trees no longer twisted.

The air no longer felt heavy.

The final conduit was gone.

The Old One was gone.

The villains were gone.

For the first time in what felt like forever, the world was still.

Igný sat up slowly. "Is everyone unharmed?"

Chance nodded. "Mostly. Emotionally? No. Physically? Also no. But alive."

Gladys dusted herself off. "We did it. We actually did it."

Flynn smiled. "We saved the islands."

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "We fought well."

Chance grinned. "We fought *amazingly*."

Igný looked at the Heartstone.

It was quiet now.

Dim.

Resting.

But not gone.

Chance nudged him. "So... Keeper, huh?"

Igný stiffened. "I do not know what that means."

Gladys sat beside him. "It means the Heartstone chose you. You're connected to the conduits now. To the balance of the islands."

Flynn added, "You're like... the guardian of everything."

Chance nodded. "Basically the magical janitor of the universe."

Igný frowned. "That does not sound flattering."

Chance shrugged. "It's important, though."

Igný looked at the Heartstone again.

"I do not feel different."

Gladys smiled softly. "You don't have to feel different to *be* different."

Xaras nodded. "You are stronger."

Flynn nodded. "Braver."

Chance nodded. "Shinier."

Igny sighed. "Please stop calling me shiny."

A rustle came from the treeline.

The party tensed.

Weapons drawn.

Spells ready.

Xaras excited.

But it wasn't the witch.

Or the sorceress.

Or the Uberhobgoblin.

It was a small creature — a fox-like animal with glowing purple eyes. It approached Igny cautiously, sniffed the Heartstone, then bowed its head.

Gladys gasped. "A shadow fox! They only appear when the balance is restored!"

Chance blinked. "It's cute."

Flynn nodded. "Very cute."

Xaras nodded. "I want one."

The fox nudged Igny's hand, then scampered back into the forest.

Igny watched it go.

"The world is healing," he said quietly.

Gladys smiled. "Because of you."

Chance elbowed him. "Because of *us*."

Igny nodded. "Yes. Because of us."

They made their way back to the ship.

The sky brightened.

The sea calmed.

The islands shimmered with new life.

But as they sailed away, Chance noticed something on the horizon.

A flicker of green.

A shimmer of blue.

A spark of red.

Not conduits.

Not danger.

Just... magic.

Alive.

Balanced.

Waiting.

Chance leaned on the railing. "So... what now?"

Igný joined him. "We rebuild. We protect. We learn."

Xaras nodded. "We fight."

Flynn nodded. "We explore."

Gladys nodded. "We study."

Chance grinned. "We adventure."

Igný smiled — a small, rare smile.

"Yes," he said. "We adventure."

And the Party of Legend sailed on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN - The Villains Regroup

Point of View: The Witch of First Home

The witch hated losing.

She hated it more than cold tea.

More than tangled spell-components.

More than goblins who asked too many questions.

And right now, she was losing.

The Island of Shadows was quiet behind her as she stepped through a shimmering portal and into a cavern lit by green fire. The Sorceress of the Seven Sisters floated in after her, robes rippling like water. The Uberhobgoblin stumbled through last, covered in soot and holding a tree branch for no reason.

"I AM FINE," he announced to no one.

The witch ignored him.

She paced across the cavern, muttering. "They closed the conduits. They banished the Old One. They disrupted the ritual. They —"

The sorceress interrupted gently. "They survived."

The witch spun. "Yes. That too."

The Uberhobgoblin raised a hand. "I SURVIVED TOO."

The witch sighed. "Yes. Congratulations."

He beamed.

The sorceress drifted closer. "We underestimated them."

The witch scowled. "I did not underestimate them. I simply... miscalculated."

The sorceress raised an eyebrow. "That is the same thing."

The witch glared. “No, it is not.”

The Uberhobgoblin nodded. “SHE IS RIGHT. WORDS ARE DIFFERENT.”

The sorceress pinched the bridge of her nose. “That is not—never mind.”

The witch waved her staff, conjuring an image in the air: Igny holding the Heartstone, glowing with new power.

“He is the problem,” she said. “The Heartstone chose him.”

The sorceress frowned. “A Keeper has not been chosen in centuries.”

The Uberhobgoblin gasped. “IS HE A KING NOW?”

“No,” the witch snapped.

“IS HE A WIZARD KING?”

“No.”

“IS HE A WRESTLING KING?”

“NO!”

The sorceress sighed. “He is a guardian. A protector of balance.”

The witch snarled. “Exactly. And balance is the enemy of progress.”

The sorceress tilted her head. “Progress?”

The witch gestured to the cavern walls, covered in ancient runes. “The Old Ones are not monsters. They are power. Knowledge. Evolution.”

The Uberhobgoblin raised his hand again. “I LIKE POWER.”

The witch nodded. “Yes. And with the conduits closed, we must find another way to reach it.”

The sorceress folded her arms. “You have a plan.”

The witch smiled — a sharp, dangerous smile.

“Of course I do.”

The Witch's New Plan

She waved her staff again.

The image shifted.

A map of the islands appeared — but not as they were now. As they once were. Connected. Whole. Alive with magic.

The sorceress's eyes widened. "The Leyline Crown."

The Uberhobgoblin gasped. "A CROWN?!"

The witch nodded. "The ancient artifact that once bound the islands together. It predates the conduits. Predates the Heartstone. Predates everything."

The sorceress whispered, "It was lost."

The witch's smile widened. "Not lost. Hidden."

The Uberhobgoblin raised his hand. "CAN I WEAR IT?"

"No."

He lowered his hand sadly.

The witch tapped the map. "If we find the Leyline Crown, we won't need the conduits. We can reshape the islands ourselves."

The sorceress frowned. "And Igny?"

The witch's eyes narrowed. "He will try to stop us."

The Uberhobgoblin nodded. "HE IS VERY ANNOYING."

The witch smirked. "Then we will simply have to be... less stoppable."

The sorceress sighed. "That is not a word."

"It is now."

A New Alliance

The witch raised her staff.

The cavern trembled.

Shadows gathered.

Magic crackled.

The air hummed with ancient power.

"We failed separately," she said. "But together, we can succeed."

The sorceress nodded slowly. "A truce, then."

The Uberhobgoblin raised his club. "A TEAM!"

The witch winced. "Let's not call it that."

The sorceress floated closer. "What shall we call it?"

The witch thought for a moment.

Then smiled.

"The Triad."

The sorceress nodded. "Acceptable."

The Uberhobgoblin cheered. "TRIAD! TRIAD! TRIAD!"

The witch sighed. "Fine. Yes. Triad."

She turned back to the map.

"Find the Leyline Crown," she said. "Before the Keeper does."

The sorceress bowed her head. "As you wish."

The Uberhobgoblin saluted. "I WILL FIND THE CROWN AND ALSO SNACKS."

The witch pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yes. Fine. Snacks too."

The Game Changes

The map flickered.

The islands glowed.

The witch whispered:

“Let the next chapter begin.”

And in the distance, across the sea, the Party of Legend sailed on — unaware that their greatest challenge had only just begun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT - The Keeper's Burden

Point of View: Igny

The sea was calm.

Too calm.

Igny stood at the bow of the ship, the Heartstone resting in his palms. It no longer glowed with the fierce, blinding light of the World Between. Instead, it pulsed gently, like a sleeping heartbeat.

He envied it.

Chance leaned against the railing beside him. "You okay?"

Igny hesitated. "I do not know."

Chance nodded. "Yeah. That tracks."

Igny looked at him. "I am the Keeper now. I do not know what that means."

Chance shrugged. "Well... you keep things."

"That is not helpful."

Chance grinned. "I know. But you're not alone. We'll figure it out together."

Igny looked back at the sea. "The villains will return."

Chance nodded. "Yep."

"They will seek the Leyline Crown."

"Yep."

"They will try to unbalance the islands again."

"Yep."

Igny frowned. "You are not helping."

Chance nudged him. "I'm getting to the helpful part. The helpful part is: we'll be there too."

Igný blinked. "We?"

Chance gestured behind them.

Xaras was lifting a barrel for fun.

Gladys was reading three books at once.

Flynn was trying to pet a seagull that absolutely did not want to be petted.

Chance smiled. "We."

Igný exhaled slowly.

"Yes," he said. "We."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE - A New Dawn

Point of View: The Party of Legend (All of Them)

The ship sailed into the sunrise, golden light spilling across the deck.

Gladys closed her book. "So... what now?"

Flynn pointed at the horizon. "Adventure?"

Xaras cracked his knuckles. "Fighting."

Chance grinned. "Snacks."

Igny held the Heartstone. "Balance."

They all looked at each other.

Then nodded.

The islands were safe — for now.

The conduits were closed — for now.

The villains were plotting — definitely right now.

But the Party of Legend was ready.

Together.

Always.

And as the ship sailed onward, the world felt just a little brighter.

A little safer.

A little more theirs.

EPILOGUE

As Recorded by Thom, Historian of the Isles

I suppose this is the part where I, Thom the Historian, wrap things up neatly with a bow and tell you that everything turned out perfectly.

But that would be a lie.

The truth is: the world is never finished.

Magic never sleeps.

Villains never retire.

And heroes... well, heroes never stay still for long.

Ignny, the newly chosen Keeper, has much to learn.

Chance still hasn't learned to stop touching glowing things.

Gladys is studying harder than ever.

Flynn is getting better at not falling off the ship.

Xaras is... still Xaras.

And the Triad — the witch, the sorceress, and the Uberhobgoblin — are out there somewhere, plotting their next move.

But I have faith in the Party of Legend.

Not because they are perfect.

But because they are stubborn.

And brave.

And loyal.

And because, when the world needed them most, they stood together.

I suspect I'll be writing more about them soon.

After all...

The story isn't over.

Not even close.

— **Thom**

Historian of the Isles

Chronicler of Heroes

Collector of Dramatic Pauses
