

Chapter 184: Stormless Seas

The world felt strange around Wicke: the walls of the ancient room she was in seemed to twist and bend, warping around her. The floor felt unsteady, rocking and rumbling as if the building she was in was moving. She herself felt strange: her back stung, the loose and ragged clothes across her skin scraping against a sore she didn't recognise. She looked down - her hands seemed smaller, the ground closer, her body unfamiliar. Yet the lab she was in felt familiar.

A huge cylindrical tube stood in the centre over a large console covered in buttons, knobs and dials. Some of the giant walls were covered in countless metal caskets - each containing a glass window that had frozen over. A series of metal benches sat in an open space, one specked with blood that seemed to float in the air - the stench overpowering, sickly and unbearable. Everything felt surgical, and the tools and glowing jars only matched the atmosphere.

Wicke grimaced as she moved, the pain on her back like a fresh graze, approaching the centre console. It looked strange, a crane-like machine hanging over it that hissed to life and began to move - reaching for one of the metal caskets. Wicke stepped on her tiptoes, looking into the glass of the tube. Dried blood coated the bottom, a cross-like marking on the metal floor. She stepped back, a cold feeling passing through her.

A whine and whir drew her attention upwards, a casket attaching to the tube before opening. A body fell out, suspended off the bottom by wires connected to its skin. She hung there for a moment before they detached, a stream of icy mist flowing down over her naked skin. Her eyes were open - both amber-coloured, just like her long hair - but she saw nothing, staring blankly at Wicke. Wicke tried to speak, tried to say the name of the girl she recognised, but nothing came out.

The body twitched, the eyes slowly beginning to stir and see before falling down onto Wicke's face. Recognition crossed the face identical to hers. "Sister?" questioned Wicke's sibling. "Sister?" Wicke echoed back to her, reaching up to touch the hand pressed against the glass. It felt cold to touch, but a warmth bled through. The body inside the tube smiled, but there was desperation between the forced grin. "Let me out of here, please. Wake up. Please," she asked with increasing panic. Wicke looked down at the console, the arcane runes across the surface pure gibberish to her eyes. A red button stood out and Wicke reached for it on a silent command, her body obeying.

“No! Wake up! Wake up! Wake-” screamed the girl in the tube. Wicke pressed the button without thought, the floor of the chamber opening up and the girl disappearing from sight, her scream silenced immediately with a whirl of slicing coming from beneath the floor. The inside of the glass was sprayed with a crimson fluid and Wicke stepped back in horror, clutching her face. A hand grabbed her shoulder and she turned. “No!”

“No!” Wicke screamed, bolting upright in an unfamiliar bed. Almost immediately, a metal scraping filled the air, a pair of heavy feet landing on the floor. “What is it? What’s wrong?” Morgause questioned, dressed in warm, black night clothes and fluffy socks – her colossal greatsword in her arms. It was cold – the wooden ship they were sailing on lacked any real source of insulation, so much so that the windows to their room had frozen over – yet Wicke was sweaty and hot. She gasped for air, a panic clutching her throat and her heartbeat thundering throughout her body.

“Wha... Wh-what’s going on?” came a groan from another bed, Sabine peering through the darkness as Morgause put her blade away and sat on Wicke’s bed. “Nothing, go back to sleep,” Morgause commanded, an immediate snoring resuming from Sabine. “You’re okay,” Morgause said more quietly to Wicke, taking her hands and forcing her to look at her. Wicke looked down, still partially in her dream, before blinking herself back to reality. “It’s just a dream, you’re safe,” Morgause confirmed.

Wicke pulled her hands back, tucking into a ball and looking down. “Yeah, I-I know. Just a dream,” she said, confirming more for herself than for Morgause. Morgause stared at her, the gold eyes glinting in the darkness as she read Wicke’s face. “Try to sleep if you can, we’ll talk in the morning,” Morgause reassured, standing up and returning to her bed. Wicke watched her before eventually laying back down. “Just a dream,” she muttered, not sure what she had seen.

The morning eventually came, but, by the time Wicke woke up, she found herself alone in her quarters, her two roommates absent. She dressed, wrapping up for the weather before stepping out into the bowels of the Reliant – the commercial ship they were sailing with. She headed along the corridor, passing the numerous other rooms – including Cinderlee and Damian’s, the latter of whom had drawn the short straw and had to bunk with the crazy lady. She climbed up, emerging out into the weather of the Storm Archipelago.

For the middle of winter, and for a region known for its tempestuous environment, the skies were unusually clear, and the seas unusually calm – as

they had been the entire journey so far. Wicke let out a sigh, glancing out towards the horizon. The meddling of the Rising Aces had changed the world in more ways than one, but she could only question whether the revival and removal of the giant known as the Storm Lord had benefitted the people of the region. It was hard to tell, but there was nothing she could do to change it.

“Morning,” Damian stated, stepping over to her with a cup of coffee in hand. She reached out for it and he pulled it back. “Uh, get your own – that’s mine,” he stated. She sighed and stepped away, but he followed. “Morgause said you had a nightmare. Anything you want to talk about?” he questioned, following her to the canteen. “No,” she said firmly, hugging her sides as she walked. Damian stepped closer to her, walking in her periphery. “It’s nothing, I don’t even know what it was about,” she answered honestly. “I don’t remember it,” she lied.

“Uh huh, sure. Well, you know where to find me if you do need to talk. It’s still a long way to Caedom,” he stated, turning and walking away, only to stumble as the ship lurched. “What in the abyss?” he questioned, grabbing onto the door frame and looking towards Wicke as an alarm bell began to rang. She shrugged and then surged forwards as the ship lurched again. “Come on!” she yelled, stepping past him and rushing back towards the main deck.

For the most part, passengers ran to their rooms, but a few with their own armaments ran in the same direction as Wicke and Damian. The ship lurched once more, as if something heavy had impacted the side. But Damian heard no cannon fire, there was no yells of Pirates, and as he entered Focus he sensed something massive on the other side of the hull. He and Wicke darted out into the open, a huge tentacle slamming down on the main deck and splattering one of the guards armed with rifles. “Kraken!” yelled a mercenary.

“Cover me!” Wicke commanded to Damian, beginning to chant as he threw on his metal gauntlets and intercepted a flailing strike. His heavy fist rippled the flesh of the grey tentacle, but didn’t seem to do much other than redirect its strike. In turn, one of the suckers spurted out a black liquid, coating Damian from head to toe in ink. “Gross!” he yelled, desperately shielding his face with his arms before throwing off his ruined coat – a few splotches across his face.

Wicke finished chanting, her hands fizzing and sparking with green lightning. She waited for another heavy slam from a tentacle before she grabbed it and surged the energy into it. The creature writhed and twitched, a heavy screech piercing the air before all of the tentacles retracted into the water. Wicke, Damian,

Morgause, and the others that had run to the main deck to help, all darted to the side of the ship, looking over the edge to see where the creature had gone.

They saw the creature's large red eyes, but the gaze was focused on its surroundings, a flurry of fast moving creatures attacking the kraken from within the water. "We're fine," Wicke stated. "The jiaoren are here!" A few sighs of relief spread around, but a sailor emerged from below. "Hull breach! We're taking on water!" he cried, rushing towards the helm. Wicke read the Captain's lips, a heavy scowl on her face. "To the nearest island! Now!" she commanded.

It wasn't long before the Reliant docked, the ship stopping at an island consisting almost entirely of black, shard-like rock. It was hilly, covered in bursts of glass and sharp cliffs, and didn't have much in the ways of settlements: only a sizeable town with a decently large port. Sensing opportunity, the damaged vessel was immediately descended upon by any and all locals with a modicum of shipwright capabilities.

But Damian and Wicke didn't care about that - it wasn't their problem - as long as the Reliant was repaired and capable of getting them to Caedom then that was all that mattered. "A kraken so close to civilisation is... strange," Wicke muttered, mostly to herself, as Cinderlee emerged leisurely from below deck. "I read that there had been some migrations underwater, quite a few jiaoren left for the Old World along with the djinn," Sabine stated, somewhat overly enthusiastically as she pushed into the conversation - her face dyed black with ink. Wicke glanced towards her, raising an eyebrow as she glimpsed Morgause give a pair of reassuring thumbs up in her periphery. "Makes sense, the ocean crawlers are our only real defence against sea monsters - so if they are leaving then..." Wicke surmised, trailing off as she spotted a small squadron of ocean crawlers leap out from the ocean onto dry land.

There were eight of them in total, each one standing well over six foot in height. The jiaoren - the ocean crawlers - still looked distinctly alien to Damian. They were bipedal, and humanoid enough, their flesh covered in slimy crustacean-like carapaces, with fishy scale-like skin beneath - visible through the gaps in their armoured exoskeleton. Connected to their heads was a large tail that ran the full length of their body, the end covered with a pointy, bony tip.

A few, however, had more than one headtail, the large mass having been split into anywhere from six to nine thinner headtails, each still holding a sharp tip. Damian stared in amazement as one of the ocean crawlers merged the headtails back into its singular form - the prehensile limb looking singular when together

with no visible seams. One more lazy ocean crawler used the tips of its multiple headtails to hold itself aloft, walking without touching the floor with its feet.

They ranged in colours, mostly blues and purples – but the smallest of the group was a usual golden colour, that blended into green at the edges of its countless fins and frills. Damian frowned as the clear youngster looked around, eventually setting his gaze on the ship before bearing a wide and pointy smile – his eyes flat and black. “Why do I recognise that ocean crawler?” Damian questioned, turning and looking towards Wicke for an answer. “Why would I know? Are you sure you’re not confusing them for Red? You know jiaoren are all different, right?” she returned. He scowled, walking to the edge of the ship before surging down the gangplank and strolling towards the alien people.

His confidence quickly faltered as he approached the group, all of them far larger than him and quite intimidating. They turned and stared him down, several of them holding pads of an unusual material and what looked like pens. On closer look, Damian quickly spotted clothes over their carapaces, they all wore backpacks of varying sizes – the youngest wearing the largest. One even reached into their bag and pulled out what looked like a camera – bearing Guild markings - aiming it at Damian and snapping a photo. He staggered back in shock, the aliens observing him with curiosity and bemusement. “You’re tourists,” he realised.

“Archaeologists,” corrected the largest of the group. Damian tilted his head, the word unfamiliar. “What?” he questioned, drawing a deep sigh from within. “They study the past,” Wicke answered, approaching from behind along with the rest of their crew. “So... tourists that write things down?” Damian questioned. There was a further sigh, the group immediately turning their attention away from Damian to Wicke – other than the golden jiaoren, who continued to stare at Damian.

“Thank you for your assistance with the kraken,” Wicke stated, approaching the group closely and making it clear that she was in charge. “Of course,” returned the leader, “it was of no issue. Now, I don’t suppose you are familiar with this region? We are in search of a temple.” Wicke shook her head and the jiaoren turned away from her. “Let us be on our way,” he ordered, the group beginning to walk away. “Woah, hang on. We may not be local but I’m sure we can help – it’s not like we have much else to do,” Wicke stated.

“I doubt that very much, you islanders are sloppy and unrefined and unfamiliar with our methods. You will cause more harm to our search than aid you could

provide. The way you gawk tells us a lot," he stated, looking directly at Damian and then Sabine. "I-I have worked with jiaoren before – there's one in my crew: Chalakon Lore, of the Crushing Core Clan," she stated, the group immediately faltering and looking at her. The eyes were full of suspicion and they all immediately tensed, as if waiting for a command to strike. "Choose your next words carefully, human," warned the leader, his voice a deep growl.

"He's red, somewhat stubborn, but otherwise nice," Wicke immediately added. "He's fulfilling a life debt to my Captain for freeing him from his captors." "Supervisor..." said a purple jiaoren quietly. The leader turned and spoke quietly to her, the pair in hushed tones that Wicke couldn't quite catch. He then turned and looked down at her. "You will join us on our expedition and you will explain fully where the Prince is. Am I understood?" the older jiaoren questioned. Wicke nodded and he glanced to Damian and the others, who mirrored her nod. "Enki," he then stated, the golden jiaoren perking up. "Walk with me and explain your connection to that one," commanded the supervisor, pointing to Damian. "Follow close, do not fall behind."

The ocean crawlers set off quickly, walking either using their headtails or their legs, but after realising that Wicke and the others were quickly falling behind the supervisor sent his group on ahead, walking more slowly along with the purple and golden jiaoren. Wicke watched as the others headed upwards, scaling the cliffs to climb up the island, but almost immediately her attention was drawn elsewhere. "You may refer to me as Captain Tano Plovol," stated the lead jiaoren. "Wicke," Wicke said in turn before naming her group.

"This is Livet Ojo and Enki Soko," Tano then added, gesturing to the purple and golden ocean crawlers. "So how do you know Damian?" Wicke asked Enki, the smaller ocean crawler flushing green and shying away. Damian stared at him, a strange memory bubbling to the surface. Instead of answering, Enki began to chant, magical markings surrounding his neck. A bubble formed around him before popping, leaving a dampness on the air that floated around him. He then pulled out a large paintbrush, dipping it into several vials on a bandolier across his chest before painting in the air – leaving a floating mark behind.

The paint changed as they walked, forming an image of a small yacht – Corina's yacht – it then changed to an image of a young boy dangling from the edge above the water, a mirrored image of Enki below the surface. "That was you!" Damian realised, his mind remembering the incident over three years prior. "I fell in because of you." Enki shook his head, shying away behind the purple jiaoren.

"No, it was because you were stupid," he said quietly, his voice monotone and soft. Damian flushed red as the image showed him wrapping his ankle in rope before falling and flailing in the water. Wicke and Sabine both burst into laughter.

"And why were you at the surface?" questioned Livet, turning on her cowering protégé. "Uh, I, uh..." Enki stammered, before looking down in shame. She sighed and formed a fist before rapping the top of his head with it. He hugged his head defensively, the impact more surprising than painful. "We will discuss with your broodmatron later," Tano stated, moving the conversation onwards. "Where is the Prince currently?" he questioned assertively.

"I don't know. He was with my Captain, Jayce Exarga – of the Rising Aces – but they left for the Old World, beyond the Frontier," she answered quickly and honestly. Tano sighed, shaking his head – his head tails flicking from side to side. "That makes things tricky. How did your Captain come to be owed a life debt?" "Red – uh – the Prince, we found him in an Imperial Arena. He had been captured and sold, we helped him escape."

"That fool," Livet scowled. Tano gave her a warning glare, his flat grey eyes boring into her. "It's an old tradition, but it is a tradition," Tano stated to her. "It is a shame, but there is nothing we can do until the Prince has obtained his story of valour," he said with a sigh, looking up to see a waving jiaoren. He began to climb a near vertical cliff, Wicke and the others doing their best to follow. "Enki, provide them some aid," Livet commanded.

Enki began to paint once more, this time painting a brown ladder in the air. He then pushed it with his palm, the ladder materialising and attaching to the cliff's surface. "Okay that's cool," Sabine stated bluntly, testing her foot on the bottom rung before beginning to climb. "It will not last long," warned Enki, using his headtails to climb by imbedding the tips in the stone. Wicke was the last to climb, spending every second analysing the conjuration – her mind fascinated with the magic. As soon as she reached the top, the ladder melted back into paint before washing away.

The jiaoren led them through a concealed passageway, not too dissimilar to the ruins Wicke had traversed through during Thalia's Storm Maiden trials. Murals lined the walls of the circular chamber, depicting images of Giants waging wars against endless Dragons. It showed the Dragons then feasting on the corpses of the Giants before using their runic magic to turn into larger versions of themselves. One image stuck out in particular: an image of an ice-white Dragon

stood staring at a woman with matching white hair and pale skin. Their eyes were the same icy blue colour.

"A pity," Tano eventually stated. "Nothing of note," he told his followers, beginning to pack up. "Nothing of note?" questioned Cinderlee. "Is he mad?" "What were you searching for?" Wicke questioned as the ocean crawler glared at Cinderlee. There was a cautious pause. "Wicke, the information you have provided has been appreciated, and I have no reward to grant you for it, so I will speak earnestly. We seek information on the end of days: the apocalypse of the past. Much remains a mystery, and your people may hold the answer."

Wicke nodded in understanding. "I get that, we're currently investigating the Dungeons and seeing what lies at the end of them. Tano paused, thinking to himself before setting his gaze on Enki. "I see. Then perhaps the currents brought us together for a reason. We must return home and inform the King of the Prince's whereabouts. The journey is long and dangerous, and it will be sometime before we can resume our expedition, so – in the spirit of exploration – I offer a trade."

Wicke folded her arms, raising an eyebrow. "Go on," she stated, her curiosity piqued. "I shall bestow an archaeologist to join your party. From your spirit I sense strength about you, so I trust that you will look after them," he offered. Wicke couldn't help but grin. "Could we have Livet? Or if not, then I want your most experienced," she stated. Tano scoffed, shaking his head and stepping back before stopping next to Enki. "It is the duty of the youth to prove themselves to the world, not the other way around. Enki is young, much like your group, so this will be a perfect chance for him to prove himself," Tano stated, placing a hand on Enki's back and guiding him forwards towards Wicke. "What?" Wicke and Enki questioned in unison.

"Enki, your mission is simple: verify her story and connection to the Prince, and collect as much firsthand information on the Dungeons as you can. As our youngest, you have the most to prove – and I eagerly await your tales on your return. Seize this opportunity - we are all jealous not to be in your place," Tano concluded. Enki glanced to the others – they didn't look jealous. "Do I have a choice in the matter?" he asked. Tano shook his head. "Fine..."

Seize the Seas Tales: State of Affairs

Alara did her best to hide the terror surging throughout her body as she read the reports that had been laid out in front of her. She could feel Cyrenna and Beowulf's eyes upon her, her friends waiting for a reaction. She finished the final line, taking a gulp and setting the document down before looking up at the other Captains and Commanders that had assembled in the vanguard base of operations, located two weeks southeast of Final Bastion and the Frontier in a large, crescent island. They all stared at her. "So where does this put us, Captain Vanathur?" Commodore Kai questioned.

"It lines up with what we expected," Alara answered, forcing down her emotions. "The Admirals crossed the Frontier in a trio of ships a little more than fifteen years ago – one of which was under the disguise of Pirate Lord Ghalt Lorus who had been discretely assassinated. The Old World was at war with itself, an all-out battle between the four nations. The three ships separated, each tasked with scouting and analysing the three closest nations. This they did with success, but one day Ghalt's flagship disappeared. Commodore Osiris located its wreckage in the far east. All hands lost or missing."

"Admiral and Admiral Vanathur continued with their crews, they had taken losses - from disease, being caught in the crossfire of conflicts, and attacks from renegades – but otherwise were functional. Around three years ago, Pirate Lord Dick Valentine crossed the Frontier, an act that coincided with the emergence of the Sea Sovereign – Atalana Scáthach. Scáthach brought an end to the war through mass assassination, leaving power vacuums and desperation behind. Scáthach then conquered and unified the Old World, eventually finalising her conquest early last year."

"The Admirals met up, discussing the state of affairs before agreeing to sabotage Scáthach's efforts. They formed the Reapers, alongside a Princess of the Scáthach's own nation who acted as a hidden benefactor. Eventually this benefactor betrayed the Reapers, joining Scáthach as a Betrayer known as Alice. The Admirals' crews were hunted down a few months ago. Admiral Victoire Vanathur's crew was annihilated but she managed to escape with a few others. She later rendezvoused with Admiral Silas Vanathur within Chull. This was where the Reapers were routed and wiped out. The majority receiving public executions."

"The Admirals managed to escape, which..." Alara faltered, looking towards Beowulf. "Brings us to now," he concluded. "We have learnt that Admiral Silas

Vanathur's ship has been destroyed. It too is now a trophy." Alara looked towards Cyrenna, waiting for an order. "Find that ship. Find the Admirals," she commanded. Alara stood immediately and stormed out of the room.