

### **Chapter 189: The Machinist**

“Just this way,” stated Marsia, the young woman the Rising Aces had bribed to take them to the Machinist. Of the entire crew, Jayce had decided to only take himself, Astris, Arthuria, Mai Lu and Caelie – a decision most of his crew had protested against. But given it was his first meeting with someone that most people were referring to as a new Pirate Lord, Jayce felt it appropriate to set a clear understanding.

Marsia held her left arm as they walked, a consequence of her unwieldy shotgun and her inexperience at using it, and her armour shuffled with every step – the metal too large for her small body. “Do you think the boss will reward me?” she questioned aloud, Jayce and Astris glancing towards each other. “Uh, sure,” Jayce returned, only for the bucket-like helmet to turn and glance towards him with confusion. “Never mind,” he muttered.

She led them through the city of Novalis, away from the pristine marble city towards the more grimy and metallic factories spewing black smoke into the sky. The streets began to close up: the wideness remaining but an abundance of overlooking metal walkways and pipes blocking off the sky. They passed numerous carts carrying ores and slag, most of them pulled by large animals but some instead moved by giant humanoid automatons. The metal golems towered over Jayce and his crew, each one lumbering and clanking along, or otherwise standing guard.

They looked almost comical, each one shaped like a headless man with long arms and legs and a bulbous torso, with a burning furnace in the middle. Large pipes stuck out of their backs, bellowing smoke that felt acidic in Jayce’s nose. The automatons rumbled as they stood still, vibrating as fuel burned inside. Astris paused and analysed one, the faceless machine staring down at her. “Hmm,” she pondered to herself, turning away and hurrying back to Jayce’s side. He glanced towards her and she simply nodded back with an expression of confidence.

They continued their march into the Machinist’s territory, and it wasn’t long before Jayce noticed the sheer volume of attention he and his crew had brought. Armoured guards surrounded him, leering and jeering down at him from walkways and railings – all armed with a variety of guns. Some even held flamethrowers, their backs covered in large canisters of fuel. “Shouldn’t we have brought more people?” Mai Lu questioned cautiously, a small demonic grin on her neck. Caelie shook her head, confidently striding ahead before lowering her mask over her face.

They were led to the largest of the factories, the colossal building dark and imposing apart from the orange glow that illuminated the windows – creating a monstrous expression on its front. They walked through the monster’s mouth, the heat immediately overwhelming and the sound of clanging and machinery deafening. A channel of automatons guided their path through the middle of the factory floor, countless guards stood on walkways – all armed with rifles and aiming them at Jayce. “Bit overkill, don’t you think?” Arthuria questioned, her hand on her swords, her armour concealed for the moment. “We’re with Jayce Exarga, Pirate Lord, if anything it’s not enough,” Astris returned, with a mocking grin. “Shush,” Jayce told them, as they both giggled. “We need to look serious and intimidating.” Caelie, Astris, Mai Lu and Arthuria all rolled their eyes.

They came to a connection of rail tracks, all meeting on a circular metal disk that could clearly rotate, so as to change the pathing of the numerous carts moving between forges. Before them, on an elevated platform five-or-so metres above them, sat a large man. His skin was a corpse-like white, but held multiple black, tribal tattoos across the left side of his exposed torso, chin and face. His eyes were cold and glowed a deep red colour. Black and red dreadlocks hung down his back and shoulders, and he had countless stud-like piercings across his arms, chest and chin. His teeth sparkled, his mouth full of metal. A colossal metal hammer on a huge pole sat next to him within arm’s reach. “Welcome, Pirate Lord,” he growled, remaining sat in his metal throne, the back of which was actually on fire.

He looked huge from their position below, the man certainly a giant and rippling with muscle. He wore black samurai armour on his lower waist, and clearly had no fear or concern about Jayce. “I heard you put a bounty on my head, I’ve come to collect as I’ve brought it to you,” Jayce called up. “So pay up, before I take it from you.” A wave of clicks spread around the room as the numerous gunners aimed their weapons. The giant paused, before he burst into a bellow of laughter. “Outrageous, even with heat such as this you remain cold and steeled. Greater men than you have broken before me,” boomed the figure.

“Why would I fear you? You’re not the Machinist, are you?” Jayce questioned, glancing up past the throne to a walkway high above it. A young woman stood leaning against the metal railing, her red eyes wide and visible even from the distance below. A big grin sat on her face, her long, blood-red hair tied up and held back by a bandana. A pair of huge metal gauntlets sat on her forearms, her upper body otherwise exposed apart from a black tube top. She had tanned skin, and similar tribal tattoos across her right shoulder and neck. A metal and leather

skirt covered her waist, a pair of steel-toed black boots over her feet. Numerous metal piercings filled her ears.

"Impressive, not that it will serve you much," she stated, her voice coming through her puppet. "I sincerely hope that you haven't come all this way just to tell me off for putting a bounty on you? The entire world wants your head, Exarga, I'm just the one with the deepest pockets to get it done for me." Jayce nodded. "I get it, I also want to make it clear that the bounty ends here. Now. If I have to come back..."

"If you have to come back?" laughed the machinist. "There's no leaving." She clicked her fingers, her gauntlets making a loud clink that echoed across the factory. The automatons that had lined the path to the throne all moved, spreading out to block the way to the exit. "I want your title, and the Sovereign wants your head. So I intent to take the latter to her to get the former - got it?" she questioned from above. "Uh, Boss, I brought them to you – does that mean I get a reward?" interrupted Marsia, a clear expression of irritation crossing the Machinist's face. "Sure, here you go," answered the Machinist, the puppet standing up from his throne and leaping towards Jayce with his greathammer in hand.

He swung downwards mid-leap, splattering the young woman into the metal floor before turning his blood-covered body towards Jayce. "He's taller than I thought," Arthuria stated, cautiously stepping back, the puppet around Bjorn's height. A bloody golden pearl rolled across the floor, bouncing off Mai Lu's foot. She reached down and picked it up, smearing Marsia's blood with her thumb before pocketing the coin. "Bring me his head!" screamed the Machinist, turning and walking away.

Baal emerged from Mai Lu, immediately turning the blood covering the puppet into his weapon. The giant screamed in agony as a thousand glass-like shards pierced his body, yet he didn't go down. The crystals cracked and shattered as he forced his body to move, hefting his hammer up and preparing to swing it down upon Jayce. But before he could strike, Jayce swung with Sola and Luna decapitating the puppet in a pair of sharp slashes. The body toppled, but not before Jayce spotted machinery inside the giants neck – his entire spine seemingly made out of a bronze metal.

Astris vanished in a splash of blood, a series of screams ringing out as a pair of railings fell from the roof. She then reappeared amongst the automatons, darting between them and systematically dismantling them with precision shots to their

joints or by throwing explosives inside of their furnaces. The machines could hardly respond as she apparated from one spot to the next, periodically launching herself through the hail of gunfire to find a feast to refuel before returning to her dismantling.

Caelie wasted no time, the second combat begun she threw out a pair of teleportation portals. Arthuria surged through one, darting along the railings against the gunners whilst dressed in her armour, cleaving them apart and using their bodies to protect herself from their gunfire. A periodic arm, leg, or head would drop from the ceiling with a splat before eventually the entire railing gave way as she cut the supporting cables and leapt at the next group of enemies. Caelie used the other portal to protect herself, Jayce and Mai Lu from the barrage of bullets, turning the projectiles back on their owners as she began to walk towards the exit.

Between Caelie's portals and Mai Lu's walls of blood crystal, Jayce felt no threat as he slowly walked towards the exit. The automatons fell apart before him and the ceiling collapsed behind him. The second he crossed the threshold, Astris and Arthuria dropped back to his side – the group of them turning towards the army ahead of them. "I think the message has been clear - get us out of here," Jayce commanded. Mai Lu erected a wall of blood in front of them and Caelie conjured up a portal, the group stepping through.

They fell out of the sky above the city, Caelie immediately creating another portal to bring them closer to the Stacked Hand. They landed without issue, the lounging crew immediately getting to their feet as they noticed the blood covering Jayce, Astris and Arthuria. "I see it was a peaceful encounter," Bjorn said sarcastically. "Everyone back to the ship," Jayce commanded. Caelie immediately ran to Falconer's side, the pair of them climbing aboard Wren before taking to the sky. A series of portals appeared, the rest of the crew emerging through them. "That's everyone," Bjorn confirmed, walking to the helm. Jayce nodded, glancing out towards the factories – a different kind of smoke rising from them. "Good," he stated, "because we're about to have a fight."

From the smoke emerged a quintet of sailing ships, each lifting into the sky by means of a giant balloon. But descending from the sky above the factory was something Jayce had never seen before. It was long and tubular, absolutely colossal and at least three times the length of the Stacked Hand. It looked a lot like a giant balloon, only stretched out: an airship, one that was at the very least armoured and covered in so many guns it looked like a cactus. A series of giant

propellers pushed it forwards, fast, and a continuous stream of flyers began to fill the skies around it. "Just what did you say to him?" Bjorn questioned in disbelief. "Her," Jayce corrected, "and only that I preferred my head attached to my body."

"The plan, Jayce?" Astris questioned, as the crew gathered on the main deck. "We only have a few minutes before they're upon us. So no time for big speeches," he stated, leaning on the aft-deck railing. "Bjorn, take us away from the city – as far as you can – I don't want their falling ships to crush any civilians, and I don't want the blame for any damage either. Zeta, Yuthura, Marisha – harness the winds, get us some real speed. We follow the usual strategy: an away and a stay team."

"Captain, could we use the main cannon on that giant airship?" Wam questioned. Jayce glanced towards Tempest. "We do not have much ammunition Captain, we have not yet encountered a magic dense region where I can restock the ore. My synthetic substitutions are not yet ready, and will not be ready for at least a year," warned the djinn. Jayce looked at him. "We have a dozen shots," Tempest assured.

Jayce looked towards the rapidly approaching airships, a single good shot would heavily swing the advantage in their favour, but he was equally aware of just how accurate that shot would need to be. "It exposes us too much, Jayce," Ordo advised, Jayce nodding in agreement. "Both in the future and now. I believe the Boys can hit the shot, but we'd need to let them get closer to us and I suspect those guns have a larger range than we do," he added.

"Captain, five minutes at most before they're in range of us," Falconer warned, Wren by his side and waiting. "Enemy count?" Jayce asked, folding his arms and thinking. "Sixty flyers, five carriers, one airship," warned Astris, Falconer and Marisha, all with their eyes on the enemy and the number pre-counted. Jayce couldn't help but smile: he could trust his crew to fill in his gaps – always. "Okay, right! Arthuria, Astris, you two will be engaging the flyers alongside Morgana and Falconer. Aim for the pilots, ignore the crews, knock them out of the sky. Thalia, Ordo, Caelie you will be engaging those carriers – Alara fought them before, aim for the cables and cut them free; the Machinist will have reinforced them since then so do whatever you can to drop those ships."

"Caelie, you're on support, not attack," Jayce commanded. She stomped her foot in protest. "Just because we can travel through the air doesn't mean we have to, that's energy that's better served to defeating our enemies," he told her swiftly.

“Zhurong, Taranis, Asmodeus and I will handle that airship. We will bring it down. Home team, keep the ship away from combat – defend it however you can. Feed Paimon the reserve magic stones, use her foresight to keep an advantage and feed that information back to us. Bjorn, you have the ship,” Jayce commanded, summoning his plate armour out of his enchanted bracer before flicking Sola and Luna out into a pair of flaming longswords. “Give them hell!” Bjorn declared.

Caelie opened up a portal on the main deck that Thalia immediately launched herself through, with Ordo close behind. The enemy fleet immediately burst into disarray. There was a pair of loud roars and the ship shook before lurching as two of the three Dragons launched themselves out of their hatches in the hull, the two giant beasts immediately flying in the direction of their prey. “Good luck,” Astris stated to Jayce, placing her hand on his arm and drawing his gaze. He nodded to her, watching as she and Arthuria lunged through their own portals to join the skies with Morgana and Falconer, both flying on broomstick and roc respectively. Jayce then turned down to the small bat Demon by his feet.

“You’re becoming quite a serious cost to me, you know – these magic stones aren’t cheap,” Jayce stated, placing several of the purple stones onto the floor. “It would be easier if you accepted my bargain, both Paimon and I offered a fair deal for your body,” the Demon countered, picking up a stone and consuming it with a series of loud crunches. Jayce couldn’t deny that the offers hadn’t been tempting, foresight or wings and the ability to conjure magma were both very tempting. “My own voice is irritating enough in my head, I couldn’t stand anyone else’s,” Jayce returned with a grin, stepping back as the bat ballooned in size, ending up even larger than the Dragons. “I would understand that comment with Paimon... I’m not that bad, I don’t think. I think we both share an appreciation for art,” Asmodeus continued. Jayce rolled his eyes, reaching out with his containment orb towards RK, dragging the rokken inside before tucking him inside his armour. “Shut up and fight,” Jayce commanded, leaping up into the skies before darting through the air with his Focus towards the enemy.

It was mayhem, a sea of flames and bullets as the Machinist’s fleet desperately tried to handle the offensive power of the Rising Aces. Long unhindered by the limitations of gravity, the Rising Aces surged through the air using their Focus – an image that Jayce still found himself struggling to believe, as he remembered not too long ago seeing only Admirals and Pirate Lords fight on the scale that his crew now could.

The flyers tried to bring themselves around to shoot at Ordo and Thalia, the pair working their way through the first carrier – slaughtering the crew with their heavy weapons and destroying the numerous tethers holding the metal and wood ships up to their lifting balloons. Instead they found only devastation, a blur of movement bringing death to the numerous pilots as they were either boarded in a splash of blood by Astris, sniped with a devastating arrow from Falconer aboard Wren, detonated by a spell from Morgana, or de-winged in a single strike by the winged angel of death known as Arthuria.

Those enemies that found a moment to breathe, a moment to plan and coordinate an attack, found themselves assaulted instead by Dragons as large or even larger than the flyers themselves. Zhurong spewed flames, sometimes enough to obliterate the flying machine in a single blow, other times the Dragon spat just enough to ignite the canvas and wood of the vehicles. Taranis, on the other hand, held no issue with grappling the vehicles in his claws, throwing them into other flyers or even towards the main airship. Their hides were resistant to the hail of bullets, but not impervious.

A boom deafened the skies as the Machinist's airship came about, unleashing its arsenal of heavy guns onto the battlefield. There was no care for who the explosive shells caught, foe or friend alike were caught in the array of devastation. There was a roar of pain and Zhurong dropped from the sky along with Arthuria, the pair sharing in the agony as a large wound was opened in the Dragon's side.

Morgana dove through the sea of explosions, darting towards the flailing body of her sister through smoke and fire as her Dragon similarly plummeted. Zhurong twisted as he fell, the Dragon's eyes full of fear and panic. "Brother!" came a voice through the battlefield, unheard but anyone other than the Dragon as Taranis launched himself off the flaming carrier he had shielded himself behind. Morgana angled her broomstick low, the wind warping around her as she tucked into her broomstick, pulling up at the last moment to catch Arthuria half-across the wood and half-across her body. "Lose some weight, meathead!" Morgana groaned, a rib cracked at the very least from the impact and the sharp change in weight angling them both towards the sea. She screamed as she failed to pull them up, a blue portal sending them crashing into the main deck of the Stacked Hand instead. "Medic!" Morgana groaned, as she rolled across the ground. Her eyes then immediately widened as the sun was blocked out and a wide wave of water crashed across the deck as Taranis dragged Zhurong back onto the Stacked Hand before launching himself back towards the battle.

The explosions continued, the heavy guns of the airship unrelenting and firing in all directions. "Everyone pull back," Jayce ordered, the two remaining still intact carriers pushing forwards towards the Stacked Hand along with a dozen surviving flyers. He darted upwards along with Asmodeus, the pair of them observing the battlefield from above. Thalia and Arthuria had both been injured, Wren had caught some flak as well. The main airship was untouched. "Only one way for it," Asmodeus stated. Jayce nodded in agreement, darting up and into the clouds to better position himself before he pulled out RK's orb from within his armour. "Sorry my friend," Jayce stated, releasing the rokken to fall like a meteorite.

Jayce darted after RK, the rokken grumbling in what Jayce perceived was confusion, anger, or excitement. The well-fed meteorite then slammed into the giant airship, tearing straight through the metal and then the canvas below into the super-structure before carrying onwards and through the bottom. Alarms rang from within as Jayce dropped through the hole, landing on a walkway before surging forwards towards what he guessed was the control room. Asmodeus landed on the surface, tearing the giant hole open even more before dropping through and vomiting out a stream of molten magma in the other direction. He then ignited his body, the flames spreading rapidly out and along the airship. "Captain, this thing appears to highly flammable – you don't have long," warned the Demon, through his personal communicator.

Jayce danced along the walkway with his swords, the few guards onboard offering little resistance as they surged towards him. He pushed through the final group, arriving at a sealed metal box near the middle of the colossal vehicle. He pulled open the hatch and dropped inside, expecting to see the Machinist. Instead he found only machines. They were golden, much like the other automatons the Machinist had created, but they were smaller – made to be human-sized. They were like golden skeletons, and one in a large, funny sailor's hat turned to face him. "Dissappointed?" questioned the machine in a familiar voice. "I'm not so stupid as to risk my own life for a title as small as: 'Pirate Lord'. Still, I expected better of this dirigible. Perhaps it needs more guns, or not to face you. Here's your prize, I'll see you at the Revelry," stated the Machinist, the automaton gesturing towards a large crate on the floor with a large red bow wrapped around the top.

Jayce glanced towards the nearest window before he approached the crate and lifted up the top. A flashing timer stared up at him, the countdown less than five seconds. He turned to move towards the window, but the automatons had



surrounded him, attempting to block him. Jayce lunged, shoving the closest automaton over before darting forwards as the countdown dropped to zero. "Fuck!" he screamed.

Astris staggered as the wave of heat hit her, the enemy dirigible exploding in a colossal fireball that painted the skies orange. "No," she realised, the shockwave slamming into the carrier she was stood on and sending the vehicle lurching out of the sky. She rode it down, apparating off it and landing back on the Stacked Hand as it crashed into the water. "Where's Jayce?" she questioned, looking around the main deck as the remains of the away team returned. She locked eyes with Bjorn, the pair of them turning towards the falling wreck of the dirigible. "He wasn't... he wasn't on that thing when it blew? Right?" she questioned. Bjorn's face darkened. "No," he stated in shock, reaching up to his communicator. "Jayce, where are you? Jayce, come in?" Bjorn questioned, receiving only silence in turn. "Red, Taranis, Morgana, I want search and rescue now!" Bjorn commanded, turning and angling the Stacked Hand towards the debris. "Bjorn, it is imperative that we remain clear of the debris," Tempest stated. "We cannot just leave Jayce," Bjorn returned.

The djinn shook his head. "We protect the ship. Our home. That was the Captain's orders," Tempest responded - the crew glancing between the two before looking towards Astris to mediate. "Bjorn..." she said quietly, shaking her head. If Jayce had survived that blast then the Stacked Hand would put him at risk by shifting the debris or bouncing into remaining explosives. "Look!" Zeta yelled, drawing the crew's attention to a giant bat flying through the smoke. Asmodeus approached, a charred form in his claws that he gently lowered to the main deck. Jayce was breathing, just about, but his skin was burnt badly and he was bleeding heavily. "Stand back!" declared Yuthura, getting close to him along with Morgana. "Doc, you're already hurt," Morgana told her. Yuthura shook her head, she had no intention on letting Jayce die. "I can start with the worst, you can handle the rest," Yuthura stated, looking from Morgana to Astris. "I'll be fine," she stated, taking his worst wounds before immediately slumping over from the pain.

"Bjorn, we need a plan," Astris stated, turning towards him as he stared at Jayce's body in horror. "...Right," he stated, snapping himself back to reality. "There's, um, the rokken islands. We'll head there, hitch a lift on one of the islands. We'll be safe there," he suggested. Astris nodded in agreement, looking back at the mess that was her Captain. Caelie stood over him, tears in her eyes and her hands pointing towards the two Demons. "Them, he needs them," she stated.

**Seize the Seas Tales: A Connection Beyond Blood**

Wicke faltered, stopping in her path and then turning and looking back in the direction they had come. "What's wrong?" Damian questioned, seeing an expression of dread on her face. She was clutching her chest, her heart racing and a cold sweat spreading across her. Wicke shook her head: she didn't know, but at the same time she did know. "I-I... something's happened. Something's gone wrong."

Damian shook his head. "I'm sure it's nothing. Come on, we're nearly at our old record. I have a feeling this is the one. We'll find the end soon, I know it," he stated, placing a hand on her shoulder and turning her in the right direction. Wicke remained where she was, the dread fading. "Be safe," she said quietly into the wind.