

### **Chapter 186: A World Down Under**

“Right, listen up!” Jayce declared, silencing his crew as they gathered in a tavern they had emptied out. The voices quickly quietened, the numerous members already settled into their familiar groups – an entire bar’s worth of drinks displayed out before them across the numerous tables. “We’re back, and by that I mean we’re leaving in two days’ time. Put your affairs in order and prepare for the Revelry. We have three months left before the deadline and I intend for us to arrive near the Sovereign’s castle with plenty of time.”

Murmurs immediately began to spread before one clear voice rang out. “Would it not make more sense to stay here - to minimise the risk of the journey? We’ve all heard the rumours of our new bounties,” Marisha questioned, to the nods and approval of the crew. “I’ve given it some thought. We’ve all trained hard these last weeks, and we’ve all had our own run-ins with fools looking to claim my head. What I’m suggesting,” Jayce stated, looking towards Red, “is that rather than sail, we dive.” An uproar of questions spread out and Jayce held out his hands, gesturing for the group to settle. “Red?” Jayce invited.

“Much of my time recently has been scouting. There are paths - routes under the seas - that we could traverse with the correct means. Tempest and I have discussed this before and the Stacked Hand has done it before – there are markings that indicate so. It would be dangerous...” Red stated, the group turning to Jayce. “It will help us to evade bounty hunters and other Pirates, and - quite frankly – it sounds fun. According to the locals, and what Red has found out personally, there is a place called Devil’s Gate. That is our heading.”

The crew wasted no time in preparing for the voyage. The warmer weather had already begun to set in, but the journey underwater was warned to be cold and dark, so the crew immediately stocked up on clothes for a variety of environments – just in case. The larder was filled, the fridges and freezers packed, and Jayce had even taken the time during their rest to have the Stacked Hand painted with a fresh coat of blues, whites and blacks and a recoat to ward against a variety of weathers. Both ship and crew had been refreshed, and a new journey was waiting for them.

“I shall see you at the Revelry,” King Crach stated, gripping Jayce’s hand firmly. Jayce nodded to him. “I... owe you for this. We wouldn’t have felt so safe, so secure, without you – so thank you, on behalf of myself and my people,” Jayce said earnestly. Crach shook his head. “Nonsense. These people like you, and that’s certainly without my help. Treat us as equals – as gratitude for allowing

me to have a family again, even if begrudgingly,” Crach returned, looking towards Thalia who stood to the side with her arms folded. “Hmph,” she uttered. The old lion chuckled. “Watch your back, my friend – from her and from the world,” Crach warned, looking back at Jayce before turning and walking away. “Rising Aces!” Jayce called out. “Let’s go!”

Bjorn released Magnus, the pair of bears looking at each other. “Take care, my son,” Magnus stated, before glancing towards Marisha and the Beastly Boys. “And you, all of you. I shall await your return. We all will,” Magnus stated. He embraced Marisha before shaking the hands of each of the boys. “I wish Inger a speedy recovery,” Marisha said softly to Magnus. The old bear nodded, looking down with an expression of pain and grief. “I think we are beyond that now, I hope that the ancestors will protect her for a little longer – for my sake – but something inside me knows that she was waiting for your return. Worry not, it will be alright,” he reassured, to himself more than them.

The Stacked Hand departed, leaving Belluabella behind as they sailed east. Even with weeks of rest, the crew settled in immediately – returning straight to their familiar duties. The two Demons - Paimon and Asmodeus - returned to their positions of comfort and relaxation. The three Dragons escorted the ship: Zhurong and Soteria from the air, alongside Wren, Taranis from the sea, alongside Red. Jayce grinned as he stood by Bjorn at the helm, taking in the salty and cool sea air – the spray soft on his face. It was good to be back.

The seas were calm and steady, the journey smooth for several days before the weather took a sharp turn. The skies remained clear, the sun warm on Jayce’s skin, but the seas churned beneath the Stacked Hand. “We’re arriving at Devil’s Gate,” Red warned, standing alongside Jayce, Bjorn and Astris at the helm. “It’s a convergence point of multiple currents.” Jayce looked ahead, an island sat in the distance with a considerable harbour built into it, but his attention was elsewhere – focused instead upon the colossal whirlpool nearby. “It sits on a Leyline,” Falconer stated from aboard Wren, the pair gliding alongside the ship. “Explains something I suppose...” Bjorn muttered. “So how do we survive underwater?”

“Tempest!” Jayce called out, the djinn turning away from the main mast and floating over towards him. “Yes, Captain?” he asked with a buzz. Jayce looked towards Bjorn. “Bjorn-” Jayce began. Bjorn glared at him. “Uh, we were wondering how it’s possible for us to sail underwater?” Jayce questioned,

partially aware of the details but not to an explainable degree. The djinn sparked with excitement.

"We will require a little time to stop at that island, such that Chalakon and I can make the necessary modifications to our vessel, but the process is rather... spectacular, if I do say so myself," Tempest stated, without actually answering the question. "An answer please, Tempest," Astris stated, a bit more bluntly. "Ah, apologies. We shall utilise Gaea, and some magical modifications, to create a continuous burst of air, pushing the water away. This will create a falling or rolling effect that the ship can sail upon. It is a tricky and delicate operation. Mai Lu has already warned that there are countless records of failure – with most ships utilising a special coating instead, or magical spells that are lost to us without Wicke, but I believe this will work. Although we will be extremely vulnerable in our pocket," Tempest explained. Bjorn and Astris did not look hopeful.

"Think of it as blowing bubbles whilst you are swimming, only large enough to surround you," Red suggested. They looked even more concerned. "Do not worry... too much – there are areas within the ocean with lessened pressure that we shall travel through," he added. "The pressure is difficult for even us, as such we have Heralds – guides and farmers who cultivate a special type of plant that hyperaerates the waters to lessen the pressure. It is these routes we will follow so the strain on Gaea shouldn't be too much."

"What about light? Won't we need light for Gaea and these plants?" Astris asked. Bolts of excitement burst from Tempest's armour. "Ah, now this is what I am most eager to witness. Prince Chalakon has informed me that there is photoemitting life that is in symbiosis with the plants. We must procure a specimen," the djinn stated eagerly. Astris looked towards Jayce, but he simply shrugged. "Only one way to find out, we'll be fine – or this will be one really short trip."

They docked at the island known as Hell's Guard, the process of modification took a few hours, with alterations made to both the hull and the Gaea's Tree of Oaths, but eventually Tempest summoned the crew back to the ship. "How do you feel?" Jayce asked Gaea, as she sat in a meditative stance on the main deck. Her cyan hair had grown out and lay braided across her right shoulder, her skin was still the same white bark colour as the tree, and her eyes had taken on a slightly more orange hue in recent times – as opposed to the vibrant green she had previously. Her horns had grown out, now curling around like a ram's. The

changes had been noticeable during their time in Belluabella, but she looked different from how she had a few hours earlier – and Jayce was really struggling to tell what had changed.

“Fine – I think,” she answered. “What do you think?” she then questioned to him. Jayce didn’t really know what to say. The dryad had a habit of refusing clothing, at least in the traditional sense. She would often cover up the bare minimum with leaves she had chosen from her tree, or found whilst walking alongside the ship in its bottle. It had taken some getting used to, her shyness dedicated to anything other than modesty. She sat before him as naked as could be, his eyes glancing in every direction away from her as he desperately maintained eye contact. “Um,” he uttered. “These,” she stated – showing off her arms and legs and the new tattoos covering them. “Oh,” he realised, before flushing red and looking away. “Honestly,” she murmured. “You humans.” She stood up and took a trio of leaves from her tree before plastering them to her body. “Better?”

“Uh-huh,” Jayce returned. She rolled her eyes and gave a spin, only for Astris to throw a huge and heavy coat over her shoulders. “Hey!” Gaea protested. “Tree rights to nudity!” she declared, before realising she quite liked the weight of the coat and slipped her arms through the sleeves. “Overruled!” Astris declared, the tips of her ears bright red. “The tattoos are nice,” Jayce stated, intercepting the conversation. They were mostly dark cyan swirls and otherwise didn’t seem to have any particular meaning. “Do you feel stronger?” Jayce asked. She stepped forwards towards him and placed her palms to his chest before pushing. He didn’t move an inch. “Gaea,” Tempest buzzed, somewhat endearingly. She turned and frowned. “Oh, right.”

She flicked her wrist towards Jayce and a huge spiked tendril of wood launched itself from the deck of the ship towards him. It was instantaneous, forming out of the planks and moving to strike him in the blink of an eye, and had it happened a month or two prior it may have been lethal. Jayce’s entire body tensed as his Focus kicked in, his entire body erupting in an invisible cyan flame. He ducked, used his forearm to block against the thorny surface, before he threw a fist into the side of the bendy tendril – directing it up and away from his fellow crewmates stood behind him.

He and the rest of the Rising Aces stood on the deck in shock, none more surprised than Gaea herself. “By the great woods, Jayce, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” she said quickly, stepping forwards and helping him from his limbo-esq position. “Yeah, fine. That’s... terrifying, Gaea. Um, be careful – please. Can you

do that anywhere on the ship?" he questioned. She nodded, beaming with pride. "Anywhere, I can also... feel everything more. Little Witch is with Caelie in their hole, Arthuria and Jeanne are... ooh, uhm, but yeah," she said flushing green. "I don't think I can reach far, but from anywhere on my skin I can strike! Huyah!" she declared, swinging her hands wildly and creating a kraken-like appearance on the outside of the Stacked Hand. Jayce flicked her forehead and they retracted. "I get it, thanks." She rubbed her forehead and pouted before returning to her meditative position. "Ooh there's marshmallows in the pockets!" Jayce heard her declare, as he turned away shaking his head. "Tempest, are we ready?" he asked. The djinn nodded. "Perfect. Set sail for the Devil's Gate!" Jayce commanded.

They approached the giant whirlpool, the crew tying anything and everything down before grabbing hold on the railings and each other as the ship entered the vortex. "Three laps!" Jayce called out, as he stood next to Bjorn at the helm. "Then take us in!" They circled the outside, lowering into the vortex – the ship tilting heavily. "See you inside!" Red declared, diving off the side straight down into the circle. There was a roar, a heavy thundering emerging from the main deck before Jayce heard a splash as the hull opened and then quickly closed as Taranis jumped ship as well. They looped again, the ship practically horizontal. "Onto the next!" Bjorn declared, glancing towards Jayce with a wide grin before he span the wheel. "For glory and adventure!" they both declared, the ship turning and diving straight down.

A gust of wind blew past them as they dove, the Stacked Hand picking up speed as it descended. The water ahead of them parted, splitting in all directions as they pierced through like a dart. Jayce and Bjorn both screamed with excitement and joy, the ride exhilarating and terrifying as they dove through the ocean before eventually the bow of the Stacked Hand began to lift and the ship levelled out, gravity returning to Jayce and his crew. "Woo!" Bjorn yelled, the deck surrounded by darkness in all directions. "We're alive!" he stated, cheers spreading across the deck. "That we are," Jayce acknowledged. "But just where are we?"

They furled up the sails, underwater they contributed nothing. "Do I steer?" Bjorn questioned to Jayce, his hands locked on the wheel. Jayce could hardly see him in the darkness, forcing him to activate the nearby lamp. "Uh, I think so. Why are you asking me?" Jayce returned. Bjorn glared at him before gesturing around. The ship was surrounded by a capsule of water, a constant gust of fresh and damp air pushing past their faces. The ocean walls were dark blue,

completely devoid of any light, but as Jayce entered into Focus he could sense and see the outline of life all around them.

"Jayce," Bjorn stated, tapping his shoulder and pointing to the starboard side. There was a glow in the darkness, a small glow of electric blue that quickly grew and spread before forming a skeletal outline of a reptilian creature. The bubble was breached, an axe-like head sticking itself into the air before taking in a deep breath. Taranis stared at the Rising Aces before diving back into the waters and swimming alongside, his flat tail moving like a whale's, and his glow a reassurance in the darkness. There was another splash and Red propelled himself out onto the deck in a spray of water. "Follow the current," he called out. "Just how the hell do I do that?" Bjorn questioned.

"Not you, Bjorn. Gaea. She is moving the ship," Red confirmed. Bjorn locked the wheel and let go. "Well fuck me then!" he exclaimed, stepping back and shaking his head. "Apologies, I thought it was obvious. It would be the role of the leading Mage, or otherwise we would have made a control disk to manage the enchantments," Red further added. Tempest folded his arms, thinking to himself. "I may just make one of those. I think I shall," he stated, floating away below deck. "Gaea, can you feel the current?" Red asked, approaching her on the main deck. "I... I think so. It's warm," she answered softly, her eyes shut. He nodded. "Yes. It is. Keep looking forwards, I will guide you to the nearest route." Red then ran to the edge and dove into the ocean. Gaea turned and looked up towards Jayce: a nervous expression immediately obvious. "You're doing fine," he reassured. She pushed out a weak smile before nodding and facing the bow.

"What's that?" Bjorn questioned, moments later. The ocean ahead of them held a glow. It was small, tiny but visible - as if far away. It was a golden colour, like a ray of sunlight, and, as they continued to dive through the ocean, it grew before moving aside. Jayce frowned, another dot was visible that soon stretched upwards. It continued to change, spreading out before forming a full circle ahead of them, and then in an instant the Stacked Hand entered the ring. "Woah..." came several unconscious gasps of awe from the crew as they found themselves diving through a spiral of golden light.

"Captain, it is the photoemitting creatures! I must procure a specimen!" Tempest buzzed, as they continued forwards. "Uh, are we able to stop?" Jayce questioned in return. "Is that permission, Captain?" Tempest asked. Jayce nodded. "Gaea, full stop," Tempest commanded. The ship lurched, the wind changing to a steady and loud hiss. The walls of the water shimmered, becoming clearer and fully

transparent, allowing Jayce to see out into the ocean. They were diving through a series of colossal stone rings, each decorated with clumps of green seaweed and large round orbs of glowing sponge.

Red swam closer to the Stacked Hand, remaining outside of its bubble with a clear expression of confusion. Tempest gestured towards the plants and sponges and the jiaoren nodded before propelling himself backwards to collect a sample. It was quite something to witness the ocean crawler swim. He glided through the ocean, propelled by bursts of water ejected from the back of his head. His head tails functioned in the same manner, but they acted as thrusters, allowing him to alter and change his trajectory. It was like a dance, like he was flying, and with the terrifying speed and manoeuvrability he had it was clear why ocean crawlers ruled the depths.

There was a splash and a sample was ejected onto the main deck. Tempest descended upon it like a hungry beast, holding the sponge aloft and looking at its bioluminescent sacs. "Falconer, I require you," he buzzed, into the communicator build into his armour, before descending below deck. "I would advise not remaining here," Red voiced, through his own communicator. "The ship is very bright, and there are predators that may be drawn to it." Jayce nodded, opening his mouth to give the command only for his hairs to stand on end. "Jayce..." Bjorn whispered, his eyes wide in terror as he stared straight past him. Jayce turned, a colossal head staring straight at him.

The leviathan looked almost like a Dragon, it was serpent-like with a monstrous head but also had two sets of four tentacles spaced along its long tail. It was a deep blue colour, and decorated in a thick carapace and membranous frills, periodically were spots of bright blue light – glowing lures that increased in number as it got closer to the monsters head. A singular large lure dangled in front of its countless eyes, its mouth perpetually open and filled with countless spiny teeth. It's many eyes were all a flat grey colour, as if it was blind – but Jayce could sense its gaze directly upon him. "Nobody move!" Jayce called out, the creature clearly uncertain as to what it was seeing.

It's head jerked to the side, the creature diving before reappearing on the other side of the Stacked Hand – its body so long that the majority of it was still floating in the water where it had been. There was a pitter patter of feet and from the main deck leapt Paimon, landing next to Jayce. She stood on the aft deck, staring at the creature with curiosity. "Paimon!" Jayce snapped in a whisper. The small

Demon bear glanced towards him. "But... Captain Exarga, this thing... feels familiar. It reeks of... home?" she questioned to herself, more than anything.

The leviathan gurgled, its screech rippling the bubble around the Stacked Hand. "Defend the ship!" Bjorn yelled, the creature pushing its head into the bubble and snarling at the crew. It lunged for Zeta on the main deck, only instead to crash into a shimmering barrier as Soteria leapt to Zeta's aid – the small Dragon roaring at the monstrosity. The leviathan roared back, this time unhindered by the change in density between the water and air. The crew of the Stacked Hand dropped to their knees, their ears threatening to rupture under the unnatural screech that was both deafening and like a grinding hiss.

A heavy stomping drew Jayce's attention to the stairs, Zhurong lunging out onto the deck his mouth half open. He spewed fire immediately, several of the smaller eyes of the leviathan popping under the sudden heat. The creature writhed before pushing through its pain and lunging for the Dragon. Another barrier blocked the lunge, and immediately a heavy and barbed tentacle burst out from the other side of the bubble, smashing into Soteria from behind and sending her rolling across the deck. Several more tentacles began to strike at crew across the deck.

Jayce lunged, darting from the aft deck with Sola and Luna each in the shape of a colossal greatsword. He swung, cutting open a deep gash before using the other to cleave straight through the opening. Purple ichor sprayed across the deck, the limb retracting, along with several others that other members of the Rising Aces had assaulted. The creature then turned, locking its gaze onto Jayce. It unhinged its jaw, pulling back and preparing to strike. Jayce combined Sola and Luna into a large spear, preparing to defend himself, but as the creature lunged it faltered.

There was a clear look of fear, the leviathan writhing in pain before quickly retracting back into the water. Amongst clouds of purple Jayce glimpsed flashes of red, as the Rising Ace did his job. The leviathan tried to flee but a large dark yet glowing form crashed into it, biting its neck. The pair disappeared in a cloud of darkness and then a singular form approached. With a splash and a wet thud, the head of the leviathan splattered on the deck – Taranis emerging from the waters with glee and joy as he descended upon his new feast. His teeth revved as he tore apart the monster's flesh in a gruesome display that painted the deck. "Well, at least we know we can defend ourselves," Jayce muttered, looking out to the floating corpse of the leviathan.



### Seize the Seas Tales: Family

The journey upwards through the Dungeon felt like it was taking longer than the descent had. It was partially due to Damian's whining over his burns – most of which had been swiftly dealt with through alchemical solutions – but also with the waring reminder that they were going to have to come back and do it all over again. They had made it to floor sixty, and had beaten the floor boss, but there was no telling whether that meant anything. There could be sixty-one floors, eighty, a hundred... a thousand. They didn't know. Still, the more casual ascent gave a chance for a proper conversation. Conversation that most of the time could have been escaped.

"Morgause, please, I need to rest – I can't take anymore!" Sabine begged, one knee on the floor and her mace discarded. "The enemy will not give quarter, there will be no mercy from these artificial monstrosities," Morgause returned, her knuckles bound in cloth and her sword set aside. "Again! And fight like you mean to hurt me – I assure you, you won't," she commanded. Sabine was still a lump of clay – one that was far from moulded and crafted. Wicke had said that she needed more from her, and Morgause had every intention on making sure it happened. She didn't want Sabine to be left behind... not like she had been.

Sabine lunged and Morgause stepped to the side, the girl stumbling forwards before crashing to the ground on her own. "Morgause..." Sabine whimpered, trying to push off the ground only to collapse. Morgause sighed. "Fine..." "How do you do it? H-how do you push yourself so hard, and do it so easily?" Sabine questioned, tucking into a ball. Morgause looked down, looking at the callouses on her hands, the blood under her cracked nails, the bruises on her knuckles. "I..." She turned away and began to walk towards the camp. "Morgause?" Sabine called after her.

It had been that way from their first meeting. Morgause didn't talk about her past. They knew she had been a part of the Church. They knew she had sisters. But that was it. "I have nothing, Sabine," came an unusual response. "My sisters... left me a long time ago. My father abandoned me for my sisters. My mother has a new family – one that I wasn't really welcome within. My past is a mess, I just want a better future for myself. That's all," Morgause answered quietly, her face in clear pain.

Sabine nodded, forcing herself to her feet. "I-I get that. I know what you mean." Morgause turned to face her, folding her arms. Sabine in turn gestured to a large rock, limping over to it before sitting down. With a sigh, Morgause followed.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Sabine genuinely offered. "You'll just ask again another time. What do you so desperately wish to know about me?"

"You said your Dad abandoned you for your sisters, how do you mean?" Sabine asked. "My father is... scum. I'm the product of an affair of an affair. He cheated on Arthuria's mother with Morgana's mother. And her with mine. I don't know how but they all found out and for a bit of time we lived together. I was a baby, but I've seen the photos," Morgause explained. Sabine nodded along. "It wasn't long before it became unacceptable for Arthuria's mother – the original. She demanded he choose. He chose her, and we were left behind."

"Morgana and I grew up as sisters, but Morgana's mother was unwell and when she died Morgana left me behind. My mother married and... well. I wasn't wanted anymore. I went back to visit after the collapse of the Church, but... she was happy without me. My sisters are my real family, I know they are. They... they... they have to be," she said almost in a whimper, her body shaking as she relived her past. "I'm sorry," Sabine stated, snapping Morgause out of it. "Yeah, whatever... Go on then, why is person like you doing this?" she asked in turn.

"Um, well... my mother left me when I was young, but I still had my dad. He was... old, but kind," Sabine said quietly. Morgause nodded, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. "Was?" she questioned. Sabine nodded, looking over towards the nearby camp. "I've come to find my mother. I know she's out there somewhere. I know nothing about her, I have no photos or names, but my dad said she was a doctor. I'm going to find her and ask her why she abandoned me."

Morgause chuckled and Sabine looked at her. "Then I guess we're basically the same: both failures of a marriage, both looking for the families we still have." "I guess we are. Ooh, we're just liked sisters – you and me," Sabine suggested. "Don't push it," Morgause returned, a small smile on her face.