

### **Chapter 187: Several Leagues Under the Sea**

Bjorn let out a long yawn as he carefully slid out from his bed. Marisha lay spawled diagonally across it, her duvet bundled mostly by her feet whilst his was neatly spread across his side of their bed. He smiled slightly as he lay his duvet across her back before turning towards their window. It was the same view as it had been for the last two-and-a-half weeks: a blur of water flooding past the outside of the Stacked Hand, as they continued to dive deep beneath the ocean in a roughly eastern direction.

The clock said it was morning, but at the depths they were diving it was almost impossible to tell without standing on the main deck and looking upwards. He dressed and stepped outside of his and Marisha's quarters, his head pounding – as it had done for some time now – likely due to the pressure and the lack of sunlight. He shook it off, it was minor and nothing worth worrying about, heading upwards to the main deck.

Immediately a wave of light forced him to shut his eyes. He held them closed and then eased them open as he slowly stepped out into the open. A cloud of golden spores decorated the deck, floating out of the branches of Gaea's tree. They were bright, like tiny jellyfish that glided on the ever-present wind that flowed from the bow to the stern. Additionally, hanging inside glass bowls were several cultivated sponges, painting areas of the ship in bright light. The deck was practically empty, with only Falconer on watch by the helm and Zeta strumming a guitar as she sat underneath Gaea's tree with the sleeping dryad's head in her lap. "Morning," she said quietly.

The journey took a heavy toll on Gaea, and even when she was sleeping she was still steering the ship. She kept them following the currents, kept them on the right path, and when predators and monsters came too close she was often the first to defend the ship. "Morning," Bjorn returned. "Anything to report?" he questioned. Zeta shook her head, letting out a large yawn. "All quiet," she stated, leaning back and shutting her eyes. Bjorn approached the helm, Falconer glancing up at him from his science-fiction book. "Get some sleep," Bjorn ordered. Falconer nodded, getting to his feet and wandering off. Bjorn then took his seat, getting comfy as he waited for the rest of the crew to wake up.

A cold feeling drew his attention down to the main deck, forcing Bjorn to his feet as an immediate feeling of panic spread through his mind. He heard a scream – a voice he recognised. Without hesitation, Bjorn surged forwards, racing back to his room only to find the door propped open. A heavy stench of blood floated on

the air and Bjorn charged inside. He fell to his knees, unable to speak, unable to scream as he held Marisha's corpse in his arms. A cold blade rested itself on his shoulder, someone stood behind him. "Bjorn," Jayce stated.

"Bjorn?" Jayce questioned again, the Quartermaster zoned out as he sat in a chair watching the ship. Bjorn turned and looked at him, his eyes wide and in a panic. He then stood up and lunged for Jayce, who quickly stepped back and caught his wrist. "Bjorn?" Jayce said a bit more forcefully, the vacant expression clearing and his Quartermaster returning. "Jayce?" he questioned, quickly pulling his hand back. "Yeah, you okay?"

Bjorn cleared his throat and stepped away. "Yeah, fine," he said coldly, an expression of anger on his face and his eyes glancing nervously in Jayce's direction. "Headache?" Jayce questioned, as Bjorn rubbed his forehead. The therian shook his head. "It's nothing, I'm fine!" Bjorn snapped. Jayce opened his mouth to speak and then faltered, deciding against it. "Okay, sure. Um, well, morning anyway. Anything to report?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn shook his head, folding his arms and turning away. "Right..."

Jayce left him to it, heading below deck straight to Tempest's forge. The sound of hammering was audible all along the corridor and, paired with the metal golems guarding the hallways, it created quite an intimidating effect, even to Jayce. The heat was extreme as he entered the workshop, the forge in full effect, but to his surprise Jayce found Tempest not alone. "Morning Jayce," Morgana stated, a durable jumpsuit tied at her waist, her tattooed upper body covered in a simple black bra. "Uh, morning. What are you doing here so early?" he questioned, glancing past the pair to the suit of armour spread across the workbench. "Well, uh, Tempest asked for some help and I've - for the most part -" she said yawning, "lost track of time. So, I was up and stayed up I guess," Morgana answered, dark circles around her golden eyes. "I see," Jayce returned.

"How is the... work coming?" Jayce then asked, looking towards Tempest. The djinn gestured around his workshop where numerous other suits of armour sat on stands. They each belonged to other members of the crew, all designed to fit them perfectly whilst also representing them through Tempest's eyes. Jayce drew his attention towards Morgana's, the helmet designed like a Witch's hat. "They are finished," Tempest stated. "But there is still work to be done. I am hopeful that they will function as intended, but - until someone is brave enough to step outside - I do know whether they fulfil their purpose."

Jayce nodded, glancing to his own suit of armour, a crown built into the round helmet. Finding a volunteer willing to step outside into the depths was not going to be an easy task. Between the pressure, the weight of the suits, and the general danger of sea monsters, it was a hard sell to anyone. "Finish them and I'll... test my suit – when we find a suitable spot to stop that is relatively safe," he stated, with an added and clear condition. "Very good, Captain," Tempest returned, continuing to etch runes into the armour before hammering away with Xander's hammer. "Are we sure it will work?" Jayce questioned more quietly to Morgana. "Should be fine," she said, with a soft, but not certain, smile.

It was several hours later that Jayce was summoned to the main deck. "What's up?" he questioned, wiping the sweat from his brow before faltering as he noticed that they had stopped. "Well, if I didn't know any better, I would say we have arrived at a destination," Bjorn stated, as he stood at the edge of the ship. Jayce approached, looking around. They were floating in the middle of a giant expanse of open ocean within a colossal crater, the walls high and dark, yet covered in foliage. But it wasn't the crater itself that drew Jayce's attention, the waters were bright and clear, the sunlight descending down upon them from above, and beneath them was a city.

At least it looked like a city. There was a clear, white palace of sorts, placed at the edge of the crater and against the stone wall. It was quite colourful, with patterned rooftops made of a golden shell that from the distance looked emerald in colour. It featured multiple high towers, each open with entrances at the top rather than the bottom, and connecting covered walkways that were held up by pillars and also completely open. There was no visible glass, instead the windows were completely hollow. Sat below and surrounding it were round, stone houses, packed closely together before spreading outwards, eventually separating into - what looked like - farms, each with large fields of seaweed and unusual crops. There was cracks in the crater wall, canyons that were lit and clearly led elsewhere – likely to nearby villages.

Almost immediately, several jiaoren came to investigate, surrounding the ship in all directions whilst holding a variety of weapons. With a splash, Red descended onto the main deck. "It's probably for the best that we move on, Captain," Red said, with a little panic on his voice. "Why?" Jayce questioned, only for several large shadows to smother the light of the Stacked Hand. "By the ancestors," Bjorn muttered, the crew staring up at no less than three krakens. The colossal octopi stared down at the ship. "Keep the Dragons below deck," Jayce ordered through his communicator, his instincts telling him that the krakens weren't their biggest

concern, that the real threat was the purple jiaoren in the middle of them. "Ura Soruk," Jayce realised, staring up at the jiaoren Betrayer as she gestured for the krakens to surround the ship. "The Despoiler," Red hissed.

With a spray of water, Ura Soruk descended, dropping to the main deck with a heavy thud. She towered over Jayce, using her multiple headtails to stand as tall as she could. "Exarga," she gargled, her voice translating through his communicator. "Why have you come to my territory?" she questioned, leaning close to him whilst glancing towards Red. "An accident, I assure you," Jayce returned. "We're simply exploring on our way to the Revelry."

She didn't look too happy with the answer, her blank green eyes boring into him. "Right..." she stated, leaning back and folding her arms. "I assure your safety for the moment, a conversation will be had within my palace. You may trade and stay, but I expect your presence – either through an emissary or yourself – within an hour," she declared, talking directly towards Red. She looked almost identical to him, only purple and with multiple frills around her neck and waist. "Fine," Jayce started. She looked back at him and then nodded, darting to the edge of the ship before diving into the waters – her krakens following after her before beginning to circle around the palace. The other jiaoren departed, leaving the Stacked Hand alone.

"Well, this is a mess," Bjorn stated. Jayce glared at him before sighing and shaking his head. "Agreed," Jayce admitted, approaching the side of the ship and looking down towards the city. He frowned, spotting several fast moving objects moving away from the city. They looked like versions of the flyers that the Guild deployed, only more ray shaped. The submersibles drove upwards, others coming down in their stead, likely carrying cargo. "The Guild are here," Jayce stated towards Bjorn. "Makes sense, a customer is a customer," he returned. "Can you stock up here?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn shrugged before nodding. "Worth a shot, why not?"

Jayce turned to his gathered crew. "Caelie, Tempest, Red and I will meet with Ura Soruk. Bjorn, Marisha and Astris will attempt to resupply the ship. The rest of you stay here. Feel free to take a dip in your armour, but don't stray far from the ship. I don't trust that Betrayer and this feels like a trap, be ready to leave at a moment's notice. I don't want to face those krakens and however many more monsters she has in reserve." The crew nodded, splitting up and gathering anything they thought they might need.

Tempest led Jayce, Caelie, Bjorn, Marisha and Astris to his workshop, pointing out their armours before helping them to put it on and then ensuring that the armour was sealed and on properly. "I can breathe?" Bjorn questioned, in slight disbelief. "I have built filters into the suit, as well as connections to extradimensional space. The air is fresh and will be continuous, provided the ship is not destroyed," Tempest clarified. Jayce moved his head around, testing the range of motion and being pleasantly surprised by the armour's manoeuvrability. "There are runes on the bracers that should provide extra functions for in the water. You should be adequately protected."

Jayce didn't like the word 'should', but he had little choice in the matter and he knew it. He and the others made their way back up to the main deck before approaching the edge of the ship where Red was waiting. "Who's going first?" Astris questioned, all of them nervous about the prospect of diving. Caelie shrugged and stepped next to Jayce, taking his hand with her gauntlet and then leaning forward, pulling them both overboard.

Jayce shut his eyes as he passed through the bubble, emerging into a wet environment that felt cold at first and then surprisingly warm. He felt dry, at least he thought he did, it was hard to tell as he opened his eyes and looked through the T-shaped visor in his helmet. Caelie swam up and in front of him, her bird-like armour had been altered in the water: the feather adornments replaced with blue fins. The feet had been lengthened and turned into flippers, and her gauntlets were webbed. She tested her movements, swimming around in a dance-like movement before disappearing through a portal and reappearing next to Jayce. She took his hand, turning over his gauntlet before pointing to a series of runes on the underside of his bracer. He pressed it, his armour changing to mirror hers and immediately feeling lighter in the water.

"Jayce, you alive?" came Astris' voice through his communicator. He turned to see Bjorn and the others in the water. "Yeah, all good," he returned, turning to face Red. "Captain, is it wise to bring Tempest along? My kind may view him as a threat, without effort he is a danger to those nearby – including myself," Red stated. "Exactly why I want him along. A show of force and a source of protection if needed," Jayce stated. Red didn't look too happy about the idea but he gave no further complaint, instead swimming ahead in the direction of the palace.

"Good luck," Marisha stated, swimming off in a different direction with Bjorn and Astris as they approached the city. The swim had taken a considerable length of time, the distance to the Stacked Hand not minor and the ship tiny in the

distance. Countless jiaoren had come out to stare, most of them looking towards Red who they bowed to or otherwise seemed to adore. Tempest floated alongside Jayce, his presence uncomfortable and the water itchy from his electricity. He carried an orb in one gauntlet, something that Tempest had reassured would limit the transference from himself, not only for his own safety but everyone else's.

They swam along the main road, approaching the palace that was much larger than Jayce had initially thought. Several armoured guards wielding tridents stared at them, but they made no moves to intercept, instead gesturing to a central entranceway on one of the towers. Caelie had other plans, already long fed up with the swim, she instead created a portal - connecting the other end to a room she saw through a window. Jayce passed through it, emerging inside the palace inside a large hall.

"I'm looking for the Betrayer!" Jayce declared, as several guards immediately descended upon him and the others. They pointed their weapons at him and he glared them down. "Cease!" commanded a voice from somewhere behind, the water rippling as a wave of Panic pushed through it. The guards backed off, bowing to a singular jiaoren on approach. "Who are you?" Jayce questioned, looking at a blue ocean crawler decorated in a red armour with matching eyes. He looked young, but it was hard to tell – he was the size of Red, if maybe a little bigger. A pair of swords were attached to his waist and Jayce got the immediate sense that he knew how to use them and use them well under water.

"Ningyo!" commanded a cold voice from further back. Jayce glanced past the blue ocean crawler to a set of open doors leading to a throne room. Ura Soruk floated in the waters beyond. "Follow me, Pirate Lord," said Ningyo coldly, Jayce's senses immediately alerting him of danger. The blue jiaoren swam forwards, Jayce and his group following closely behind. They entered the throne room, the entire area distinctly beautiful and carved more than decorated. Unlike the surface there weren't tapestries or paintings as such, instead there were built in mosaics and sculptures, most of which depicted battles between Ura Soruk and another ocean crawler. Trophies sat on pedestals, mostly weapons, and even a severed ocean crawler head mounted on a wall above the throne.

"I will take my leave," Ningyo attempted, bowing to Ura as she rose from her throne. "No, you shall not," she commanded, much to his clear irritation. "You will wait here with Exarga, whilst I have a conversation with his pet," she stated, pointing at Red and then gesturing upwards. She swam, heading to a chamber

in the roof of the room. Jayce couldn't help but be bemused by the architecture, even if he was annoyed that he was being ordered around. "So... Ningyo, what do you do for a living?" Jayce attempted, the jiaoren glaring at him.

"Prince Chalakon Lorre of the Crushing Core Clan," Ura stated immediately, the pair of them floating in a round circular room with a drinks case built into the roof. She floated up, taking out a small round sphere filled with brown liquid. It was soft in her hands, squishy and somewhat hard. There were multiple and she passed one to Red. "You know me?" he questioned, taking it and biting it before sucking out the fluid – it was a strong liquor that burned. She instead placed the orb into her mouth and crushed it. "I do. I know your family well, which is why I am most surprised to see you of all people here, with them. With that Pirate Lord."

"My business is my own, and is not for your knowledge," Red snarled, folding his arms. "Is it not? How unusual, I was under the pretence that everything under the seas was mine. Gifted to me by my lady, the Sea Sovereign herself. And as such, the details of an enslaved Prince owing his life to an islander, of all creatures, to me seems... like it is my business. Now your father blamed me for your capture, he even insisted that I was the cause of your death," she goaded.

"Personally I found it amusing. I had warned that your habits of engaging with the surface would get you into trouble, but I find it even more amusing that rather than accept the dishonour and just go home you instead thought that a life-debt to a Pirate Lord would be better for you. And Exarga of all Pirate Lords at that," she chided. "Do not dishonour him, Exarga is an honourable human who I owe much to," Red snapped, pointing at her.

"Indeed," she returned, taking his hand and bending his finger back into his fist, but keeping hold of it in her hands. "Kill him for me," she stated coldly, staring deeply into his eyes. He looked away. She was fearsome creature, older than him by at least a few years, but immensely beautiful and terrifying to boot. She leant closer. "Do it and I will be yours," she tempted. "We could rule it all, together." He took his hand back and there was a clear expression of disappointment. "You are the Despoiler for a reason," Red snarled. "A Witch! A temptress!" he declared. "Cutting words for a Prince without a home. Rid the seas of the Rising Aces, they will be the downfall of not only you, but your home as well. Seize this chance, this opportunity to turn the world upside down and make the surface fear the waters once more. I will not ask again," Ura Soruk stated, her hand reaching out

towards him. "No," Red stated, turning and swimming down back into the throne room.

"I only have need for one Prince," Ura stated, as Red rejoined Jayce and the others. "What in the abyss did you discuss?" Jayce questioned, turning to Red. "Ningyo, Chalakon abandoned his home, his people. That's why I came here, because of him," Ura stated, with a wide grin. Red turned to the blue jiaoren, his eyes wide as he shook his head. "No," Red stated. "That's not true." Ningyo drew his swords. "You're the reason for all of this!" he roared. "You doomed my home!"

Ningyo lunged at Red, who drew his own sword to defend himself, the pair darting around the room and striking at each other with their swords. "Ura, enough of this!" Jayce declared, willing Sola into a trident. The Betrayer grinned. "Indeed, enough games!" she declared, opening her mouth and letting out a screech that rippled the waters. "Captain, big problem," came Wam's voice immediately afterwards. "Krakens incoming!"

Jayce swam forwards towards Ura with his trident, but she easily backed off. "You will not touch me in my domain. But I like my prey to have a fighting chance. Die with your crew," she stated, swimming away before he could do anything. Jayce turned towards Caelie. "Portal us out of here," he ordered. She nodded, conjuring a portal to the outside. Jayce then turned to Red, a cloud of purple blood stemming from his side as he desperately avoided the blue ocean crawler. "Red!" Jayce yelled, drawing his attention towards the portal.

"I cannot flee!" Red roared back, swinging wildly only the strike to be blocked and a large cut to be drawn across his chest. "You've lost, accept it. I'm ordering you through that portal!" Jayce commanded, Caelie darting through the blue swirl. Red darted backwards, his face in clear pain, both at his loss and his injuries as he charged through the portal. Ningyo then turned towards Jayce, a snarl on his face. "You asked my profession, Exarga – I am the one that will take your throne, take your head and use that position to cleanse this world of the Despoiler. I will free my people–"

"Do you really need my head for that? Couldn't you just do that anyway without killing me?" Jayce questioned. Ningyo roared and charged towards him, but Jayce just darted through the portal, leaving only Tempest behind. "Oops," the djinn stated, tossing the orb in his hand through the portal before unleashing an underwater storm of lightning. Ningyo screamed in agony as the djinn departed, the portal closing behind him.



"All good?" Jayce questioned to Tempest, as he threw back the orb to him. Tempest nodded. "I believe so, but I doubt it will be enough to kill him. That child seemed... stubborn." Jayce nodded, turning and looking to the expanse ahead of him, the Stacked Hand in chaos. The krakens had descended upon the ship. One was locked in battle with Taranis, the Dragon tearing the monster apart one tentacle at a time, whilst electrifying the waters around him. Gaea had warped the hull into a wall of barbs, tentacles of her own striking out at the krakens, whilst the Rising Aces fought from inside the bubble and out. "Caelie, get us close," Jayce commanded. She conjured another portal and stepped through. "Tempest, protect the ship. Red, heal up and then fight – that's a command," Jayce ordered, the pair nodding and following through the portal.

Jayce began to swim towards it himself, his thoughts racing as he questioned their best move. His body then tensed on its own, something impacting him hard from the side and dragging him quickly down towards the ocean floor. Jayce turned, trying to kick free of the grip around his waist. The blue jiaoren, Ningyo, had grappled him – his body scorched and face furious. Jayce tried to swing a fist, but it was slow in the water and seemed to do nothing.

Ningyo slammed Jayce's body into the ocean floor, backing off quickly and drawing his swords as Jayce groaned and pushed himself back upright. A cloud of sand surrounded him, the ocean crawler circling like a shark. "We don't have to do this!" Jayce yelled out, glancing towards the Stacked Hand as more sea monsters emerged to fight. "I think you do," Ura stated, swimming down from above with a smug grin on her face. "Stay out of this Despoiler, his head is mine for the taking and then I will come for you!" Ningyo roared. Ura cackled, before forcing a cold and steely expression. "How terrifying," she said softly, a duo of leviathans swimming over to observe. "But I appreciate the sentiment."

"Ura, leave my crew alone!" Jayce declared, commanding Sola and Luna into a pair of curved daggers whilst taking a defensive stance and following Ningyo's movements. "No," she answered coldly. "Get on with it, Ningyo, kill him." "Jayce, where are you?" came Astris' voice through his communicator. Ningyo darted towards him like a bullet and Jayce blocked a strike with his blade before the other sword raked itself across his chest. Jayce felt the impact, it was heavy but his armour protected him. "Ocean floor, bit of trouble," Jayce answered, desperately blocking another lunge, his movement throwing up sand as he twisted around.

"We're coming, hold on," Astris returned. Jayce didn't like that, he only stood a chance because he was fighting on the floor and that limited the ocean crawlers attack angles. The swim to the Stacked Hand would be lethal, no matter how close it was. Jayce grit his teeth as he felt a blade find a gap in his armour. The wound was small but it was a wound. It wouldn't take long for Ningyo to realise he only had to take off Jayce's helmet to win.

The jiaoren circled once again and Jayce kicked off the ground, throwing up more sand. His eyes then widened as the jiaoren lunged, swinging not only his blades but also his pointed headtails for a multiple strikes. Jayce commanded Sola and Luna to form shields, defending himself from the strikes before pushing back against the jiaoren who circled around for another attack. Jayce waited, watching his foe as the Stacked Hand dove closer.

Ningyo surged and Jayce threw up a wave of sand, combining Sola and Luna into a spear that immediately punctured straight through the stomach of the jiaoren who was unable to see the trap. Ningyo hung there, his eyes wide in shock as he hung on the spear. He then snarled and swung with his swords, but Jayce retracted the spear, splitting it back into two daggers – one of which he raked across Ningyo's face, the other cutting straight through a headtail that had tried to strike him. The jiaoren screeched in agony, pulling back in a trail of purple blood.

He then surged forwards again, but a Red blur tackled him from the sides, this time armed to the teeth. "Cowards! bastards!" Ningyo cried, backing away. "Count your days, I will strike again when you least expect it!" he warned. "I doubt it!" Jayce goaded back, Red grabbing his waist and then propelling them both through the crowd of sea monsters straight on the deck of the Stacked Hand. "Get us out of here!" Jayce yelled, ensuring all crew were aboard before they began to flee for any of the other canyons. "We can't lose Taranis!" Ordo declared. A huge splash and a wailing screech drew all eyes to the main deck as the giant Dragon dragged a still-living kraken onto the main deck.

He then revved, lifting his head up before biting down, the numerous tentacles writhing before falling still. Taranis pulled his head out of the corpse, shaking blood and gore in all directions. "Great mother," came a voice next to Jayce, Belial standing in Caelie's stead. "The monster... it smells of home. That thing is from the abyss."

**Seize the Seas Tales: A New Depth**

“What floor are we on?” Sabine questioned, as she lay on the floor in a daze, her face cut and bleeding. Damian roared, throwing a heavy fist up and through the jaw of the final giant, armoured skeleton – one of a more than a dozen death knights that had ambushed them. Each skeleton had felt like a floor boss of their own, each capable of fighting without fatigue and lapse in skill, and each of them coordinating with each other in order to pincer and crush the group. Yet they’d survived, if only just – numerous large magic stones littering the ground around them. “Floor 71,” Wicke confirmed, adding the stones to her collection. “We’re heading back up. We’re nearly there, I’m certain of it.”