

Orbs of Prestige: Chapter 9 – Fishing



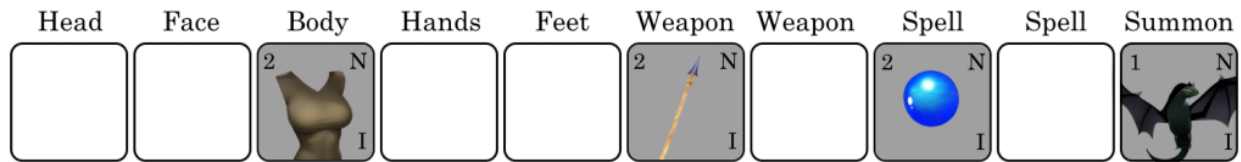
Jade [Level 4] 10.7 Copper Chips
 Low Human [Rank 1, Copper], Female

Attributes [Stats]

Strength: 3	Power: 3	Carry Limit: 3
Endurance: 3	Stamina: 3	Armor: 9
Agility: 5	Dexterity: 5	Speed: 5
Mind: 17	Mana Regen: 17	Perception: 5 20

Orbs [Carry Limit: 4 / 3]

1. Water Blast [Lv 2 (L-Mid)]
2. Short Spear [Lv 2 (Mid)]
3. Basic Tunic [Lv 2 (L-Mid)]
4. Pygmy Draco [Lv 1 (L-Mid)]



Jade blushed as her tunic automatically unequipped when she stepped through the barrier; she felt very exposed in only her tank top and short shorts. “Right, that happens,” she mumbled.

Lotus was a [Town] so it had eight buildings instead of a [Village]’s four. But, like all settlements she had been to, the streets were empty. Before heading to bed, she quickly explored the settlement. Tavern, Hunter’s Hall, and Market were all the same as Jin [Village], but it had a Blacksmith instead of a Crafter’s Den. The other four builders were a Dock, Library, Bank, and Garden. Jade resolved to visit each one after she rested.

Jade decided to enter the Hunter’s Hall to introduce herself and to catch up on any news. A few people were browsing the quest board and a large man stood behind the desk talking with another person. Jade felt a pang of sadness as it reminded her of Wilma. The others in the room glanced at her; some of the men stared a bit longer than typical. She fiddled unconsciously with her clothes. She felt so exposed.

It did bring a question to mind. Nobody here had any reproductive organs, so what was the purpose of gender and attraction? Was it just pre-programmed into the NPCs because that’s the way the real world worked? Was she just imagining the stares?

Jade projected confidence and walked to the board. She checked the bounty list first and found the bounty for Syn and Trist. As expected. Moving on, she browsed the quest list; not much was available, mostly for creatures in the mountains. Probably all the easy ones were taken. She waited in line for her turn to talk to the man behind the counter.

“How can I help ya, little miss?” the big man asked once she got to the front of the line.

“I’ve got some loot I was wondering if you could buy,” Jade replied. She laid out the loot she’d gotten since leaving Jin [Village], except for the ingredients. She quietly lamented she couldn’t cook in Tavern. A red-haired girl appearing as a cook the same day a red-haired guy with a bounty who cooked disappeared would be super suspicious. Syn’s details were probably already being leaked. At least she could cook privately once she bought her kitchen.

The man shuffled through them. “Not a bad haul for a Level 4. I’ll give you 1 Copper for it.”

“Hey, Harvey, you didn’t give me that much! That’s way more than it’s worth,” a man said. Level 6 and bald. He had been the person in front of her, but he had stuck around to see what Jade had. He glared at Jade and the Hunter’s Hall worker.

“Bill, you should know this by now,” Harvey said. “We give a bonus for newbies Level 5 and below. It helps them survive at their most vulnerable. You had it too when you were low-leveled, whether you noticed it or not.”

Bill opened his mouth to speak, but quiet mocking behind him snapped it shut. He harrumphed and stormed away to the teleport crystal.

“Sorry about that,” Harvey said. “He’s been a pain in my neck since he spawned here. He’ll probably try and get a newbie to sell his stuff and then get banned from the town. Good riddance, I say.”

“Sounds like you’ve got your problems,” Jade said with a smile. “One Copper? Sounds great. Thank you. I’m new here. Is there anything I should know about?”

Harvey considered. “We’re mainly a fishing town here. Our main export is raw fish, water element materials, and Raw Rice. Judging by your loot, you came by the hills and marsh area. Don’t go into the lake unless you’ve got permission from the Dock. The desert to the south is full of strong monsters. My advice for you at your level would be to join a party to complete quests in the Marsh.”

“Stay away from the western mountains,” a man said behind her. “Most of the quests on the board are for that area. There’s a reason they haven’t been completed yet; we’ve lost so many people.”

“Oh, keep an eye open for a guy with red hair and a girl with blue,” another woman said. “They’ve got huge bounties on their heads. 10 Gold Chips.” This caused the whole room to start gossiping as Jade finished her transaction.

“One of my friends said that the guy with red hair was spotted in Jin [Village],” a man said.

“What?! That village to the north? It’s not too far away. Maybe I should head over there.”

“I’ve got a teleport point there. I’ll go check it out,” a Level 8 man said. He left and reappeared a few minutes later. “The boy got captured by the outlaws at Favia [Outpost]! They’re organizing a raid to storm their hideout as we speak. Paul, you in?”

A large man with thick black hair and a beard stepped forward. “Sure, why not? How far away is it?”

People began to gather in the Hunter’s Hall to form a caravan to Jin [Village]. And then they were gone. The building went from almost empty, to packed, to back to being almost empty.

“You’re not heading out with them, lass?” Harvey asked.

Jade shook her head and smiled sheepishly. “No, I know I’m way too under-leveled to get a chance at a fraction of that bounty. Plus, I just got here. I need some rest.”

“Smart. Looks like we’ll be short-handed for the next little bit; you should have plenty of opportunities to make money. Check in at sunrise for new quests. Oh, and stop by the Library if you have any general questions.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that.”

Syn: <I made it to the next town.>

Trist: <Nice. Still jealous. I’ve been stuck in my dungeon all day. It is kind of fun to manage it, but I’ve been stir-crazy the whole day. I only go out when a neighboring dungeon monster gets too close. I’ll head out tomorrow to meet up with you.>

Syn: <Be careful. It’s crazy out here. 50 NPCs just took off at the rumor I was in the next village over.>

Trist: <Your disguise must have been excellent if you fooled them. Get me one of those?>

Syn: <No can do, there was only one of them, and it was a gift. I owe that NPC a lot.>

Trist: <Really? You owe an NPC? A computer program?>

Syn: <They are super realistic. I forget half the time I’m not talking to a real person.>

Trist: <I see. I haven’t really interacted with them much since all of them want to kill me. What are you planning on next?>

Syn: <I’m going to stay here a day or two to build up strength. Hopefully, gain a level or two. There’s a desert and a lake in the way. I’m going to try and find the best way to cross it.>

Jade closed her chat and sat up on her bed in her Room. It was odd to see Syn as her name in the chat with Trist, though it had been less than a day. Syn's name wouldn't change until she met up with Trist.

Jade had just woken up. With her high Perception, she only needed to sleep about two hours in the outside world to get fully rested. She was a bit miffed she couldn't sleep on her stomach as easily; stupid new body parts. Jade would need short naps throughout the day to stay rested. She wasn't going to waste a single moment. For her next level up, she'd need to invest a bit into Endurance. She was getting way too tired too quickly.

She checked her Orb progress:

<Orbs (100%)

Carry Limit: 4 / 3

1. Water Blast [Level 2 (Low-Mid)] – 100 / 100
2. Pygmy Draco (Duke) [Level 1 (Low-Mid)] – 100 / 100
3. Short Spear [Level 2 (Mid)] – 100 / 100
4. Basic Tunic [Level 2 (Low-Mid)] – 100 / 100>

All of her Orbs were still at Mid or below, even though she had gone through multiple battles. She'd have to grind a lot. She wanted to be Level 5 before moving on. Duke would level up the fastest since he was still Level 1, but it was hard to use him in the swamp with those herons. She needed to fix her Carry Limit; it would be a pain to eat meals to compensate, but it was her only option until she leveled up.

Jade checked her wallet. 11.7 Copper Chips. The Inventory system automatically converted the Chips to the lowest amount of coins possible. Jade would have a much more difficult time making money, especially since she couldn't sell her cooking. Maybe later she would sell Meals again when she got more established. She eyed her Room Upgrades. 10 Coppers for a Mini Kitchen. She almost bought it but held off until she had a steady stream of income.

"Alright, time to get going." She touched the Mana Crystal and teleported to the front gate. She nodded at the guard and walked in. The sun was barely setting. Unlike the real world, shops didn't close. People had various sleeping schedules due to Perception differences and monsters were active at different times. The streets were still empty. Jade could never get over that.

Jade stopped by the Library first. She had to pay 1 Copper to enter, but it was a one-time fee, and she could enter as many times as she wanted. Finally, after so much time, she could gain a basic knowledge of the world. She stepped in and immediately felt ripped off. Only one mostly empty bookshelf. A few couches and chairs lined the walls and only two people were reading: a Level 7 woman and a Level 4 guy. Neither noticed Jade enter.

The bookshelf only had ten books on it. Jade quickly skimmed through the titles. Her disappointment faded. Most of the books were information on general knowledge of the game

world, like what upgrades were available, an explanation of elements, creature types, spell effects, and so on. She took a few books to the couch and activated her Mind Dampener skill to read the books in slow time. Another benefit of the skill. She would not be able to retain most of the information, but she made notes in her notepad of the general topics so she could go back later.

After she spent a few hours reading in slow time, Jade walked to the Dock. Three pools of water rested inside the building. Each pool was partitioned by walkable planks. The two outside pools held small boats that could only hold four people max. The middle pool was empty and bordered the gate that led outside to the lake. From her Library visit, Jade learned that settlements could build vehicles in special buildings like Docks or Caravan Hub. They could build boats, wagons, and other vehicles depending on the upgrades.

Four people were working on the boats docked in the pools. A short stocky Level 7 man noticed Jade and greeted her.

“Evenin’ lass, what can I do for you?” He had a bit of a drawl to his speech.

“Evening. Um, is this the place where I can find a boat to travel further south?” She thought a boat might be the fastest way to travel south.

The man guffawed. “Lass, nobody but the stupid travels south through this lake. Further south is filled with monsters and owned by the Scalelings. No, lass, what we focus on is fishing. Want to join? We have a newbie program. It’s a good way to level up. Have you ever been fishing or boating?”

Eric went fishing once in the real world, but Jade assumed that didn’t count. She shook her head.

“We charge five Coppers to join us on a voyage. We’ll train you on the dos and don’ts of fishing. If we like what we see, you can earn your money back and join us for actual work.”

Jade hesitated but nodded. Half of her money was gone in an instant, but it was a good opportunity. Spend money to make money. “When do we leave?”

“In an hour. The voyage will last three hours. We do have one more requirement.”

“What’s-Ahhh!” Jade broke off mid-sentence as the man pushed her into the middle pool. She felt a cool rush as she was enveloped in water. She floundered around in a panic until she got her bearings. Eric had swum a lot as a kid and the skill carried over. Jade kicked hard and forced herself up, her small clothes only minorly getting in the way.

Breaking the surface, she spat water and hair out of her mouth. She glared up at the man.

“What was that for?”

“Oh, you can swim. Do you have the Swimming Skill yet?” The man had a floating device ready but stored it away when he saw she could swim.

Jade glanced at her wrist. No notification. She shook her head.

“You’ll need to swim for at least an hour before you get it. Perfect timing, if I do say so myself. What do you say, lass? Going to back out of it yet?”

Jade stuck her tongue. “My name’s Jade, not lass. And yes, I’ll get your stupid Skill.”

Swimming for an hour in a pool meant for boats was not the way Jade expected to spend her night. It wasn’t too bad. Kind of relaxing and gave her time to get used to the way her body moved in the water. She found that she could float fairly easily, control her position underwater, and her eyes didn’t hurt if she opened them underwater.

Jade saw a flash on her wrist and checked her notification:

<[General] Congratulations! You have learned the Skill: Swimming.>

<Swimming [Iron]

- Effects:
 - In water, you may hold your breath for up to 5 minutes
 - In water, Speed: +2>

“Hey, Matt! I got it,” Jade called out to the man who pushed her in.

“Good job, now get out. A boat’s about to come in,” Matt said.

Jade climbed onto one of the planks floating on the water and walked back to solid ground. It felt odd to be standing after swimming for so long. She looked around for a towel, but none were around. She sighed and realized she had to drip-dry. She shook her hair to try and get as much water out as possible. She was not a fan of long hair, especially when wet.

A few minutes later, the large door opened and a boat the same size as the others drifted into the middle pool. Most of the dock workers gathered to help tie the small boat to the dock. The four people inside climbed out and made their way to the Mana Crystal to teleport out. Three people were waiting on a bench near the pool that Jade hadn’t noticed before. A woman stood up and walked to Jade.

The woman had on a tight blue tunic and a triangle hat. Level 10; all of her Orbs were Copper. “Jade, I presume.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good, my name is Jillhurst and I am the captain of the next voyage. You may refer to me as Captain.” She spoke in a very clipped tone.

She waited expectantly. Jade replied, "Um, yes, Captain." Captain seemed a bit too grandiose a title for a small boat but to each their own.

Jillhurst nodded in approval. "Matt filled me in. Do you have 5 Coppers present?" Jade nodded and handed over the money. "Good, good. I'm not the biggest fan of charging for newbies, but it is what it is. It's to keep those who aren't serious from taking up space. With any luck, you'll earn your money back on the voyage. Ahem, to get back to business, we'll teach you your responsibilities. When we get to our location, we will start fighting monsters. You may stay on the boat the entire time, or join us in the water. You do have the Swimming Skill, correct? Good. Any questions?"

"No, uh, Captain."

"Good, good. Let me introduce you to the rest of the crew." The two men on the bench approached, one wore a blue tunic like the Captain while the other was in his small clothes like Jade. Jillhurst motioned at the tall skinny one without the tunic; Level 8, four Copper Orbs. "This is Darvis. He's our scout. He'll be on the lookout for any monsters we can hunt. He's a temporary crew member like you, but he's been on a few quests with us."

Darvis gave a flourishing bow. "My lady, I was enchanted by your beauty when I laid my eyes on you swimming. You were like the fabled mermaids, whose beauty would draw sailors all across the world just to catch a glimpse of."

"Real mermaids are quite ugly," the other man said; Level 10, seven Copper Orbs. "I'm not sure she'd like the comparison. Jade, was it? A pleasure to meet you. My name's Riley." Riley was about average height and wore thick gloves, but his arms were huge. Jade caught herself staring at them.

"Nice to meet you too," Jade said, nodding to him.

"You ruined my compliment," Darvis complained.

"Hush, Darv," Jillhurst said. "If you can't tell, Riley is our muscle and rower. He'll get us anywhere we need to on the lake. Shall we head out?"

A moment later, the four of them gathered in the boat. Jillhurst took the back with the tiller, Darvis took the front to be the lookout, and Riley had the middle with two large oars. And then Jade sat awkwardly between Darvis and Riley.

"Cut us loose!" Jillhurst called out. The dock workers untied the ropes and Riley began rowing. The door opened and the next moment, they were gliding over the smooth surface of the lake.

Jade felt the cool lake breeze rushing through her hair. Almost immediately, they rowed through the [Town] barrier. Darvis equipped glasses and gazed over the water and called out directions, and Jillhurst would alter their course. Jade was facing Riley and easily became transfixed on his muscles straining under the intense exercise of rowing. She shook herself and forced her eyes to look away.

The surface of the lake was almost like a mirror, except for the slight ripple the boat caused. The stars glittered in the reflection; it made the sky feel extra large. And Jade saw her reflection for the first time.

Eric knew what his new body looked like from the profile picture, but to see the girl's face reflect the expression of his own made it seem more surreal. He touched the high cheekbones and the girl did the same. The wonder in her eyes reflected exactly how he felt.

The boat jerked sharply and forced Jade back to the present. Jillhurst called out, "Stay alert, Jade. We don't want you falling overboard. And you better equip your clothes, just in case."

"Sorry, Captain," Jade replied with a blush and equipped her tunic.

"There's one ahead, Captain," Darvis called. "Left 10 degrees, 400 feet."

"I see it. Riley, slow down. Ease us into it. Good. No one makes a sound." Jillhurst's voice gently lowered to a whisper. The boat coasted close to the dark spot on the water. A shadow was swimming under the surface and looked at least the size of their boat.

Jillhurst stood up, equipped a cutlass, and dove into the water in one fluid motion, barely making a ripple. Jade looked at the others questioningly, but they didn't appear nervous. Darvis equipped a yellow bow. Riley equipped a large hooked spear with a rope attached to the end; a harpoon. Along with his large gloves, he held a spiked shield. Jade nervously equipped her Short Spear, feeling very under-leveled.

Darvis noticed Jade's apprehension and smiled. "Don't worry, my lady. I'll protect you."

Riley rolled his eyes. "We do this all the time. Jillhurst dives down and pulls the monster up, then we kill it. Just watch this time. This one should be a Battle Shark, a Copper-class monster. Good for loot."

Jade nodded and waited nervously as the dark shape started to rise; time slowed. Jillhurst popped up out of the water twenty feet away . . . and stood on top of it like it was solid ground. A giant shark burst out following Jillhurst, but the Captain did a backflip to escape its jaws and then dashed forward to sliced it with her sword.

Darvis pulled back on his bow and a glowing arrow appeared on the string. Right after he shot, a new arrow appeared. He shot three arrows in quick succession, each of them hitting the left eye. Sparks flew out of the impact. The shark let out a guttural sound in rage and pain. It was about to dive back under, but Riley threw his harpoon like it had come out of a cannon. He grabbed the end of the rope as the harpoon impaled the monster.

Jade was about to question the wisdom of anchoring a large shark to a small boat, but Riley climbed out of the boat and walked on the water as well. He held the rope like he was walking a dog that wanted to get away. Jillhurst dove back under the water. A moment later, it was like a bomb exploded under the surface as it bubbled into a small hill and then burst into a fountain. The shark was launched into the air.

Darvis shot a stream of arrows as it hung in the air. Riley had tied the rope around his waist and pulled the shark down. With his tremendous Strength, he struck the shark on the way down with the spiked shield.

The shark didn't die, but the crew was in complete control. Jillhurst would harass it and drive it towards Riley; she did get hit occasionally by a sharp fin or water blades the shark sent out, but the damage was minimal. If the shark got too far away or too close to the boat, Riley would pull it back. Darvis sent a constant stream of arrows at the shark.

Finally, the monster stopped moving and dissolved into blue mist. Jillhurst leaned over and picked up the copper box that appeared. She and Riley climbed back into the boat.

"Only a Level 6," the Captain tsked. "Not the best haul."

"That was only a Level 6?" Jade asked incredulously. She berated herself for not paying attention. She felt drained and her hands were shaking, even though she hadn't done anything. She felt completely outclassed.

Jillhurst looked at Jade in surprise, like she had forgotten she was there. "Oh yes, barely out of adolescence. They don't get much bigger, but they do get far stronger."

"There are three Copper dungeons in this section of the lake," Riley explained. "Lotus keeps them heavily regulated so the lake constantly has high-leveled Copper monsters. Any poachers get a bounty on their heads. Never come out here without permission."

"Get me the next one, Darv," the captain said.

Once again, they were moving through the water. A few minutes later, they slowed as they found their target. Repeating their strategy, Jillhurst drew the shark to the surface and the crew tethered it and pelted it with attacks. However, this time when the shark only had a bit of Mana left, Jillhurst created a net and wrapped it up. Riley pulled it closer to the boat.

"Jade," Jillhurst said. "Go ahead and attack it a few times. It's a great way for newbies to level up."

Jade licked her lips and nodded. She stabbed it a few times with her Short Spear, but the tip barely penetrated its tough hide. The only place she felt like she did damage was to its eyes, but she missed most of her stabs. Next, she cast Water Blast, but that caused the boat to shake hard. She then summoned Duke. The Pygmy Draco bit and clawed repeatedly at the shark, aiming for the eyes following Jade's instructions. The shark began to thrash and hit Duke, killing it instantly. The crew killed the monster after that.

Riley laughed once everyone was back inside the boat. "Jade, have you put any points into Strength? I don't think you did any damage."

Jade blushed. "Um, no. I've mostly put my points into Mind."

“Don’t tease her,” Darvis said. “Not everyone is a brute like you. Though, Mind? You don’t sound like someone with a high Perception.”

“It’s a Skill. I’ve got a plan for my build, ok,” Jade said defensively.

“Good luck with that,” Riley replied. “Let’s try the Freshwater Pike next. It doesn’t have quite as much Armor.”

“I’ve got another idea,” Jillhurst smiled. “So, Jade, you have a flying summon? Mind if we try something?”

“Um, sure?”

“Great, Riley, we’re heading south.”

Riley raised an eyebrow. “Really? You think that will work?”

Jillhurst grinned cockily. “Only one way to find out.”

A few minutes later, they rowed to a new part of the lake. Jillhurst climbed over the edge of the boat and stood on the water but didn’t dive under. Duke was flying just above the water a short distance away.

“How is she standing on the water?” Jade asked while they waited.

Riley tapped on his shoes. “Lakewalkers. This is an upgrade of Basic Shoes.”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t know that was possible. I didn’t see the upgrade path in the library book,” Jade said. “What do you need to get that?”

“Sorry, Ridgewater [League] secret,” Riley replied. “Not even Darvis knows. But, it does require very specific upgrade materials.”

“Fair enough,” Jade said, not feeling too disappointed. It was cool, but she didn’t necessarily want that upgrade. “Why do you even need a boat if you can walk on water?”

“It consumes a lot of Mana,” Riley answered. “Captain can manage it since she has a higher Mana Regen, plus her Wetsuit armor makes it so she moves faster in water. My focus is on my Harpoon and Giant’s Gloves. You’ll realize in the later levels that most of your advantages come from the synergies between your Orbs. It’s best to plan early on.”

“Usually, the [League] you join will provide you with a path for upgrades,” Darvis said. “But, for those of us who aren’t part of one, we have to rely on luck.”

“That is a pretty cool bow,” Jade said. “I’ve been thinking of getting one as my secondary weapon.”

Darvis beamed. “It’s my pride and joy. Lightning element works wonders against water creatures. I’ve gotten it up to Copper Level 3 and plan on taking it up all the way!” Darvis

glanced at his wrist and continued with a whisper. "Great, now Captain is mad at me for being too loud."

Jade lowered her voice. "What are we doing here anyway? Nothing's happening. Can't Captain dive under like she did before?"

Riley shook his head. "We're going after Toxic Jellyfish. It's one of the few Silver-class monsters in this Realm. They pollute the surrounding water and block the southern lake passage. They've been a pain for a while. We don't have a strong enough poison resistance without an antidote; those can be pricey, affecting our profit margins. If all goes well, your little summon will draw the jellyfish up to the surface one at a time. I'll snare it and pull it to safer waters." He held up his weapon. "It takes more time, but we'll get far more loot."

"So, I'm just bait?" Jade asked.

Darvis snorted. "We all have to start somewhere. I haven't personally hunted these guys before, but I've heard they're deadly, so stay alert."

Jade nodded and watched the water carefully. Time slowed and an instant later, a clear tentacle burst from the water. It moved fast, even for Jade's eyes. It reached for Duke and killed him instantly. Jade felt a little lightheaded for losing a hundred Mana in one attack.

The crew reacted instantly. Darvis shot arrows at the tentacle; electricity coursed through the tentacle, causing it to spasm uncontrollably. A huge net burst from the Captain's hand and sunk into the water around the tentacle. Jillhurst grabbed the rope connected to the net and pulled her quarry to the surface. When a dark shape formed under the surface of the water, five tentacles sprung from the net and attacked Jillhurst; she glided across the surface of the water like an ice skater, dodging the incoming attacks. Riley threw his harpoon into the middle of the net; the rope went taut.

Then chaos. Twenty more tentacles burst out of the net. The Captain got struck twice and fell into the water, disappearing under the surface along with her net.

"I think we caught a Level 10!" Darvis called out. He was shooting multiple arrows at the tentacles getting closer.

Jade screamed and fell back as a tentacle popped up in front of her. She cast Water Blast as it was about to crush the boat. The tentacle inflated like a balloon; Darvis shot it with a lightning arrow, and it burst in an explosion of goo. Jade shivered as she wiped the goo out of her eyes.

"Nice job, Jade!" Darvis called. "Drop the line, Riley! Let's get out of here!"

"What about Captain?" Jade cried out, ready to cast Water Blast at a moment's notice.

"She'll be fine; we'll only hold her back," Riley said. He had dropped the rope connected to his weapon and began rowing. The boat did not move. "It got us!" Riley jumped out of the boat and called out, "Cover me!" He dove into the water.

Jade was left with Darvis who was desperately firing arrows. However, the bow faded to mist when it ran out of Mana. Undeterred, Darvis held out his hand, and a thin translucent disc spun in front of it. A wind spell. The disc shot out. And barely did any damage. However, ten more quick discs did the trick to cut the extremity. Darvis looked at Jade and shrugged. "Better than nothing."

Without Darvis's arrows, the tentacles approached unimpeded. Jade used her spell sparingly, only when it was right on top of them. She would inflate the tentacles that got too close, and Darvis would use his wind discs to make them explode. They destroyed 5 tentacles this way before Water Blast ran out of Mana.

One of the tentacles wrapped around the top of the boat between her and Darvis. Jade backed away as she got a good look at it. It was clear, slimy, and writhed disgustingly; small needles covered nearly the entire tentacle. "Don't touch it!" Darvis said. "Poisonous." He continued to slice it with his wind spell and the dagger he summoned.

Jade ate a Meal and pulled out her Short Spear. She stabbed it with all her might. It did nothing. A second tentacle wrapped around the boat behind her and the boat began to creak. She recovered enough Mana to cast Water Blast one more time, and they managed to destroy the tentacle in the boat, but two more took its place. Fear radiated through Jade's body; she felt powerless, like when she kept on getting her head cut off. Jade closed her eyes and resigned herself to death.

Then the boat jerked. Jade opened her eyes and found the tentacles had gone limp. Then they faded into blue mist. Jade sighed in relief. Too close.

Riley flew out of the water. With a start, Jade realized he was on a direct course to land on the boat, or rather, on her. She tried to move out of the way, but she tripped over a seat. The large man hit her and they tumbled together.

Jade pulled her head out with a gasp of air. He was heavy; she had lost over 30 Mana from that collision. She pushed Riley with a grunt. "Get off me." That was when she noticed his condition. His tunic had disappeared and small blue lines decorated almost every inch of his body. His body was shaking uncontrollably. Darvis was over him with his hand on Riley's shoulder. He was casting Heal similar to what Lola cast in the tutorial.

Jillhurst climbed into the boat and collapsed on the floor; she still had her wetsuit on, but everything else was missing. She only had one Orb left, and it was dangerously low. Darvis rushed over to her with a curse and cast another Heal. He shook his head and took out Drinks for each of them. Jade presumed it contained massive Mana Regen and hoped it helped with the poison.

"I need you to row us back to the Dock," Riley said. "My Drinks aren't strong enough, so I need to keep healing them, or they won't survive."

Jade nodded and sat in Riley's position, which meant she was sitting on top of Riley's fallen form. Not the best position to row in, but she did her best since she couldn't move him.

They moved slowly through the water, Jade berating herself she didn't have more Strength and Endurance; the Meal she ate earlier supplemented her Stamina and Power, but it was only a drop in the bucket to what she needed. Darvis put his whole attention on stabilizing his two companions and urged Jade to move faster.

Jade ignored her pain and exhaustion as she pulled harder. Her arms ached, and she was vaguely aware she was losing Mana from the strain of pushing past her limits; it was ok, her Mana Regen could keep up. Another stroke. Mind Dampener deactivated, but she turned it back on; anything to be able to row a little faster. Another stroke. Her thoughts seeped out of her head. Her world was the oar, the water, and the next stroke. And pain. So much pain. Pull, lift, reset. Pull, lift, reset. Pull-

The boat crashed into the Dock's pool edge. Jade fell to the hull of the boat and her vision blacked out. When she came to, she was on the floor of the Dock next to the pool. She was still heaving for breath, so it probably hadn't been that long. She turned off the slow time and forced herself to sit up to get her breathing under control. She looked around. A host of people were moving all around her. She pulled a woman aside. "Did . . . did they make it?"

The woman nodded. "They did, thanks to you. You should head to your Room and get some rest."

Jade nodded. The woman helped her to the nearby Mana Crystal. Jade teleported to her Room and fell asleep before she had completely materialized.