

Jace, Alone

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The man opened his eyes.

He lay on his back, looking up through a canopy of delicate green toward the darkening blue of the sky. Stalks of bamboo were rustling in a warm, drowsy breeze. He could feel through his bruises (and a tremendous headache) that the ground beneath him was plush with fallen leaves. It was quiet here, under the bamboo. The air tasted faintly of salt, and he could hear waves in the distance.

Something snapped a twig to the man's left. He startled and spun his head searching for the source of the sound, then froze.



Art by Jonathan Kuo

It was a lizard-like thing covered in brilliant blue and yellow feathers. Standing on its hind legs and clutching an egg between its oversized claws, the creature briefly turned its orange eyes to regard the man on the ground. It gave a small chirp before continuing on its way, kicking up a few leaves as it trotted by. A moment later it was gone, disappearing as quickly as it had come.

The man took a moment to process the encounter. The lizard-thing was novel, but everything else about his current situation manifested a curious sense of déjà vu.

He lifted his head for a better look at himself. He wore a blue cloak, long pants, and a tight leather breastplate.

None of it looked familiar.

The man sat up and groaned with the effort. He stood and began to stumble his way out, following the path of the lizard-thing.

The bamboo thicket gave way to a sparser stand of palms, and likewise the rich soil of the forest floor grew thinner and sandier as the space between trees grew wider. The man could hear the waves grow louder and stumbled faster toward the water.

He emerged onto an endless beach. The sand beneath his boots was soft as flour. The air was thick and humid—he felt soaked even though he stood on dry land. A few rock structures formed a natural arch between the beach and the sea, and the lush jungle formed a harsh and immediate wall at the edge of the sand.

The man looked up. The sun was starting to descend in the distance, and he could hear the calls of seabirds darting through the sky above.

He looked in either direction down the beach.

“Hello?”

The gentle tide lapped at his boots.

“HELLO?!” He called, fear creeping into his voice.

As logical explanations were methodically checked off his mental list, the man drew closer and closer to a state of panic.

He did not know how he had gotten here. He did not know his own name. He did not know where this jungle was, or why he was on a beach, or what in the world that lizard-thing was. Why was he covered in bruises? And why did his head hurt? And what the hell did he need to do to get out of here?

An image of an unfamiliar place flashed through the man’s mind—color and light and the idea of *away*. The man felt a tingle run down the back of his neck—and in a refreshingly cool rush of energy, he felt his entire body attempt to break apart from itself, particles flickering and vanishing, his physical form wavering between one place and another. It was pleasant, familiar . . . comforting. He had done this before. His body was dissolving and breaking apart—it should have felt terrible, but instead it felt like *him*. He pushed toward the feeling, praying that if more of his body vanished, then more of his mind would return—only to feel himself *yanked backward, pulled by some massive force back through whatever metaphysical door he had begun to walk through. Away and away and down and down until he smashed* back together on the same beach he tried to depart. He fell to the ground with the shock of it.



Art by Chase Stone

A shining triangle enclosed by a circle appeared in the air above him, and the man gasped through mended lungs.

The pleasant chill receded. His body was whole, his hands were clammy with sweat, and his knees sunk into the sand.

The man drew in breath after panicked, ragged breath. His heart beat a bruise against the inside of his chest.

The man gripped his fists in confusion, took a full breath, and yelled the most illustrative swear he could think of. A single, long, satisfying word, and into it he poured all the confusion and frustration he could muster.

He finally stopped and could only hear the rhythm of waves lapping the shore.

Night was settling in.

He took stock of his physical state. His bruises and aching muscles needed rest more than anything else—food and water could wait until the morning.

He sat on the sand for some time trying to recall how he had arrived, but the only thing he could remember was the swaying of bamboo when he first opened his eyes.

After trying to remember how he got here, he tried to remember his name.

The man remembered plenty of names. Lazlo was a name. So was Sam. But he didn't think either of those names belonged to him.

He then decided he could figure out how he got here in other ways.

There were no people about, so the man took off his heavy leather breastplate, cloak, and gloves. He removed his shirt and trousers, folded them neatly, and laid them on the sand, sighing as he felt the relief of a cool breeze on his skin. He looked down at his belongings, then paused as he looked at his ungloved right hand for the first time.

A scar ran in a perfect line down his right forearm. It was straight as a surgeon's cut; someone had intentionally done this.

The man assessed himself for further clues. He was bruised from recent battle, but he could feel several more of the deep, stick-straight scars running along his back. Were these as old as the scar on his arm? Who had done this to him?

The man put one of his gloves back on over the scar and made a note to ruminate on this evidence later. He looked down at the clothes laying on the sand.

The man tried to imagine who would wear these.

Whoever this person was came from somewhere much colder, that was certain. The materials were heavy, built for rain (he remembered rain!) and brisk chill. The cloak was a bit much—it was not a gaudy thing, per se, but its pattern belied any semblance of subtlety. The undershirt was stained with sweat, so he must have been walking through the heat for some time. Most curious of all were the boots. A few grains of sand were trapped inside against the sole, but the type of sand from his shoes had a different grit than that of the beach around him. This evidence was courser, rougher, a rich golden yellow compared to the soft white beneath him.

The man frowned. There were no supplies. No knife. No food, no rope, no personal items. Whoever this person was seemingly didn't bother to carry weapons.

Was he that idiotic, to travel so unsafely? He didn't think so, but the evidence was concerning. Perhaps his weapons were taken from him? Unlikely—there didn't seem to be anyone near.

The symbol on the cloak caught his attention.

It was . . . familiar.

Why was it familiar?

The moon was high in the sky now, and the man would need to sleep. He decided to mull over the meaning of the symbol later.

He stomped over to a washed-up log and lay down on the beach. Part of him worried about the lizard from earlier—perhaps it ate people too? Not just eggs? A flawed line of thinking—if it ate humans it most likely would have attacked earlier—but perhaps there were others of its kind with bigger appetites.

The man felt terribly exposed.

He threw his cloak over himself and screwed his eyes closed, wishing desperately he would sleep through the night without being detected by whatever else might live on this island.

The man drifted to sleep with a tingle on the back of his neck and tucked his legs close. He tossed and turned on the sand of the beach, completely asleep—and unbeknownst to him, utterly invisible.

The man awoke with the sun the next morning and, still having no idea who he was, decided to focus on taking care of his physical needs.

He began by familiarizing himself with his new home.



Art by Titus Lunter



Art by Titus Lunter



Art by Titus Lunter

Having learned the size of the island (a day's hike in circumference), he chose a spot shaded by a rocky outcropping and protected from the wind to make his home. He built a shelter where the trees met the beach. The labor of hoisting foraged sticks and tying posts with peeled bark caused the man to realize how little exercise he must have been getting before he lost his memory. His muscles were flimsy from disuse, and the man wondered again how his prior self had intended to survive here without weapons or tools. He grew stronger as he worked, though, and despite blisters and sunburns, he managed to construct a covered platform upon which to sleep.

Food required a bit more trial and error, but the man was excited to learn what his likes and dislikes were. He fashioned a simple knife from a sharp stone and set about taste-testing. He liked oysters. He liked whatever the orange fruit was. He liked the long green fruit and the small red berries, but not the violet root vegetables. Those made his tongue itchy, which he attributed to a newly discovered allergy. How fascinating!

What he really needed to learn was how to build a fire.

The sun was rapidly sinking, and a few clouds were rolling in on the horizon.

A second blister began to form on his right palm. He grunted with effort, rubbing a stick between his tired hands as quickly as possible, ignoring the pain and the pus, and the droplet of rain that had just fallen on his neck. He counted the beat of the waves behind him (six crashes per minute) and began to replicate the rhythm in his mind, so the rubbing of the stick pattered a beat along with the waves. His hands were hot with strain, and his brow knit with concentration.

A thin trickle of smoke rose from the point where his stick met the driftwood, and he laughed, trying as he could to keep the little fire alight.

The stick snapped in two.

And the tiny wisp of smoke vanished.

His eyes went wide in shock, and a whimper of disappointment that descended into a growl of frustration escaped his throat.

“*Useless* island!”

The man sat back on the sand, elbows on his knees, and stared at the broken stick laying atop of the log. A sad pile of twigs and dry leaves lay to either side.

The man groaned and leaned back until he lay flat on the beach.

An albatross was gliding in lazy circles far above his head.

The man groaned a second time.

“Why do I know what an albatross is?” he asked aloud.

The albatross didn’t respond.

The man sat up and looked down, narrowing his eyes at the pile of twigs.

Maybe he could *will* fire into being.

He wiped the sand from his pants and felt the sting of a sunburn as he leaned forward, his gaze locked on the pile in front of him.

He concentrated and felt another trickle of rain fall on his bare back as the chill of the overcast sky set into his bones.

The man needed fire. He *needed* fire more than *absolutely anything else in the world*—

The hair at the back of his neck stood up as a tingle went down his spine.

A little stream of smoke began to rise from the log.

He leaped to his feet and backed away. Smoke?! Smoke!

Part of him was alarmed—was this real?!—but the rest of him was too ecstatic to care. The man laughed in surprise and yelled, “I did it!”

The smoke began to gush upward. The man dropped to his knees and started feeding tiny twigs and leaves into the flame, laughing all the while. He could have cried; he was so happy.

The man scrambled to his feet and began dumping in more and more branches, leaves, and bits of driftwood. He didn’t care if he used up all his fuel, he *needed* fire.

The flame had bloomed into a cozy little campfire now. The man’s face pulled wide into a grin. A little laugh escaped him, and he laced his fingers above his head. He stepped back to admire his work.

The fire was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He assumed he had seen more beautiful things, but as he could not remember them, they were irrelevant and incomparable to the current beauty in front of him. *This* was lovelier than any painting and more precious than any jewel.

The growl of the man’s stomach interrupted the moment.

Right! Food! He needed to eat food!

He had found a fish washed up on the beach earlier. It was an ugly, ancient-looking thing, with flat, diamond-shaped scales and a vacant look on its dead face.

The man stabbed the fish through with a stick and held it over the flame.

He sat back, ready to rotate it when one side was done.

But the fish merely stared at him.

Its scales didn’t burn. It didn’t sizzle. It didn’t char. The fish was awash in flame, but not once did it show any sign of being cooked.

The man was confused.

He put out a hand to feel the fire and realized it was not hot.

His confusion turned to dread, and he thrust his hand directly into the flames.

The fire was as cold as the dead fish.

The man pulled his hand to his chest and scrambled away from the fire in fear.

“What?! No! No no no no no!”

The flame flickered a brilliant blue—blue?!—then unceremoniously vanished.

But he had *seen* the smoke! He’d *seen* the fire consume the kindling below! And yet not once did he feel its heat before the fire’s evidence vanished.

The man’s dread tumbled into absolute panic.

He backed up against a palm tree and stared down at the fish on the stick in horror, quickly sifting through the evidence and landing at a reasonable conclusion.

He was trapped, without memory, without food, shelter, or skill . . . and now, to top it all off, he was losing his grip on reality.

The man solemnly concluded that he had gone insane.

It had been quite some time since the incident with the fish, and the man had come to accept that things were much simpler now that he had lost his mind.

If it was true that his mind was disconnected from reality, then he needn’t worry about the logistics of how he had arrived or who he had been before. His sanity was irrelevant if the only truth he could experience was his current reality.

How freeing it was to come to that realization!

And so, the man set about doing things that a person who believed they were trapped on an island would do.

He delighted in building new tools. A basket woven from stick, a simple snare, even a sharpened knife to open oysters with. The man set about to make a new tool every day, and took pride in every single one. It was almost *fun* having endless amounts of time with which to build new solutions to his problems.

As he explored and learned, he became used to the visions he would see along the way.

Some had more shape than others. Usually they were humanoid, with faces and voices of their own.

A woman with snow-white skin and elaborate white hair who would float behind him, taking note of his actions in a journal. A bailiff, stern faced with a blue cape and silver armor. A leonin missing an eye.

In his moments of loneliness, he would sometimes see a woman in violet on the edge of his field of vision. A tug of anxiety gripped his chest whenever she walked by.

The man knew these were hallucinations, knew they were not real.

They had no power over me. Right?

He ignored the visions as they came and went, but sometimes they refused to be ignored.

“You’ve really done it this time, haven’t you?”

This vision appeared whenever the man was struggling at a task.

His shoulders were broad, and his olive skin had a sheen of sweat underneath the shine of his armor. The hallucination was looking over the man’s shoulder as he tried to carve a fishing hook.

“Listen, you aren’t really suited to this task. Let me handle it.” The vision’s voice was gruff but friendly. It came off as condescending.

The man was annoyed.

“I can do it myself.”

The hallucination sighed. “You and I both know you’re not suited to this. Let me handle it, you go philosophize on the other end of the beach.”

“I said I can do it myself.” The man let his irritation reach his voice.

“No, you can’t. I call the shots and execute, you stand to the side. That’s how this works.”

The man responded by throwing his hook at the hallucination. It went straight through the figure’s eye and landed behind him on the sand.

The hallucinations appeared more frequently as his boredom grew.

“Policies and procedures, section 12, item 4.”

He gasped in surprise. A woman with dark hair and a cane was staring at him from a few feet away down the beach. She wore a white dress with a sun emblem on its front. A dark cloak hung behind her and grazed the sand, and her expression made it clear that she was on a mission.

She impatiently tapped a finger on the handle of her cane.

“I said, ‘Policies and procedures section 12, item 4. Official guild representatives may be granted passage from one guild-controlled place of residence or business to another by virtue of an official warrant’. Do you or do you not agree that that is a standing law?”

She followed him from snare to snare, peered over his shoulder as he reset the traps, and glared at him all the while as he carried the lizards he had caught back to camp to cook.

He buried the lizards with hot coals, palm leaves, and root vegetables to cook for the rest of the afternoon. In time, the hallucination vanished, and the man sighed in relief.

He sat for a while, listening to the shorebirds above, and decided to stave off boredom building a bonfire on the beach.

He spent his morning heaving log after log onto the flames, hoping the smoke would rise far enough for a ship to take notice. It hadn’t yet, but perhaps it would today.

His optimism was waning.

He set down his braided-palm hat on the sand. The heat from both the fire and the noon sun was overwhelming. He walked away from the fire and waded into the sea.

The water was warm in the shallows, but a relief from the heat all the same. It stung his sunburn, and under the waves he could see small fish darting back and forth.

He could feel the pull of the tide against his legs.

Taste the salt on the edge of his lips.

Smell the smoke of the bonfire from the beach mingling with the scent of washed-up kelp.

It all felt . . . real.

Real in a way that his insanity shouldn't allow him to feel.

The man considered his perception of reality.

There was another explanation for all of this. For the strange disappearing and reappearing that his body had done earlier and for the fire that wasn't actually fire.

What if my hallucinations are expressions of magic?

He knew magic existed. He knew there existed people who could manipulate fire or summon lightning or grow trees where none grew before, but he did not know their names. Did not know their faces.

He had forgotten everything else about himself . . . could he have forgotten such a crucial part of what made him *him* ?

The man ran a wet hand through his hair. He went out deeper in the water, letting the waves lap at his bearded cheeks.

The thought felt . . . correct. "I can wield magic" was a thought that came to the man as simply and truly as "I am a man" or "I dislike crocodiles."

He closed his eyes and willed himself to find that *thing* , that chill at the back of his neck and that ripple of power within. He searched inside his mind and willed himself to create.

The man opened his eyes, and saw a vision of himself standing on top of the water in front of him.

The image had a blank expression on its face, but was otherwise identical to the man himself, standing calmly—impossibly—on the surface of the water.

The man's jaw fell open in shock.

The illusion appeared solid as flesh, and its detail was astonishingly accurate. The man was amused he did not remember his name but remembered the exact details of his own body: muscles toned, stubble on its face, blistered sunburn on its bare shoulders. He even saw its scars—*his* scars—the little book-marks of a life well-lived.

The man reached out and tried to touch the illusion's leg. His fingers passed through it as they would through the air.

Incredible.

The man stood up, his waist at water level and his hands at his sides.

The man grinned from ear to ear.

He concentrated, felt that familiar chill on his neck, and the illusion vanished.

His grin erupted into a cry of joy.

The man ran to shore, kicking up sand as he went.

"I've been manifesting fragments of memory! I'm not hallucinating—I've been creating illusions! *I am a mage!*"

He held out a hand and willed an illusory draft horse into being. The thing materialized through a soft haze of blue, and it ran a heavy canter around the man. He reached out to touch it and easily passed

a hand through its dappled grey side. The illusion ran past, leaping through his signal fire and loping up and down the beach, a graceful streak of cloudy night against the harsh white of the sand.

The man laughed at the madness of it all. He laughed at his own ability, his foolishness, but most of all in that moment, he laughed that the other inhabitants of the beach thought his creation was *real*. Seagulls took flight when the horse approached, insects flew close to try and rest on its back, and though it left no mark in the sand, this creation felt more real than any fire, spear, or net ever had. His imagination was too great to contain, and his mind was as boundless as he wished. The man had no need for a name or a past, for in that moment he knew *exactly* who he was.

The man dispelled the horse and created an elephant, dispelled the elephant and created a sea monster, dispelled the sea monster and turned the day into night, filling the beach with an endless array of delicate stars.

He laughed until he cried.

After a moment of happy tears surrounded by an endless galaxy of illusory stars, his heart became heavy.

He was standing in an endless night, a perfect void dotted with small bursts of light.

The man was incredibly alone.

He vanished the illusion of the stars and the night and was met with an equally empty beach.

The next day, he realized he didn't know what another human voice sounded like.

He did not leave his sleeping platform on the day after that.

The man returned to the bamboo grove.

He came wearing the clothes he had arrived in, and lay down in the bare patch he had woken up in.

The man stared at the azure sky above.

He tried to will himself to leave, but nothing happened.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember what friends or a home looked like, but nothing came to mind.

"Please let me leave," he said to no one.

The wind rustled the bamboo above, and the man whimpered, holding his face in his hands.

He might not be insane. Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps this was some horrible afterlife. Perhaps he had never existed before and was doomed to whatever *this* was for forever.

Even if he couldn't leave, at the very least he wanted someone to talk to.

"You look *terrible*," purred a voice from above.

The man moved his hands. An illusion of a woman stood above him. She had raven hair, tired eyes, and a disdainful expression. Her arms were gloved in violet satin and crossed in front of her.

"The muscles are a nice change, but you look awful with facial hair." Her lips curled in a disdainful sneer.

The man shook his head, tears building in the corner of his eyes.

"I don't know who you are."

"Of course you don't, *boy*."

She looked him over. "You didn't know who I was then, and you don't now. Hard to build trust when neither of us trusts each other."

The man decided to stop caring that this illusion wasn't real. He desperately needed someone to talk to.

"Who was I, before here?"

"*You weren't who you thought you were, that's for sure.* No one else saw through you, but *I did*. You were never a leader or a detective or a scholar; you were a frightened child playing pretend."

The man swallowed a lump in his throat.

"You can fool the rest of the world with your magic and illusions, but you could never fool me."

The man wanted to sob. Wanted to go back and sleep. Wanted to starve until all of this went away.

"I don't know who you are," he finally admitted with a broken voice.

The woman knelt and looked him in the eye with a cold, crocodilian smile.

"I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."

The man shot out a hand to shove her away, and the image of the woman flickered away in a haze of blue. She was gone.

His heart was racing. And his brow was knit in despair.

That despair began to tighten into rage.

He stood to his feet, balled his fists, and punched his hand into a stalk of bamboo. The shock of it bloodied his knuckles.

But he didn't care. He paced and tried to slow his racing heart.

"*No more involuntary illusions!*" he said, and something in the back of his mind rung with magical affirmation. It would not happen again.

He had control over his mind. *He* was the wielder of his talents.

The man let his mind drift, and he wondered if the illusion he'd seen was the manifestation of something within himself, or a broken memory of someone close.

She may have been a lover. She may have been a friend.

He wondered if he even *had* friends.

How could someone who was close to a person like that be deserving of friends?

Then a thought occurred to the man.

"Who I was doesn't matter . . . because I get to learn who I am *now*."

Saying it out loud made it feel real.

"Whoever I was is irrelevant, for I will become whoever I *want* to become."

He believed that with all his heart.

The man realized what he must do.

He was going to prove to himself that he deserved to live.

The man got to work.

He toiled for five days straight.

He felt both exhausted and accomplished.

The man sat eating foraged fruit in front of his fire, and a small but sturdy raft sat nearby beneath the cloudless, starry sky.

He leaned up against his supplies and ran through his mental checklist one more time: two weeks' worth of fresh water (and a solar still for use after that), his net, his spear, and what was left of his cloak to use as protection from the sun. Two baskets of fruit. His hat, his knife, extra material for the sails, extra bamboo and rope for repairs. The man knew he might be sailing to his death in the morning, but he was desperate to know what was on the other side of the sea. There had to be *someone* there.

He was excited. He was terrified. He was leaving the only place he'd ever known to find what lay on the other side of the water, and the thought filled him with a strange elation. He had so much left to discover.

The man smiled. He sat back down in front of his fire and cracked open an oyster with a sharpened rock. He held the half-shell up as a toast to the island around him.

"Cheers to you, Useless Island."

His first day at sea went smoothly. Useless Island disappeared over the horizon, and infinite azure stretched out in front of him.

The man was confident. If he had survived this long on a deserted island, he could survive a trip at sea.

He slept well that first night.

His second night went well, too.

But the sea turned gray and choppy on the third day.

And on the fourth afternoon, the waves grew taller than his mast.

Thick droplets of rain rammed into his skin, and the sky churned above with the same ferocity as the ocean below.

Walls of water tossed his little raft back and forth, spraying cold water in his eyes and toppling his balance. The man gripped the sides of his raft and screwed his eyes shut, wishing he had been gifted with power over the seas rather than power over the mind.

Lightning arced overhead, followed immediately by the roar of thunder.

The man was terrified. He tied a length of rope to his waist and attached the other end to his raft.

The ship rose, lifted by the crest of a wave, and on the horizon the man could see a craggy, rugged, rocky island.

Perhaps there are people on this one?

The man pulled the side of his sail to try and catch the wind, just in time for his craft to slide down the side of the wave, dipping into a valley of water as another wave loomed overhead.

The man looked up, saw the impending wave, and gasped just before it crashed into his ship.

He awoke draped over the wood of his broken raft. It was night, now, and the sea was still.

The other island was in the distance. It was a rocky barren thing, with tops that glistened white.

Snow? He thought optimistically. He looked more closely. The man groaned. *Birds.*

He assessed his current state. His raft was in pieces, but thankfully, the basket of his belongings was still strapped to the piece of raft he clung to.

The white excrement on the rocky island was glistening in the moonlight. It was almost beautiful. Almost.

Exhausted and defeated, the man kicked himself over toward his new home.

He pulled himself out of the water and collapsed on a piece of rock above the tide level. Despite the never-ending chorus of seabirds and flying lizard-birds, the man slept a full day.

The man wavered in between sleep and wakefulness. He didn't have the energy to get up and explore, but he could see quite plainly he had traded in a perfectly livable island for an absolutely terrible one.

Everything sounded and smelled like seabirds.

In his heart, he knew that he should have stayed on Useless Island and lived a happy life with his oysters and fishing net and unyielding imagination.

But there was a small part of him that *knew* in some way that he could simply . . . go.

The man decided to replicate the experience he'd had on his first day.

Perhaps *now* it would work.

The man lay back next to the rocks and closed his eyes. He needed to find whatever it was in himself that was giving him this feeling that he could do something impossible.

He took a deep breath, let the sound of the waves around him and the sting of the sun above vanish from his perception, and in his mind, he pictured a well.

Its sides were smooth gray slate, but as the man ran his hand along the rim, he could sense that it was once filled not with water, but with endless objects and places, scents, tastes, people, friends, lovers, a whole lifetime's worth of memories. And now those were gone.

He climbed over the side of the well and fell further into his mind. His descent was controlled and slow, a graceful sinking through himself. The depth of the well had not changed, he could tell, but only the top part of it was lined with evidence and memory. It was a lush and rainy jungle, floury sand and familiar birds. Just below that, the walls were lined with bamboo, the shimmer of sunlight on fish scales, and a perfect, illusory, rain-gray draft horse. These memories were proud, full of learning and accomplishment.

The man smiled. It wasn't much. But it was *him*.

He continued to fall.

The familiar vanished, and he sensed he was moving toward a different sort of knowledge. The man made a note to one day study the differences in types of memory, for here the walls were textured, in one spot velvet, another leather, and in yet another, a patch of harsh-looking spines. As he passed his hand from one surface to another, he felt the vast variety of knowledge that had accumulated here from his other life—knowledge he never remembered learning but was thankful he had retained. Here was language, arithmetic, how to lace his boots, and how to brew a cup of coffee (oh, what horrible atrocities the man would commit for a cup of hot coffee). The man chuckled. There was so much information stitched into the walls, and yet, wonderfully, so much room for more.

The man fell further still, and the slate of the well gave way to thick clouds of fog.

Whatever used to be here was gone now.

But there was one part that remained.

It was there, suspended like a silver jewel, a shining light embedded in the well of his mind.

The man found the part that would allow his escape.

The part that made him *him*.

He did not know what it was, but he had felt it once, and he knew it was his last chance.

The man lifted his head to the sky and ascended: past the textures of his knowledge, past the memory of his beloved Useless Island, out of the well, and back into his waking body.

He opened his eyes and tried to ignore the birds cawing and flapping on the rocks around him.

The man took a deep breath, and then he tapped into that shining part of himself that he had discovered in the depths of his mind.

The man felt his body *lurch*, and tried to ride out the panic as his limbs flickered in and out of view. Pieces of himself tried to leave, blinking in and out of view in a delicate haze of blue. Once again, he felt himself violently tugged backward, falling and thrashing, until his body hit the rocks of his new island. That familiar circle-and-triangle sigil appeared over his head, and the man let out a breath when his form condensed once again into flesh.

He had failed.

The man looked around. He was surrounded by nothing but empty waves, excrement-covered rocks and seabirds, and a blistering sun.

The conclusion he came to was simple. He would not survive much longer.

“I can think of a way out,” he said through cracked lips and a dry mouth. “I will think of a way out of this.”

And so the man lay down on the rocks, closed his eyes, and descended once more into his mind to search for an answer.

He was awakened by yelling in the distance.

“Avast! Man onshore!”

“Should we send Malcolm over?”

“No. Prepare the dinghy. I want a good look at him first.”

“Lowering the away vessel!”

An immense, wooden tall ship was near the rocky, bird-ridden outcropping. Its sails were latticed with what seemed like miles of intricate rope. Brilliantly colored sails assaulted his vision with a hue he had not encountered since he first awoke on Useless Island. A stone statue was unceremoniously strapped to the front of the ship, and written in graceful script on the side of the bow was the epigraph: *The Belligerent*.

He closed his eyes.

Exhaustion overtook him, and minutes later he heard the splash of oars meeting water.

A husky, feminine voice yelled out over the tumble of the waves.

“I’d tell you not to leave, but the point is a bit moot. It’s like planeswalking into a window, isn’t it?”

The man was too tired to look at the source of the voice. It was close, now. Whoever it was must have rowed over.

“My ship needs a new figurehead, Beleren! Tell me who you’re working for and your death will be a painless one!”

Beleren? Is that my name? He wondered in a drowsy haze.

The splash of feet walking through water. The caw of gulls. A grunt, the unceremonious thud of an anchor. The woman must have jumped out of the dinghy to investigate on her own.

He heard her softly gasp from just above him.

Do I really look that bad? The man wondered. He mentally conceded, *I feel that bad. I must look that bad.*

The man’s eyes fluttered open through a thick crust of salt and sleep.

He locked eyes with a regal woman he could only assume was the captain of the ship.

She was remarkable.



Art by Chris Rahn

The woman was tall and lithe, with brilliant emerald skin and tendrilled hair dancing curiously in the wind. He knew, somehow, that she was a gorgon, but he felt no fear when he looked her in the eye.

Her golden eyes went wide when she looked down at the man on the rocks, and she stared at him with an expression of shock.

The man realized with equal parts excitement and dread that this woman knew exactly who he was.

“Jace, what the hell happened to you?”