

I

PART ONE

*“Hundreds have chased the crown in the sport of
Arenakour... yet only two have ever claimed it. Will it
remain upon the head it knows... or fall to one
unproven?”*

—Eric Peck, ACS Founder

GIVE ME A SIGN

A scrawny boy lands on the rooftop with a loud *thud*, wobbling to find his balance as the metal creaks beneath his feet. He bends over, hands on his knees, catching his breath. The salty breeze stings his face, his spiky blonde hair sticking to his forehead in the last traces of sunlight. He wipes his face with his wrist and narrows his green eyes at the view.

The island stretches out like a messy painting. The beach—a bright crescent of sand—curves along turquoise water, waves rolling lazily to shore. Beyond that, just sky and sea, making the island feel like its own tiny world. Stacked shacks and patched-together homes sprawl inland, built from whatever scraps the sea and time have offered. Rusted metal sheets gleam with hand-etched designs. Salvaged ship-wood panels still bear faded port names. Bright laundry flutters on sagging clotheslines. Handmade driftwood chimes, painted flags, and tiny Morph carvings give each home its own story.

Beyond the favelas, the dormant volcano looms, with its towering, forested slope spilling toward the sea like a silent

titan. Below, the streets pulse with life. Kids race through alleys. Vendors bark out prices for fresh fish. And skewers of steaming street food, their smoky scent curling through the air.

“MAXX!”

Maxx turns just as—*whoosh*—Nico rockets toward him up a ramp, wheels spinning, arms pumping. A wide grin stretches across his face at the sight of his friend, excitement dancing in his dark eyes. Other kids crowd nearby rooftops, breathing hard but eager for more.

“Next point wins!” Nico shouts, skidding to a stop. His striped tank clings to his skinny frame, cargo shorts crammed with handmade gadgets. “Better hurry, curfew’s coming!”

Maxx’s grin wavers. The mayor’s guards are easy to avoid, but getting caught meant serious punishment. He watches below as the merchants quickly pack up their things. Still...with work all day this summer, there’s no other time to run.

Need to be ready for the festival if I want a chance to contend.

“Yeah, yeah.” He swallows his nerves. “Pick the target. Make it tough.”

The other kids join in protest.

“Make it an easy one!”

“Not another chimney!”

Nico smirks, spinning dramatically on one wheel. “Our final target isss... *the clocktower!*”

Immediate groans.

“You’re kidding,” one boy mutters. “Nobody climbs that thing!”

Another boy with round glasses pinched tight on his nose adds, “Come on Nico! It’s a mile through the busiest part of town! And it’s falling apart!”

Nico just shrugs, smug. “Toughest challenge, right? The

clock's ticking."

DING. DONG.

The first curfew bell tolls eerily on cue, deep and heavy, rolling over the island as a warning. Shadows freeze, nerves thrum. No one moves as the chime lingers and fades.

"I'm not waiting for you scaredy-chucks," Leo says, stepping forward.

Confidence booms from his voice. Tall, lean muscle shifts beneath his shirt as he leans over the edge. He looks back to make sure everyone sees.

"I'll show you how it's done."

And just like that, he's gone.

He launches forward, his movements sharp and powerful. He cuts through clotheslines without a glance, fabric snapping in his wake.

The other kids scramble, pounding over rooftops like a startled flock. Tin rattles under their feet. The wild race to the clocktower is on.

Maxx stays still.

He watches.

The mistakes are obvious. Sloppy landings. Wasted steps.

"Come on, Maxx! You're falling too far behind!" Nico calls, bouncing in his wheelchair, acting as announcer of the game rather than participant.

Maxx crouches, mapping the route in his mind. He threads the course together before moving a muscle.

He closes his eyes, mutters under his breath, then takes in a long inhale.

"Nine Yippiyippis," Nico drawls. "Ten Yippiyippis—"

Maxx exhales, and as he does, his eyes fling open and he flashes a wide smirk to his friend.

He launches.

“Don’t worry,” he yells, voice alive. Confident. *Free*.

His foot hits the edge. He soars into the air.

“I wanted your toughest challenge!”

THE CLOCKTOWER

The rooftops blur beneath Maxx's feet. His movements are fluid, precise; vaulting gaps, skimming past loose shingles, ducking beneath snapping laundry lines. A barrier rises ahead, but he barely hesitates, pushing off the wall in a clean, effortless jump.

Below, the streets churn with sound and movement. Vendors bellow.

“Fresh fish, straight from the docks!”

“Sweet mangoes, just three pence!”

Pedestrians shove through the crowded streets, dodging carts and barrels. Hooves clatter, wheels creak, sandals slap against dirt. The air is thick with roasting nuts, salted fish, sweat, and spilled rum.

Above it all, Maxx runs.

His pulse thrums, but he's not afraid. The others will be behind him soon.

A boy freezes at a rooftop edge, hesitating.

Maxx launches past, sailing over the gap.

Cold air rushes against his skin before he lands in a roll,

popping up smooth.

“The bigger the gap, the more speed you need!” he shouts back.

The rooftops tighten as he pushes into the market square. Crumbling. Irregular. Maxx pushes harder, instincts honed by years of practice.

Then he sees it.

The clocktower looms ahead.

Massive and unforgiving. A reminder of a culture long past.

Its weathered stone walls split with deep cracks, ivy vines snaking through its wounds. At the top, the bell; its dull metal gleaming in the dim light.

He isn't the first one to reach it. A figure scrambles up the tower.

Leo.

Maxx's stomach knots.

Leo moves quickly, his strong arms pulling him up with ease.

He's ahead. For now.

Maxx slows, eyes scanning the weakened tower. It's worse than last season. Loose stone. Missing sections. One wrong move...

On the ground, a girl watches, arms crossed. Her frown is sharp.

“He's going to fall.”

Her voice is low, but Maxx hears.

He glances at her. “You could help, Gwen.”

She doesn't look at him. “You know I would,” she mutters, brushing off her dress. “But my mother would be very displeased if I ruined my outfit.”

Her white dress flutters in the breeze, unmarked by dust. Delicate florals stitched along the seams. A wide-brimmed sun

hat casts soft shadows over her sharp, composed features. She stands still, watching like an interloper, peering into a world she'll never step into.

Maxx suddenly notices the sweat stuck to his shirt.

Gwen shifts uncomfortably.

"You'll have to show him how it's done. But be careful."

"I'll be fine."

He moves. Fingers brushing rough brick. He grips the first ledge, stone scraping his skin. Then he pulls, muscles burning in a steady, rhythmic climb.

It's instinct for him now—like breathing, like running.

Below, the market noise fades to a dull hum.

Above. Leo.

Maxx angles up, watching the older boy falter, his movements turning frantic.

He smirks. "Hey Leo, better watch out! I'm comin' for you!"

Leo looks down. His face darkens as Maxx passes him with ease. His jaw clenches.

"No way I'm letting you beat me!"

He lunges upward. Too fast.

Maxx sees it coming.

"Leo, no!"

Leo grabs a loose brick.

It snaps free from the crumbling tower, still in his grip.

His other hand slips.

For just a second, time hangs still.

He falls backward.

Arms flailing. Eyes wide.

Panic twists his face, a raw cry ripping from his throat as he plummets.

Maxx doesn't think.

He dives.

Air rushes past in a blur. His arms stretch, fingers reaching out.

He collides with Leo midair, wrapping his arms around him. Their weight yanks them away from the wall.

They crash.

A market stall explodes beneath them. Crates burst, sending a cascade of fruit and trinkets rolling across cobblestones. A banner rips free, tangling around Maxx's arm before he vanishes into the wreckage.

Silence.

"What on Terra have you done to my stall?!"

A thickset merchant storms forward, face red with fury.

Maxx groans, wincing as he begins to stand. He throws his hands up defensively.

"Sir, we're so sorry! Total accident! We'll help clean up."

He nudges Leo. "Right?"

Leo winces, brushing off splinters. "Yeah, yeah. Just don't call the guards."

The merchant scowls, then points away. "Scram! You've done enough, *barnacleheads*!"

They don't wait to be told twice.

Maxx and Leo bolt, weaving through the closing market.

Pink faced, Leo mutters, "I had it under control."

Maxx laughs. "Sure, you did."

Nico rolls up with the other kids, wheezing with laughter. "Leo looked like a flailing fatter! Arms and legs everywhere!"

Another boy in the group adds. "Wouldn't want your dad hearing about this. The Mayor's top enforcer... and his son screams as high as a hairpin—"

Leo steps in front of the boy, who suddenly shrinks and grows

silent.

Leo glares down at him, ready to pounce—

DING. DONG.

The second curfew bell rings.

The sound is heavy, final.

Laughter dies. Smiles fade.

The once-lively market hushes, now tinged with something colder, more urgent.

Leo stiffens, fists clenching. He turns and walks away without a word, disappearing into the dim streets.

Maxx watches him leave. Guilt flickers, but there's no time to dwell.

He glances at Nico, already adjusting his wheels, ready to move. "We've got to go."

The other kids scatter faster than startled seabirds.

Maxx lingers for a beat, just long enough for Nico to roll beside him.

Grinning, Nico pulls something from his pocket. A small bundle, wrapped in a napkin, edges damp from the humid air. "Happy birthday."

Maxx blinks rapidly as he stares down the gift.

Carefully, he peels back the wrapping. Inside, gleaming in the low light, rests a fishhook. Carved from bone, or maybe a creature's tooth. Its surface is polished, with delicate carvings of twisting waves along its curve. Unexpectedly heavy.

Maxx swallows hard. "Nico... how?"

Nico shrugs. "When you're ready, toss it into the Twin Serpents River and make a wish. Maybe you'll wake up tomorrow on Torio as an Arenakour Champion." He waves a hand dismissively, but his expression is soft.

Maxx clutches it, smiling.

Without thinking, they fall into their handshake: Fist bump. Jellyfish hands. Swim awayyy. Their fingers wriggle like fish darting off into the water.

Laughter bubbles between them.

Maxx grins. “Alright. I’ll catch you tomorrow after work!”

He takes off.

The fishhook necklace swings in his hand, glinting in the fading light.

Even as darkness spreads, and the stars flicker awake, Nico’s gift stays with him. A silent weight in his palm. As Maxx races toward home, his steps feel just a bit lighter.

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