

### **Chapter 188: Touch of Corruption**

Several hours had passed since the Rising Aces' encounter with the Betrayer Ura Soruk and the vengeful prince Ningyo. They had hardly stopped moved since, keeping to the currents and diving further and further through the ocean. Jayce was almost certain they weren't being followed. Ningyo's threat of a further attack was almost definitely something that would not occur for some time – Jayce was at the very least confident the injuries the jiaoren had obtained would hold him off for at least a good while. Instead he turned his attention inwards.

"What do you mean the krakens and leviathans smell of your home?" Jayce questioned, pulling the four Demons together for an interrogation, alongside Yuthura, Astris, Bjorn and Morgana. Baal turned away, his host's arms folded and his expression showing clear disinterest as he manifested himself through Mai Lu. Asmodeus held a similar stance, although the large Demon bat couldn't quite manifest the expression as clearly, and paired with his diminished size it didn't make nearly as much of an impression to Jayce and the others.

"I meant what I said, Captain," Belial said with a bit more effort, likely pushed on by Caelie from within. "Those... monstrosities... they smell of home – our actual home." There was a somewhat simultaneous shudder from all four of the Demons. "And that's a bad thing?" Morgana questioned. Paimon nodded vigorously, the small bear rather bemusing. "In human terms: it's literal hell. There's a reason why we Demons took the Heavens as our prize when we exiled the Angels," she answered, the Demon bear most likely of the group to be helpful in Jayce's eyes. "Hang on, are you saying these things are Demons too?" Astris questioned.

There were a mixture of headshakes and nods, some of which changed upon seeing the opinions of the others. "Helpful," Yuthura muttered, tapping her cane loudly to recover the Demons' attention. "Apologies, Doctor," Paimon led. "We don't really know... and the topic is... sensitive in our eyes." Jayce folded his arms. "How so?" he questioned bluntly, pressing for a more definitive answer. "Exarga, please may we not continue this?" Belial requested.

There was a loud and exaggerated sigh from Baal who immediately vanished, replaced by Mai Lu. "Baal and the other Demons are afraid of the Abyss," she answered more definitively. "They're afraid because when they die, or if they lose connection to this world and go back there, they will be consumed by their mother: the progenitor of all Demons, and most likely these sea monsters as well."

"Huh," uttered Jayce, nodding in plain understanding. "So... there's a mega-Demon that's your mother?" he asked. The Demons nodded. "What does she look like?" he followed up with, drawing expressions of horror and disgust. "You do not want to know..." Asmodeus answered, a flurry of curious ideas rushing through Jayce's mind. "Picture a termite queen with tentacles, a chitinous hide and lots of teeth and horns, with a voracious appetite for her own children and a cruel attitude to simple existence. There's a reason all Demons fled her," Paimon answered.

Astris and Bjorn shared a glance, the pair of them silently acknowledging a shared disinterest in ever encountering it. "I think I get the idea. So how are these sea monsters escaping the Abyss?" Jayce questioned. The group shrugged. "We've already seen a portal to Heaven, is it too farfetched to believe there could be one to the other side?" Yuthura proposed. Jayce pondered for a moment. "I suppose the jiaoren would know. Could be worth asking them?" he suggested. "We've kind of burnt that bridge as of today," Astris reminded. "Besides, to what end? This doesn't help us with the Revelry." Jayce couldn't help but agree. "Fair enough."

The crew fell back into their travel routine. Bjorn and Marisha had been successful collecting supplies from the jiaoren city and the Guild representatives there, and the fresh food and cargo certainly helped to improve the mood amongst the crew. But it became clear to Jayce, as time went on, just how much the claustrophobic and dark environment of the ocean was taking a toll on the crew and, before long, a clear breaking point emerged.

"By the gods," Jayce muttered, staring at Bjorn as he shuddered within the living quarters with a jug of coffee in his hands. "Go away!" Bjorn growled, his eyes sunken and rabid in both human and therian form. He was curled into himself, hunched over and feral. "You've not been sleeping, you need rest," Marisha inserted cautiously from the kitchen. "No!" Bjorn snapped. "I'm fine." Jayce and Marisha glanced at each other.

"What was that?" Bjorn demanded, getting to his feet and throwing the metal container at Jayce. The coffee burned, but Jayce ignored it. "You're conspiring against me? You-you-you've be-betrayed me?" Bjorn half-growled, half-whimpered in Marisha's direction. "You're against me! Both of you!" Jayce held up his hands, Sola and Luna dripping off his wrists onto the table under his telepathic command. "No one is against you," Jayce eased, circling around

towards the sofas and sitting down. "Let's talk it out. Me and you, buddy – just us," Jayce attempted.

"He's tricking us," whispered a voice in the back of Bjorn's mind. "He's waiting to toss you aside, to bury you in this damned sea."

Bjorn turned away. "No! I won't fall for your tricks! You're a liar!" he roared. The door to the living quarters opened, Astris and Ordo peering inside. "You're all against me!" Bjorn roared, picking up a chair and throwing it at the door – the chair and door breaking on impact. Astris and Ordo both stepped inside, glancing towards Jayce and Marisha for advice. "Leave us," Jayce said softly, gesturing with his hand for the pair to remain nearby.

"He's betrayed us, he's waiting for the Revelry to toss us aside," continued the whispers, the woman's voice cold and pressing and growing louder by the moment. "He'll doom us all. Your wife, your boys, your tribe – they'll all die at his hands. We can't beat the Sovereign, it's doom!"

Bjorn grabbed his head. "Let me think!" he growled, Marisha rushing forwards to grab his hands. "Hey," she said softly. Bjorn snapped his gaze onto her, his therian form melting away. "He's going to get us killed, we can't beat the Sovereign," he whispered, his voice breaking and eyes tearful. "No, he won't. We're safe, we're all safe, and Jayce has a plan. The Captain always has a plan," she soothed. He shook his head, pulling back and away, before he turned on Jayce and turned back into his bear form.

"Sit," Jayce commanded, putting Panic into his voice. Marisha turned her head towards him, her eye wide and questioning his action. "We'll be fine, check on the boys," Jayce stated. If he couldn't sort it without her then whatever was going on would only continue. The Beastly Boys had drawn Jayce's attention to Bjorn, and in the process Bjorn had nearly killed them. "But," Marisha attempted. Jayce shook his head, saying nothing further. She met Bjorn's gaze, and forced herself away, his hands – that had been clutching onto her arms - trailing after her as she walked away with tears in her eyes. "Don't leave me..."

"He's going to kill you..."

"Bjorn!" Jayce said assertively, remaining relaxed in his seat on the sofa. The therian turned towards him, his expression flitting between terror, rage, and confusion. "Sit, please," he offered, gesturing to the seat opposite him, his arm red from the hot coffee. Bjorn faltered, glancing towards the broken door and the

seat opposite Jayce – his eyes cold and menacing, shadows covering his face and a... a soft smile that broke through it all.

Bjorn sat, holding his head in his hands as the voices continued to bombard him from inside and out. "Ask me anything you need to know the answers to. What's bothering you, Bjorn?" Jayce offered, remaining with his arms spread and his body vulnerable as he maintained his gaze on Bjorn. "I-I..." Bjorn trailed off. "It's the Revelry, isn't it? That's what's bothering you?" Jayce questioned. There was a pause as Bjorn let the words sink in, tears silently dripping to the floor. "We can't win..."

"Bjorn, that's not true. You know it's not true. We've already got the seat, we just need to hold it – and that's how it was before," Jayce returned. Bjorn shook his head. "No, not that... Vexx... the Sovereign..." he said with a hushed whisper, glancing around as if to check no one was listening – a barrage of images from his nightmares warping his vision. Countless bodies of his friends and family filled his mind, their corpses grotesque and brutalised in a montage of violent ends. In some he saw Jayce doing the deed himself, his already scarred form turned into some monstrous marauder kneeling before the Sea Sovereign herself.

He flinched as he felt the sofa shift. Jayce sat next to him and somewhat mirroring his hunched over form, only with his hands clasped rather than on his head. "There is time... lots of time, before we need to worry about Vexx and Scáthach. I will do everything I can to bring him home without a fight, but if we do need to defeat her then we will, and we can – I know it." Bjorn looked at him. "What if we can't?" he whispered.

"Then I will do everything to protect this crew - you included, big guy. I won't let anything happen to you, or Marisha, or anyone else. We will get stronger, all of us, and we will face the Sea Sovereign and the Betrayers together," Jayce reassured. Bjorn looked down at his hands. "Wh-what if I fall behind? I'm not like everyone else – not like you." Jayce pat Bjorn's shoulder, a single gesture that shocked Bjorn. "You steer the ship, command the crew, you do a far better job than I ever could. You'll never fall behind, I'm still desperately trying to catch up to you. To stand proudly alongside you, and be the Captain you deserve."

The whispers began to soften.

"What if we lose?" Bjorn questioned. "What if the Revelry is a trap?" he asked. "Should we pull out? Head home? We can do so - it's not too late," Jayce offered, genuinely. "Say the word and we'll go home. We'll find Wicke and leave the

Sovereign for the rest of the world to deal with. I trust no one more than you to tell me we're not cut out for a fight. I will always punch up, but you see the world in a more grounded way than I do. Should we throw in the towel?" Jayce questioned.

Bjorn looked down at his hands, the voices gone. He concentrated, willing a cold feeling across his palms. Tiny shards of ice began to form, that he promptly crushed. "We'll be fine... most likely," he answered, forcing a smile and turning to look at Jayce. The darkness around his eyes had vanished and he looked healthier than he had. Jayce nodded, standing up by pushing down on Bjorn's shoulder. "Then we carry on, but - as always Bjorn - tell me when I'm leading us astray. Talk to me, I'm here for you as I know you are for me, my friend."

Jayce stepped outside, his nervous crew waiting for him. "He's fine. Morgana, Marisha, Yuthura - a moment, please," Jayce commanded, stepping aside. The trio looked at him. "Someone cursed him, I don't have proof, but I can feel it. That wasn't Bjorn behaviour. Marisha, does he have any new items?" he questioned. She shook his head. "Nothing that makes me think it was cursed," she answered. "I want a full check-up on everyone," Jayce ordered. "Morgana-" She held up her hands and nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I'll do what I can to find and eradicate the source. But Jayce, if it was a curse - I'd have noticed. If it's magical and not just a nervous breakdown - no offence - there'd be more signs. Magic has rules, it doesn't just..." Morgana stated, trailing off as she and Jayce both turned and looked towards the Demons. "It's Demonic magic," they both realised. "Someone with a Demon cursed Bjorn at some point."

It was as if a switch had been flicked, the old Bjorn returned almost immediately, along with a considerable feeling of guilt about his behaviour, but the incident had opened Jayce's eyes to a new and unknown threat. Someone had messed with Bjorn, and from Morgana's estimates pretty much the entire crew had been modified with the same magic - yet Bjorn had been the only one affected. To Jayce that screamed that he had been targeted, someone had targeted the person closest to him.

Jayce braced himself as the light above the ship grew brighter and brighter, the Stacked Hand rapidly rising from the depths - before, with a loud crash and a heavy splash, the ship burst out of the ocean back to the surface. "Oh my gods, that feels good!" groaned Zeta, immediately laying down in the sunlight. "Sun, fresh air - real fresh air - birds!" she cried. Astris hissed as she darted for cover, stepping inside Jayce's quarters to put on her hat. The light hadn't hurt her as

much underwater and she had taken the chance to ease back on her blood consumption – clearly an error on her part as she emerged sipping a blood pouch.

“We have two months to the Revelry, and, if I’m not mistaken, that’s part of the southern continent over there,” Astris stated, pointing ahead to a mass of land covered in white buildings. “So, what’s the plan, Captain?” Bjorn questioned. Jayce smiled. “Let’s first find out what we missed,” he stated, conscious of the isolation they had experienced underwater. “Then set a heading for Diasta’s Capital: Novalis.”

Jayce was relieved by the absence of news on Alara and her fleet. The papers mentioned mysterious attacks that occurred across the Old World – one of the more recent ones taking place in Novalis itself. But it was the somewhat consistent mentions of Jayce’s own name that drew most of his attention. The bounties placed on his crew had been raised again. The leading value coming from someone called the Machinist. “Let’s pay them a visit,” Jayce suggested. “About time we had some action,” Astris stated, checking the chambers of her pistols.

Novalis came into view several days later, after sailing through a maze of wandering islands that drew the most intrigue from RK-227 of all crew members. The rokken was clearly enamoured by his ancient kin, but it was hard to tell whether that was because he wanted to eat them or because he was impressed by them. It did raise multiple queries as to just how big he would continue to grow with the food they were giving him. He was already getting a bit too large for the ship.

The city was beautiful, a mesh of industrialisation and antiquity blending harsh grey metals and white marble. Red roofs, large gardens, streams and fruit trees painted the region in colour and the locals wore robes, togas and gold – lots of gold. The constant stream of traffic in and out of the city drew Jayce’s attention elsewhere. Almost all ships heading to and from the city’s main harbours were heading north, but out of the hundreds sailing Jayce glimpsed one ship sailing south.

“Falconer, can I borrow Wren for a moment?” Jayce questioned. Falconer nodded, whistling and summoning the giant bird down from the air. Jayce climbed onto her saddle and she took off, soaring high into the air to grant him the view he wanted. His eyes widened almost immediately. A few kilometres to the south by south-west of the city was another island, one far smaller and

populated by what looked to be only a single colossal building: a giant stone mansion. The Sea Sovereign's home.

"There it is," Jayce stated, pointing to the island as they entered the traffic. "That's where the Revelry is taking place, that's the Sovereign's castle." Astris and Bjorn stared at the island through a pair of binoculars. "Doesn't look like a castle to me," Bjorn stated, passing the binoculars to Falconer. Astris nodded in agreement. "Looks like one of my old homes," she stated, both Bjorn and Jayce looking at her with judgement. "There was an old plantation we went to live in the summer. Hey, don't look at me like that! My father was an Admiral, so was yours!" she protested towards Jayce. He shook it off, turning his attention back to the task at hand. "Well at least we know where we're going," he stated.

They docked the ship, the crew splitting up to restock and do a little shopping before gathering again once their presence had drawn the correct attention. "Where's the Rising Ace?" demanded a small woman, covered in rough, spiky metal armour and holding a short rifle with a thick barrel. "Hmm?" Jayce questioned, stepping to the edge of the Stacked Hand only to leap to the side as the weapon roared and spat a burst of shrapnel his way. "Rude," he grumbled, returning to his position as she began to reload. "Are you part of the Machinist's crew?" he questioned down to her, the rest of crew similarly nonchalant. "Yes!" she yelled. "We've been waiting for you, and now you've finally shown yourself! It's just my luck that I found you first!" she declared, aiming and firing again – the recoil knocking her off her feet.

"Jayce, stop toying with her," protested Astris, the shot going wide and impacting in the hull. She got to her feet and reloaded once again, this time charging the ladder built into the hull and beginning to climb. Jayce waited until she was right at the top before he nudged her screaming back over the edge. She crunched into the deck of the pier, her spiked armour nailing her to the wood. "Okay," Jayce said with a sigh, dropping over the edge and landing next to her. "I'll get you! Your head is mine!" she screamed.

"Are all of you like this?" he questioned, concentrating his Focus into his finger before flicking the bucket-like helmet. It rang like a bell, a dent left behind where he had flicked. He pulled the helmet off her, the girl somewhere in her mid-teens, with curly brown hair and very dark skin. Her eyes were glazed over, her head clearly ringing as she groaned. "Where's your leader? I want to meet your boss," Jayce told her clearly, waiting for her eyes to refocus. "You... want to meet the

boss?" she questioned. He nodded, picking up her shotgun and tossing it up towards Astris. He then pulled out a golden pearl. "I'll pay."

"Deal," she said immediately, sensing little choice in the matter.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Footsteps of Parents**

Alara grit her teeth as she and her squad marched through the rain. They had arrived back in the Capital of Brunxchume, the city known as Chull. "Captain," Wulf said to her softly, her hands shaking as they made their way towards their target. "I know," she stated, softly and angrily. They had followed her father here, to this city, before, and now they had come back. But they'd arrived too late, once again.

Her father's ship burned in the distance, the exhibition it had been placed within now completely destroyed. Instead, Alara turned her attention to the Fortress Ship in the shadow of the storm. The vessel was colossal, distinctly deadly and far too impenetrable for her crew to assault now. But she didn't want to turn away from it, she didn't want to leave empty-handed and return back to her ship alone.

The Betrayer, Barca Khallid, had used her father as a trap for her mother. In that fortress, in that vessel, were her parents – she was certain of it and now had the physical proof to convince those she needed to. Wulf placed a hand on her shoulder, her tears masked by the rain. "We'll come back for them with an armada. We'll rescue them," he reassured. She stared at the floating fortress, at the colossal cannons covering its surface. It held the power to contain two Admirals. "Yeah," she lied to herself. "We'll come back for them."